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## **Dynamics of Force Structure Innovation.**

# **The Cases of Female Engagement Teams and Female Assessment/Analysis Support Teams**

by

Cristina Fontanelli

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### ***PhD Supervisors:***

Chiara Ruffa, *Sciences Po*

Fabrizio Coticchia, *University of Genoa*

Alessandro Armando, *University of Genoa*

Supervisor

Supervisor

Head of the PhD program

### ***Thesis jury:***

Andrea Ruggeri, *University of Milan*

Simone Tholens, *John Cabot University*

External examiner

External examiner

### ***PhD Candidate:***

Cristina Fontanelli, *University of Genoa*

Department of Security and Strategic Studies

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that, except where particular reference is made to the work of others, the contents of this dissertation are entirely original and have not been submitted in whole or in part for consideration for any other degree or qualification at this or any other university. This dissertation is entirely my own effort, with no results from collaboration with others. This dissertation is less than 65,000 words long, including appendices, bibliography, footnotes, tables, and equations, and has less than 150 figures.

Cristina Fontanelli

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## **List of Abbreviations**

BATT—Battalion  
CIMIC—Civil Military Cooperation  
COCIM—Comprehensive-Military Cooperation COIN—Counterinsurgency  
COMISAF—Commander of ISAF  
COVI—Comando Operativo di Vertice Interforze  
CST—Cultural Support Team  
CSTC-A—Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan  
CSTs—Cultural Support Team  
DPO—(UN) Department of Peace Operations  
DRC—Democratic Republic of the Congo  
ET—Engagement team  
FAST—Female Assessment/Analysis Support Team  
FET—Female Engagement Team  
FHET—Female HUMINT Intelligence Exploitation Team  
FM 3-24—Field Manual Number 3-24  
FST—Female Search Team  
FPU— Formed Police  
GENAD—Gender Advisor  
GHANBATT—Ghanian Battalion  
GIRoA—Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan  
HoM/FC—Head of Mission and Force Commander  
IAT—Innovation-Adaptation Theory  
IDF—Israeli Defence Forces  
IED—Improvised Explosive Device  
IJC—ISAF Joint Command  
INDBATT—Indian Battalion  
INDOBATT—Indonesian Battalion  
ITALBATT—Italian Battalion  
ISAF—International Security Assistance Force  
ISIL— Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant  
LL—Lessons Learned  
LAF—Lebanese Armed Forces  
MALBATT—Malaysian Battalion  
MNCG—Multinational CIMIC Group  
MIBIL—Italian Bilateral Mission in Lebanon  
MINUSCA—United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African

Republic

MONUSCO—United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo

MOS—Military Occupational Specialties

NEPBATT—Nepal Battalion

NORSOC—Norwegian Special Operation Commando

PKO—Peacekeeping operations

PRT—Provincial Reconstruction Team

QRF—Quick Reaction Force

RC—Regional Command

RC-E—Regional Command East

RC-N—Regional Command North

RC-S—Regional Command-South

RSM—Resolute Support Mission

SDF—Syrian Democratic Forces

SOP—Standard Operating Procedure

SPANBATT—Spanish Battalion

TCC—Troop-contributing country

UK—United Kingdom

UN—United Nations

UNIFIL—United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon

UNIFIL SW HQ—UNIFIL Sector West Headquarters

UNITAR—United Nations Institute for Training and Research

UNMISS—United Nations Mission in South Sudan

UNSC—United Nations Security Council

US—United States

YPJ—Women's Protection Units

## **List of Essays**

This thesis is based on the following essays, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.

*Essay I The Innovation Cascade: The Global Diffusion of All-Female Military Units. Unpublished manuscript.*

*Essay II Inspiring Transformation? Exploring Mid-level Commanders' Roles in Driving Military Organizations: the Case of All-Female Military Units. Unpublished manuscript.*

*Essay III Ignition Creative: How Italian-Lebanese Military Bilateral Cooperation Sparked the "Domestic CIMIC" Approach. Unpublished manuscript.*

## Contents

List of abbreviations .....	2
List of Essays .....	5
Abstract .....	7
<b>Part One – Introduction to articles .....</b>	<b>9</b>
1. Background.....	10
2. Introduction .....	12
2.1 The central concepts of this doctoral dissertation .....	15
2.2 The FET: a remarkable example of force structure innovation .....	19
3. Previous research.....	21
3.1 A glimpse at the research on force structure innovation.....	21
3.2 Adapting or Innovating through AFMUS: a never addressed inquiry .....	24
3.3 FET and FAST (force structure) innovation programs .....	27
4. Research design and strategy of data collection .....	31
4.1 Interviews.....	33
4.2 Fieldwork .....	34
5. Ethical considerations.....	37
5.1 Interviews.....	37
5.2 Fieldwork .....	39
6. Findings and future avenues of research .....	41
6.1 Essay I.....	41
6.2 Essay II.....	42
6.3 Essay III .....	43
7. Ongoing work.....	44
<b>Part Two – List of Essays .....</b>	<b>47</b>
Essay I: <i>The Innovation Cascade: The Global Diffusion of All-Female Military Units</i> .....	48
Essay II: <i>Inspiring Transformation? Exploring Mid-level Commander’s Roles in Driving Military Organizations: the Case of All-Female Military Units</i> .....	70
Essay III: <i>Ignition Creative: How Italian-Lebanese Military Bilateral Cooperation Sparked the Domestic CIMIC Approach</i> .....	94
References .....	112
Appendix .....	120

## Abstract

This thesis makes an innovative contribution to the burgeoning literature on force structure innovations in Security Studies. Specifically, it looks at the emergence and spread of the Female Engagement Team (FET) as a never explored, yet key, force structure innovation in the military throughout the 2000s.

Over the last 14 years, United States (US) FETs—intended as female squads from various armed forces branches aiming to support commanders by engaging with local populations, particularly women, to better understand their realities and needs—have improved dramatically as a program and have been implemented by more than 25 armed forces worldwide. Not only that, but almost simultaneously another initiative—the Female Analysis/Assessment Support Team (FAST)—arose from a modified version of the original FET program, which was employed in an apparently similar but actually different manner; and finally, the program’s initial nature (foreign use) was adjusted to allow for local application, namely the “Domestic Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC)” Approach.

Such alterations and transformations, which are only a few of the changes that FET has undergone over the years, have provoked reactions from both military forces and civilian communities, ranging from skepticism to acknowledgment as essential intelligence sources. As a result, the goal of this dissertation is to explain what I believe are the central dynamics of FET modifications over the past 14 years as a previously unknown example of force structure innovation.

Based on an extensive number of primary materials including fieldwork and in-depth interviews, this thesis employed a qualitative study to respond to three critical questions and provide the first, fine-grained empirical analyses of the Female Engagement Team (FET) and Female Assessment/ Analysis Support Team (FAST) initiatives.

First, I build on Roger’s theory of innovation diffusion to present the Innovation Cascade Model (ICM), explaining the subsequent spread of FETs throughout armed forces and operational theaters. I demonstrate how direct or indirect access to invention, combined with the innovator’s broad consideration of allies and related nations, influenced the timing of transmission FETs. As a result, the first countries to adopt the FET were US North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Allies stationed in the same operational theatre as the US, followed by United Nations (UN) Troop Contributing Countries (TCC) and, ultimately, Middle Eastern partners.

Second, I inquire over the mechanisms driving command authorities serving in operational warfare to adapt or innovate on the ground. I propose a commander-centered theory, which clarifies mid-level leader’s (Senior and Junior Officers) role in inspiring a transformative vision and fostering reform by generating or adopting (emulating) innovations to match new operational demands. I find that information asymmetry between the commander and progress of the mission affected leadership’s ability to innovate. This variable is shaped, in turn, by commanders’ acumen to make the most of lessons learned (LL) and advocate the need for change. These experiences serve as framework for the first

analyses of Italian emulation of the FET program in Afghanistan and creation of the FAST initiative in Lebanon.

Finally, I propose to explicitly grasp the distinguishing characteristics of military-military collaboration, which have a substantial impact on the manner and environment in which military practices spread, as well as their potential advancement. In doing so, I describe military-military contact in the context of bilateral operations, emphasizing its importance in developing creative ideas and improving training and deployment. I depict the interaction of Italian CIMIC staff with their Lebanese CIMIC partners within the framework of the Italian Bilateral Mission in Lebanon (MIBIL) to demonstrate how such an interface has generated a meaningful reinterpretation of how to perform CIMIC in the field to use it outside of the expeditionary setting and instead execute it in a homeland scenario (“Domestic CIMIC”).



## **PART I**

### **Introduction to articles**

## 1. Background

Throughout the 2000s, an increasing number of armed forces has adopted a unique force structure innovation which has revolutionized the way they operate on the ground. Its name is FET. It consists of a squad made up entirely of women from all armed forces' branches. The aim of these teams is to assist their commanders in supporting and completing the mission both domestically and abroad by opening a channel of communication with the population, engaging with them, especially with women, and understanding their reality and needs.<sup>1</sup>

Ever since its inception in 2009, the FET program has proliferated across several armed forces and military missions. In 2009, the Americans started to employ this innovation in Afghanistan, followed by some of their closest NATO's Allies who have joined them in the conflict, the British and the Italians (2010), as well as the Romanians (2011). At a second stage, the range of actors employing FET has enlarged reaching a great number of armies deployed under UN's peacekeeping missions scattered in the African continent, such as in the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) or South Sudan, just to mention a few. These include Zambia (2015), Ghana (2018), India (2019), Pakistan (2019), Morocco (2020), Burundi (2021), among many others. Almost simultaneously, and through other ways, the FET initiative has stretched to the Middle East region, attracting the interest of a vast array of countries including Lebanon (2018) and Jordan (2019), which have got in contact with the innovation by means of bilateral training and joint exercises, such as the Italian Military Bilateral Mission in Lebanon (MIBIL) and the Eager Lion Exercise.

Over more than 14 years, the FET innovation has been adopted by more than 25 armed forces, reaching an extensive number of individuals who have either led, participated in, or witnessed it working within their region and is still gaining traction.<sup>2</sup> Through time, this innovation has elicited a wide range of reactions from armed forces themselves and receiving civilian communities. Many have viewed it as a waste of time and as an initiative to be carried about to show other countries, their society, and high commanders how equal and cutting edge their army was. To other societies, these teams have stood in for the most crucial intelligence source—without which the mission could not have been accomplished. In many communities, FETs have been perceived as a threat, a sign of the opponent attempting to extort the underprivileged in return for information on their friends, brothers, or husbands. To others, these squads have looked for a beacon of hope in a nation torn apart by terrible ethnic conflicts and civil wars. Such a diverse set of viewpoints explains why this military innovation developed and matured so differently depending on who handled and welcomed it. And yet, despite its increasing adoption and

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, MAJ Sheila Medeiros, *ISAF Joint Command's Female Engagement Team Program: Comprehensive Assessment Report* (N.p., January 15, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> By October 2024, the FET concept has been adopted by the following nations: Australia, Bangladesh, Burundi, Canada, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malawi, Morocco, Nepal, New Zealand, North Macedonia, Pakistan, the Republic of South Africa, Romania, Somalia, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United Republic of Tanzania, the United States, and Zambia.

extensive varying usage by militaries worldwide, relatively little is known about this innovation. This thesis intends to shed light on how force structure innovations such as FET are created, diffused, and employed differently throughout armies and military interventions.

It proposes doing so because FETs are an original kind of innovation that demonstrates the transformative power of military organizations incorporating new ways into military operations, improving operational effectiveness. This research, I hope, could contribute to the diffusion of innovative military thought worldwide, supplementing academic research, strategic analysis and policy development, but also improving decision-making and enhancing resource management as well as military operational capabilities.

## 2. Introduction

In recent decades, the transformation of military organizations has received increasing attention. Several studies have looked at how militaries have advanced and kept up with emerging new operational issues by developing doctrines, strategies, and technologies.<sup>3</sup> However, innovation and adaptation studies continue to overlook the structural strength of military organizations at the conceptual, theoretical and empirical layers. Since the end of the Cold War, armed forces have backed significant force transformation changes, including the abolition of the draft,<sup>4</sup> the creation of professionalized military forces,<sup>5</sup> and the enlistment of women in armies, among many others.<sup>6</sup> These are but a handful of the most significant changes. Yet other key features remain unnoticed. We still do not understand how military structure works as an innovation on the ground. For instance, little is known on the origination, adoption, and employment of elite teams to comply with sensitive operations in the field. In a wider sense, we still have incomplete conceptual knowledge of force structure innovations and all of their ways of application. And yet, military force structure improvements are essential for the development and efficacy of armed forces for a few reasons.

First, changes in force structure are required to respond to evolving threats. Military force structures must transform to meet novel dangers, such as those posed by opponents' altered tactics, technology breakthroughs, or changes in the geopolitical environment. Second, revisions in the force structure are critical to enhance operational efficiency: armed forces may function more effectively when their force structure is optimized. To assure a more efficient and effective military, this may entail reallocating resources, introducing new technology, or reforming troops. Third, force structure remodeling is linked to resource allocation. Because budgets and the quantity of resources available fluctuate, force structure transformation is critical to ensuring that resources are dispersed where they are most needed. This

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984); Deborah Avant, 'The Institutional Sources of Military Doctrine: Hegemons in Peripheral Wars', *International Studies Quarterly* 37/4 (1993):409-430; Richard O. Hundley, *Past Revolutions, Future Transformation: What Can The History of Revolutions in Military Affairs Tell Us about Transforming the US Military* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1999); Max Boot, *War Made New: Technology, Warfare and the Course of History, 1500 to Today* (New York, Gotham Books, 2006, 10); Nina Kollars, 'War's Horizon: Soldier-Led Adaptation in Iraq and Vietnam?', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38/4 (2015): 529-533, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2014.971947>; Jose Carlos Albano Amarante & Patrice Franko, 'Defense Transformation in Latin America: Will It Transform the Technological Base?', *Democracy and Security* 13/3 (2017):173-195, DOI: 10.1080/17419166.2017.1290527; David Barno and Nora Bensahel, *Adaptation under fire: how militaries change in wartime*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Bastien Irondele, 'Civil-Military Relations and the End of Conscription in France', *Security Studies*, 12/3, (2003):157-187, DOI: 10.1080/09636410390443116.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Anthony King, *The combat soldier: infantry tactics and cohesion in the twentieth and twenty first centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Sarah Garcia, 'Military women in the NATO armed forces', *Minerva*, 17/2 (1993):33. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/military-women-nato-armed-forces/docview/222836643/se-2>; Helena Carreiras, 'Women in the Portuguese Armed Forces: From Visibility to 'Eclipse'', *Current Sociology* 50/5 (2002): 687-714.

might entail purchasing equipment, rearranging the workforce, or making training and development investments.

Despite these factors, gaps in the research of force structure continue at several levels.

Conceptually, an in-depth analysis of the definition of “force structure” is required to understand all of the possible hues of this notion, which has always been particularly challenging to lay out due to the concept’s multifaceted nature, encompassing the organization, composition, and capabilities of armed forces while attempting to integrate.

Theoretically, not much is known about how commanders use military organizations’ force structure to innovate or adapt on the ground, how resulting changes disseminate throughout armies and operational interventions, or how they develop and alter in response to new operational implications.

At the empirical level, qualitative insights demonstrating how armed forces progress, modify, and cope with the operational level are lacking. The discrepancy is most noticeable when analyzing the actions of middle- and small-sized military actors, for whom there are few, if any, empirical accounts notwithstanding they go through substantial restructuring procedures. All these aspects deserve to be analyzed more in depth, as, I believe, force structure—and so military personnel—represents the primary driver behind all the technological, doctrinal changes.

To fill the gaps in this literature, the present doctoral thesis focuses on the investigation of military organizations and the transformation of their force structure. More specifically, it would like to increase our understanding on the origination, diffusion, and evolution of ad hoc military teams that are established to operate in the field. In doing so, the study centers on all-female military units (AFMUs) and advances our knowledge on how they have revolutionized the way the armed forces carry out domestic and foreign missions. Specifically, this dissertation uses the case of FETs—the major, understudied example of AFMUs—in three different pieces. This research offers a detailed empirical analysis of this force structure’s spread, development, and adaptability across the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Italy, Zambia, and Lebanon. It accomplishes this by examining the roles of innovators and adopters in creating, diffusing, revising, and improving FET into four different types of military interventions including counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, peacekeeping missions (PKOs), pre-deployment training (PDT) and bilateral training.

A synopsis of the dissertation’s first section explores FET’s dissemination potential widely.

Essay I introduces the notion of the innovation cascade and explores the FET concept, which was initially developed by the US, launched out among its closest NATO allies in Afghanistan, which included, the UK, and Italy. From there, the Essay shows how the FET innovation extended to partners beyond the NATO Coalition scattered around the world, like Zambia and Lebanon. It also demonstrates the way in which FET disseminated among various actors operating under international organizations, or bilateral frameworks, from COIN operations in Afghanistan to PKOs in the CAR to domestic interventions in Lebanon.

Next, the thesis zooms in on a few of the illustrative cases covered in Essay I to achieve a more thorough awareness of the FET phenomenon on a micro-level.

Essay II determines how Italy, the military organization that employed FET in Afghanistan for a longer period (2010-2017) and in a visible distinct (humanitarian) way from the initial context, availed benefit of this experience to build a new type of AFMU in Lebanon termed Female Assessment/Analysis Team (FAST), which stemmed from the FET. The Essay indicates in fact, how divergent perspectives on the purpose and existence—or lack thereof—of lessons learned from the past prompted Italian commanders to pursue, in turn, military adaptation—by implementing FET from the US in Afghanistan and innovation—by creating the FAST from the ground up in Lebanon.

Essay III compares and analyzes the perspectives of Lebanon and Italy on the application and design of FETs in the context of a bilateral mission. The research, which aligns with macro-level investigation and expectations, shows that the US's initial conception of FET was entirely transformed because of changing actors and operating theaters in search of a novel concept. The results indicate that Italian firsthand accounts of FET and FAST employment in Lebanon and Afghanistan helped LAF to change the FET practice to use it domestically to assist Lebanese population-supporting activities rather than sending people abroad to host them. Lebanon may share its revised FET program with other Middle Eastern nations in the years to come.

The conclusions of each essay reveal how the phenomenon of military force structure transformation can be studied at multiple levels and from the viewpoints of different actors. In summary, the dissertation depicts three dissimilar aspects of the military transformation phenomenon, all of which are related to one another.

This chapter introduces the dissertation, presents its key conclusion and contributions. Thereby, the remainder of this doctoral dissertation is structured as follows: the next section will be devoted to the discussion of the literature review. Then I present the research design and outline methods and data sources collected for the three chapters (Essays). This section will also include a discussion of the reliability and validity of the data. Thereafter, I present the Essays. The final section discusses the core findings and their implications, to conclude by outlining avenues for further research.

## **2.1 The central concepts of this doctoral dissertation**

The overarching notions of interest of this doctoral dissertation are “force structure” and “FET”. The three Essays contribute to understanding different facets of the relationships between these two concepts.

### ***Force Structure***

In order to effectively accomplish specific strategic objectives and operational requirements, military forces are purposefully arranged and organized into units, troops, equipment, and their connections within a hierarchical structure. This arrangement and organization is the definition that this thesis provides to the military “force structure”. A nation or entity’s strategic objectives, threat assessments, resource availability, and technology improvements are frequently reflected in this structure. To put it in better words, force structure represents the “harmony” between different elements including infantry, artillery, airpower, naval forces, and specialized units, each designed to carry out certain combat duties and missions. Furthermore, force structure changes in response to technological breakthroughs, shifting geopolitical environments, budgetary constraints, and strategic priorities and evolving threat landscapes. It evolves over time in response to changes in threat environments, shifts in warfare paradigms, and advancements in military doctrine and technology. Force structure is also shaped by historical precedent, institutional traditions, and organizational culture within military establishments. These aspects and changes emphasize the importance of adaptability, readiness, and integration of diverse capabilities in order to maintain a competitive edge in contemporary warfare scenarios.

Thereby, understanding and analyzing force structure require a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating insights from military science, organizational theory and strategic studies. Scholars and practitioners alike examine force structure to assess military capabilities, anticipate future challenges, and inform defense policy and strategy. Overall, military force structure serves as the backbone of a nation’s defense posture, reflecting its strategic priorities and shaping its ability to project power.

As a result, understanding and analyzing military force organization has become increasingly challenging. Few academics deal with it, which can be attributed to a variety of circumstances. To begin with, this could be caused by multidisciplinary complexity. Understanding force structure innovations requires analysis across multiple disciplines (i.e. military science, technology, sociology, and geopolitics) to grasp the interconnectedness of these elements and their impact on military effectiveness. Innovations in force structure often stem from advancements in military technology. Analyzing these innovations necessitates expertise in a number of fields to comprehend the capabilities and limitations of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, cyber warfare, and unmanned systems. However, force structure innovations are not solely about hardware and technology; they also involve considerations of human factors such as organizational culture, training, and human-machine interaction. Sociological and psychological perspectives are crucial for understanding how these factors influence the adoption and effectiveness of new force structures. Furthermore, force structure innovations do not occur in a vacuum

but are shaped by geopolitical dynamics, including strategic interests, alliances, and regional rivalries. Geopolitical analysis is essential for understanding the motivations behind force structure innovations, their implications for international security, and the potential responses from other actors on the global stage. In addition, military force structures are highly interconnected systems, involving not only the composition of forces but also logistical support, command and control mechanisms, and intelligence capabilities. Analyzing force structure innovations requires a holistic understanding of these interconnections and how changes in one area can affect the overall effectiveness of military operations. Finally, force structure innovations have significant policy implications for defense planning, resource allocation, and strategic decision-making. This complexity might discourage some academics from delving into this area due to the challenges of multidisciplinary research.

Secondly, there might be issues on access and information restriction. This aspect deserves a series of considerations. In the first place, detailed information about classified or highly specialized military force structures might not be readily accessible to academics. This lack of access can limit in-depth studies or analyses of cutting-edge or classified military innovations. This aspect may be linked to limited collaboration opportunities. Collaboration between academics and military institutions might be restricted due to institutional barriers or concerns about sharing sensitive information. This gap can hinder the depth of research and understanding of current force structure innovations. Secondly, but connected to the previous point, there might be a tendency to focus on historical analysis, namely, to study established structures rather than actively engage in discussions on emerging or potential innovations in force structures. This could be related, specifically to, availability of data. Historical force structures offer rich datasets for analysis, including information on organizational design, operational effectiveness, and technological capabilities. Thereby, scholars can rely on these well documented cases to draw insights and inform their research, as data on emerging or potential innovations may be limited or speculative. Third, scarce attention to force structure may be associated with challenges in timeliness. Academic research typically follows a rigorous and time-consuming process. By the time research on force structure innovations is completed and published, the field might have already evolved or moved on to new developments, reducing the relevance of the findings. Or, conversely, emergent force structures or possible breakthroughs may lack actual examples or case studies for examination, making it difficult for researchers to undertake thorough research and make significant findings in a small time frame. Without real-world examples to explore, debates about evolving force structures may remain speculative and theoretical.

In conclusion, the restricted academic attention on military force structure arises from its multidisciplinary complexity, which necessitates analysis in domains such as military science, technology, sociology, and geopolitics. Furthermore, advances in military technology and geopolitical dynamics impact force structure innovations, which also take into account complicated human variables. This landscape is complicated by access constraints to classified information and limited collaboration, which impede comprehensive study, while a bias for historical analysis over emergent advances due to data availability exacerbates the problem. Time constraints hamper research, resulting in theoretical talks devoid of real-world context.



## ***FET***

FET is defined as a crucial endeavor meant to improve engagement, rapport-building, and communication with female populations in combat areas. Female service personnel having specialized training in interacting and establishing connections with local women while being cognizant of their cultural sensitivities, needs, and viewpoints make up the FETs. The concept of FET has evolved over time, assuming various shadows that reflect both the challenges and advancements in integrating women into military operations. Initially conceived as a means to bridge cultural gaps and engage with local women in conflict zones, FETs faced shadows of skepticism and limited acceptance due to concerns about the potential blurring of combat and non-combat roles. Over time, FETs navigated shadows of gender biases and stereotypes, gradually gaining recognition for their vital role in intelligence gathering, community outreach, and enhancing operational effectiveness. However, shadows of operational constraints and resource limitations have also persisted, impacting the scalability and sustainability of FET programs. Despite these challenges, FETs continue to adapt, carving a path towards greater inclusion and recognition of the invaluable contributions made by women in military operations.

Following some of the observations made in the preceding paragraph, the study of FETs also presents significant challenges due to a number of factors.

First, analyzing FETs can be challenging due to the existence of similar teams under different names. These teams, although serving analogous roles, may operate under varied titles across different military branches, units, or nations. The lack of standardized terminology complicates research efforts, as scholars and practitioners may encounter difficulty in identifying and accessing relevant information about these teams. Moreover, the varying terminology used to describe similar initiatives can lead to confusion and ambiguity in the literature, hindering the ability to draw comparisons and generalize findings across different contexts. Additionally, differences in naming conventions may reflect variations in team composition, objectives, or operational approaches, further complicating efforts to analyze them. As a result, researchers studying FETs must navigate through a landscape of diverse team designations, requiring careful consideration and validation of sources to ensure accurate and comprehensive analysis. Secondly, once we grasp what we are dealing with, we realize how interdisciplinary it is. FETs, as force structure, involve the integration of military operations with social and cultural engagement efforts, requiring the analysis across diverse fields such as military science, anthropology, gender studies, and international relations. Understanding FETs requires insights into military tactics and strategy, as well as sociocultural dynamics and gender roles within the local population. Moreover, FETs often operate in complex and dynamic environments, where factors such as cultural norms, societal attitudes, and historical contexts influence their effectiveness. Analyzing the impact of FETs requires a holistic understanding of these interdisciplinary elements and their interplay, which can be daunting for researchers and practitioners alike. Additionally, the evolving nature of conflict and the diverse operational contexts in which FETs are deployed further compound the interrelated complexity of studying their effectiveness.

In conclusion, exploring FETs offers complications due to varying naming standards and interdisciplinary analysis. Operating in complex surroundings, FETs are influenced by political, strategic, and sociocultural aspects that necessitate a comprehensive understanding for effective analysis. Access to classified military information is critical for doing original and credible research. Even with all of these favorable conditions, poor documentation and differences in FET usage between nations hamper complete study, emphasizing the importance of consistent reporting to advance knowledge of their evolution and impact.

In my work I tried to employ several strategies to overcome the obstacles described above, ensuring that my analysis was robust and relevant despite the complexities involved. Here's how I tackled the identified limitations. One of the key issues raised in the literature review is the inherent difficulty of applying a multidisciplinary approach to understand the complexities of military force structure, particularly the intricate interconnections among diverse elements within military organizations and how they collectively impact operational performance. Recognizing that a purely monodisciplinary approach would overlook essential dimensions, I adopted a comprehensive framework that spans military technology, sociology, political science, and organizational theory. Through this multidimensional lens, I tried to contextualize force structure as a dynamic system shaped by numerous, often interdependent, factors. To deepen and refine these perspectives, it was essential to actively collaborate with both civilian and military experts, who could provide specialized insights into the distinct operational, technical, and social dynamics within military structures. This engagement involved regular discussions and comparative analyses with an array of professionals, including military historians, sociologists, psychologists, academics, political analysts, and practitioners from diverse military domains—ranging from engineering and logistics to support roles such as cooks and K9 handlers. Through these discussions, I aimed to bridge the gaps in terminology and conceptual understanding that often exist across disciplines. For instance, terms central to military studies, such as “force structure,” are sometimes interpreted differently by sociologists or political analysts, requiring continuous alignment in language and conceptual frameworks.

Furthermore, a key methodological approach I applied was the use of mixed methods to gather and analyze data, combining quantitative analysis of technological advancements, weaponry, and logistics systems with qualitative assessment of strategic evaluations and policy documents. This approach provided a holistic view of how both tangible assets (such as technology and weapon systems) and intangible elements (like policy and international alliances) shape force structuring decisions. For instance, examining regional and international strategic assessments enabled me to explore how geopolitical shifts, such as alliances or security threats, drive changes in military composition and organizational structure.

In particular, I sought to enhance our understanding of force structure innovations by conducting comparative analyses across various military organizations. This cross-national approach illuminated how different countries adapt to and implement similar military innovations in unique ways, highlighting variations in practice due to factors like cultural traditions, resource availability, and strategic imperatives. By juxtaposing these varied approaches, I gained valuable insights into both the successes and challenges

inherent in force structure adaptation across distinct contexts. This multifaceted approach has allowed for a comprehensive assessment of military force structure, offering a foundation for further interdisciplinary research and providing actionable insights for policymakers and military strategists.

## **2.2 The FET: a remarkable example of force structure innovation**

In my doctoral research, I aim to show why we should see FET as a notable example of force structure innovation. Reasons to do so are multiple and various.

In the first place, the creation of FETs reflects an understanding of the complexities of modern wars, acknowledging the importance of considering gender dynamics and the role of women in security and stabilization efforts. This force structure acknowledges the necessity of a multifaceted approach to conflict resolution that encompasses the perspectives and participation of women.

Secondly, by focusing on engaging with local women, FETs enhance cultural understanding and facilitate intelligence gathering in conflict zones. This force structure recognizes the significance of cultural sensitivity and local relationships in successful military operations, showcasing a strategic shift towards more nuanced and holistic approaches to security and conflict resolution.

Third, FETs represent a deliberate shift in operational adaptability, displaying the need for specialized teams capable of engaging with specific segments of the population, particularly women, in conflict zones. This structure allows for enhanced adaptability in addressing the diverse needs and sensitivities of local communities, which traditional military units might struggle to reach.

Fourth, in terms of the strategic integration of abilities, FETs leverage the unique skill sets and perspectives of female service members to access areas and gather intelligence that might be inaccessible or overlooked by male-dominated units. This integration of personnel ensures a more comprehensive approach to military operations, demonstrating a strategic understanding of the importance of diverse skill sets in achieving mission success.

Finally, FETs mean to reach operational effectiveness and mission success. FETs have demonstrated their effectiveness in improving mission outcomes by building trust within communities, gathering critical intelligence, and fostering positive relationships. This force structure directly contributes to operational effectiveness by addressing the unique needs and dynamics of conflict zones, ultimately enhancing the likelihood of successful mission accomplishment. Overall, the establishment and integration of FETs within force structures signify a progressive and innovative approach in military operations. It represents a recognition of the changing nature of conflict and the need for inclusive, adaptable, and culturally aware strategies to achieve operational success.

A crucial component (and challenge) of my research was to contribute to a better understanding of the many sorts of female military teams now in operation. Across different military branches and countries, there exists a variety of female military teams, each with unique structures, functions, and terminologies. For instance, in the US forces alone, there are numerous variations, and the military itself has often struggled with naming conventions—using terms like FET, Team Lioness, Female Cultural Support

Teams (etc.) interchangeably or inconsistently. This confusion has led to misunderstandings regarding the roles and missions of each team, creating ambiguity around the distinctions between them.

In response to these issues, my research is the first to show the concept of FET across multiple fields of deployment, moving beyond the American context and Afghanistan theater, where most studies have concentrated. Additionally, my work presents the concept of FAST (Female Analysis and Support Team), shedding light on an innovative type of force structure that has received no academic attention despite its deployment in peacekeeping operations by various international contingents. By distinguishing FAST from FET, this research fills a significant gap, providing a detailed look at how both types of teams function and how they differ in purpose, composition, and operational environment. This examination also highlights the variability in how militaries beyond the US employ these structures, each adapting them based on specific mission needs and cultural factors.

In thesis, I also tackle the broader issue of civilian collaboration with the military on topics such as force structure and FET. Civilian researchers often face barriers to accessing military environments and comprehending the complexities of military operations, yet such collaboration is crucial for advancing our understanding of specialized units like FETs. Throughout my doctoral research, I had multiple opportunities to work closely with the military. I attended specialized courses offered to military personnel preparing for peacekeeping and bilateral training missions, gaining firsthand insights into military training methodologies and the unique challenges faced by female teams in deployment scenarios. Additionally, I actively engaged in debates, discussions, and workshops centered around FETs, broadening my understanding of their evolving role within military structures. By observing CIMIC branches of various countries, I tracked the development of FET capacities through simulation exercises and scenario-based training realized by the military.

These collaborations with military personnel in researching FETs have been mutually beneficial, providing valuable perspectives and resources to both parties. The Italian armed forces, for instance, have integrated some of my findings into their FET training modules, allowing them to refine and expand their course materials to better prepare personnel for real-world missions. Furthermore, the insights I provided have encouraged military entities to deepen their study of FET structures, contributing to a more robust understanding of their capabilities and potential applications. This cross-disciplinary exchange demonstrates how civilian research can directly inform and enhance military practices, fostering a collaborative environment that supports innovation and more nuanced applications of female engagement teams in contemporary military operatio.

### **3. Previous Research**

The purpose of this section is to review the literature which I considered of paramount importance to address the three core research questions of each Essay. These include, mainly, the literature on military adaptation, innovation, diffusion, and force structure. This review also discusses the existing material on AFMUs, by analyzing academic and military publications on FET and FAST units. The examination of these works is intended to identify their strengths, weaknesses, and shortcomings, but also to leverage on the concept of military force structure to explain how FET and FAST represent unexplored, yet key forms of military forces structure that are revolutionizing the way armed forces operate both overseas and domestically.

As such, the literature review addresses the core topics forming the basis for each of the three papers of this dissertation. The first subsection (3.1) is devoted to the discussion of frequently overlooked force structure innovations to prove how they are, instead, at the core of military organizations' transformation initiatives; The second subsection (3.2) argues that AFMUs have only ever been evaluated through a gender and feminist lens and highlights all associated pitfalls. In addition, it explains why AFMUs are valid instances of force structure innovation and adaptation that should be examined from the standpoint of military transformation; finally, the third and last subsection (3.3) reviews present material on FET and FAST and encourages an ever-attempted interpretation of these military assets as unique types of force structure innovations.

The aim of the literature review is to set the context for the second part of this dissertation, devoted to the presentation of the three chapters, where the research questions of this study would be examined and investigated in a systematic way. By advancing a similar thinking, we can gain a better understanding of the factors explaining the variation in the timing of adoption and diffusion of military force structure innovations across armed forces and diverse military interventions. But also get more comprehension of the circumstances leading a military organization to innovate or adapt through them. And finally, we can put forward a clearer view of the drivers explaining the revision of existing force structure innovations and following variation in their deployment.

#### **3.1 A glimpse at the research on force structure innovation.**

It is well known from history that military organizations constantly try to figure out what happens on the battlefield, how to keep up with steady evolutions of the theater of operation, and consequently redesigning themselves to integrate innovations. This implies them to systematize hundreds of stimuli that range from required variation in doctrine, education, facilities, leadership, materiel, organization, personnel, policy, and training, among many others. While all these components are equally important to the development and change process of the military, one, force structure, has changed tremendously over the last thirty years.

The literature on military force structure frequently highlights major technological innovations, such as advancements in weapons systems, logistics, and command and control networks. However, it often overlooks more subtle yet impactful structural innovations that have reshaped military organization and enhanced operational effectiveness in significant ways. Some scholars have instead emphasized that while technological advancements often dominate discussions, less visible structural changes can profoundly influence military performance by enhancing adaptability and integration.<sup>7</sup>

We know that since the end of the Cold War, armed forces have entered a period of unprecedented profound shifts in relation to their core roles. Within this framework, an increasing number of military organizations have expressed their desire and necessity to improve their force structure through innovation and adaptation.<sup>8</sup> This has made it even more essential to understand, and predict how forces on the ground are structured, organized, and change.

Examples include the adoption of modularity, where forces are structured into versatile, self-sufficient units that can be deployed in various combinations based on mission needs, rather than large, centralized formations. This approach was critical in post-Cold War environments and in the Global War on Terror, where U.S. and NATO forces restructured from traditional divisions to more flexible, brigade-based units to better respond to fluid insurgency environments.<sup>9</sup> Non-technological innovations such as the integration of diverse personnel roles and cross-functional teams have introduced critical shifts in operational dynamics. Especially, CIMIC practices, though not involving advanced technology, have facilitated important structural adjustments by integrating military and civilian efforts in complex operational theaters, as seen in peacekeeping missions across Bosnia and Afghanistan. The literature suggests that the integration of CIMIC units has revolutionized how military forces operate in peacekeeping and humanitarian missions. Particularly, it has been argued that CIMIC units enable military organizations to effectively bridge the gap between military objectives and civilian needs, enhancing mission legitimacy and effectiveness by fostering collaboration between military and civilian actors. These overlooked force structure innovations highlight how organizational changes that adapt to environmental and operational needs can yield considerable advantages. Thus, a more comprehensive understanding of military innovation should encompass these structural innovations alongside traditional technological perspectives.

In the last decade, a few, valuable studies have elevated the relevance of militaries' force structure. Throughout the years, there has been a general hype in understanding why a certain country opts for a specific military format rather than others. The shift from mass armed forces toward a professional "force-in-being" has been a clear demonstration of a key change in military organizations' force

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: The Modifications of the American Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff, *The Sources of Military Change: Culture, Politics, Technology* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, John Blaxland, *The Australian Army from Whitlam to Howard* (Melbourne, VIC: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 352-353; UK Ministry of Defence, 'Advantage through Innovation: The Defence Innovation Initiative' (London: Ministry of Defence, 2016): 2, 4.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Herbert Raymond McMaster, 'The Emerging Threat: Lessons from the War on Terror', *Military Review* 83/3 (2003):14-23; Antulio J. Echevarria, 'Reconsidering the Revolution: The Evolution of the Military-Technical Revolution', *The Journal of Military History*, 71/3 (2007): 737-759.

structure.<sup>10</sup>The proof of this has been a consequent reshuffle of Western armed forces' structure by opting for modular, more mobile, flexible, and integrated force structure for expeditionary missions.<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, it has been claimed that armed forces, especially European militaries involved in recent crisis-management and peace operations and COIN, have placed emphasis on joint, network centric aspects.<sup>12</sup> Other scholars have supported that attention to the infantry battalion has come as a result, to the point that they stand out for being at "the forefront of innovation among ground forces (in Europe) today" and are "at the vanguard of European military transformation around which the adaptation of the army as a whole is being organized".<sup>13</sup> Some works have even leveraged on the increasing role played by support units in military interventions, to the point that their presence, once exceptional, is now considered the new routine.<sup>14</sup>

These findings are noteworthy, as they are among the first studies to have offered exhaustive analysis of the relevance of military force structure and the way it has gradually changed over the past years. Yet, all of them also show two major issues.

First, these research remain predominantly focused on Western (European or NATO) armed forces transformation phenomena. Some studies have specifically posed their attention to the fact that the need to integrate and standardize the European forces structure should be considered as a priority for the future of European Military Strategies and represent today a substantial challenge.<sup>15</sup> And yet, non Western transformation processes, equally important but far more multifarious given their non membership to common political or military structures, such as the European Union or the NATO, have been completely left aside.

Second, by centring on an exclusive type of military intervention, namely security and stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, these research have mostly remained confined to a unique point in time, overlooking many other key instances of military organizations' transformation in different operational interventions, including bilateral training, PDT, and PKOs, among others.

In sum, among the myriad stimuli driving battlefield evolution, force structure stands out as a pivotal aspect that has undergone significant transformation over the past three decades. Understanding and anticipating these structural changes, but above all understanding the type of phenomenon we are dealing with, has become fundamental, particularly in the context of contemporary military operations. Therefore,

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, James Burk, The decline of mass armed forces and compulsory military service, *Defense Analysis* 8/1 (1992):45-59, DOI: 10.1080/07430179208405523.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Theo Farrell, Sten Rynning, and Terry Terriff, *Transforming Military Power since the Cold War: The United States, Britain, and France, 1991-2012* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 3, 8, 286; Theo Farrell, 'Military adaptation and organizational convergence in war: Insurgents and international forces in Afghanistan', *Journal of* <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1768371>; Timothy Edmunds, 'What are armed forces for? The changing nature of military roles in Europe', *International Affairs* 82/6 (2006):1059-75.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Hugo Meijer and Marco Wyss, *The Handbook of European Defense Policies & Armed Forces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018):17-18.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Anthony King, *The Transformation of Europe's Armed Forces: From the Rhine to Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 251.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Mark Cancian, 'Contractors: The New Element of Military Force Structure', *Parameters* 38/3 (2008), DOI:10.55540/0031-1723.2431

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Ståle Ulriksen, 'Requirements for future European military strategies and force structures', *International Peacekeeping* 11/3 (2004): 457-473, DOI: 10.1080/1353331042000249046

the distinction between evolutionary change and innovation in military force structure, which is critical for understanding how armed forces adapt to changing operational environments and threats. Evolutionary change refers to incremental modifications made within the existing framework of military organizations. These changes are often informed by historical experiences, lessons learned, and gradual technological advancements, allowing for the optimization of established practices without fundamentally altering the underlying structure. For instance, the US military's adaptation of its force structure following the Gulf War reflects an evolutionary approach, where lessons from that conflict informed enhancements in training, logistics, and interoperability.<sup>16</sup> This approach fosters stability and continuity, as it builds upon existing capabilities and institutional knowledge, ensuring that forces can adapt in a coherent manner.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, innovation embodies a more radical transformation, involving the introduction of entirely new concepts, technologies, or organizational forms that disrupt traditional paradigms. Innovations in military force structure include the development of specialized units, such as FETs, which address emerging operational demands and reflect a significant shift in military doctrine and strategy. Innovations like FET require a reevaluation of roles, missions, and operational strategies, often challenging established norms and necessitating a cultural shift within military organizations. While evolutionary change promotes adaptation within the existing force structure, innovation necessitates a fundamental reassessment of military capabilities and strategic objectives. Thus, both processes are essential for maintaining military effectiveness, with evolutionary changes ensuring responsiveness within a stable framework, while innovation drives the transformative shifts required to address emerging challenges in a dynamic security environment.

In conclusion, while these findings offer valuable insights into the evolution of military force structure, they are not without their limitations. In addressing these above-mentioned gaps, this research offers a more comprehensive understanding of military force structure dynamics, encompassing both Western and non-Western perspectives across a broader array of operational scenarios. Such insights, I believe, are indispensable for informing strategic decision-making and advancing military effectiveness in an ever evolving global security landscape.

### **3.2 Adapting or Innovating through AFMUs: a never addressed inquiry**

Sub-section 3.1 has highlighted how military organizations' force structures have changed over time and have been analyzed in the past decades by existing scholarship. This coming sub-section shows how, among force structure changes, AFMUs have never been considered as an instance of force

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Adam Grissom, 'The Future of Military Innovation Studies', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 29/2 (2006):182-200.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Thomas P. Hughes, *Human-Built World: How to Think about Technology and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2011)



structure innovation by present scholarship despite their increasing contribution in shaping armed forces attitude on the ground.

The intricacies of modern wars of the 21st century have determined the innovation and adaptation of most militaries under several organizational aspects, including the need to create AFMUs of various kinds to deal with multiple operational requirements. Since 2004, the increasing presence of women within military organizations has prompted new thinking about what female soldiers can bring to military interventions. On an institutional level, the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (S/RES/1325) of 31 October 2000 on Women, Peace and Security by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has paved the way for an endless number of studies that recalled the importance of involving more uniformed women in military interventions, especially in PKOs and security and stability operations undergoing in worn-torn nations.<sup>18</sup> The significance of contribution to multiple sorts of missions has been widely recognized by scholars.<sup>19</sup> However, Political Science experts, International Relations professionals, and Security Studies specialists have completely overlooked how armed forces innovate and adapt through AFMUs in modern interventions. Close inspection through the strategic lens of military change reveals considerable variance in the existing explanations for armed forces' force structure renovation through the creation or incorporation of AFMUs.

According to some studies, armed forces might integrate other's initiatives to rise upward into a more professional-looking organization.<sup>20</sup> We know that a first step to form an original all-female platoon in ground combat arms has been launched by the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO)—highest division charged with the directive guidance, and support of the planning, preparation, direction, and management of UNPKOs—in 2007. At the time, UNDPD ushered in a pioneering empowerment experiment by deploying an all-female Formed Police (FPU) of Indian peacekeepers to the United Nation Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) to promote the presence of female peacekeepers in the mission, as well as to strengthen the rule of law and uphold peace in the country.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Gerard J. DeGroot, 'A Few Good Women: Gender Stereotypes, the Military and Peacekeeping', in Olsson L. and Tryggestad T. L. (ed.) *Women and International Peacekeeping* (London: Frank Cass, 2001); Kari H. Karamé, 'Military Women in Peace Operations: Experiences of the Norwegian Battalion in UNIFIL 1978–98', in Olsson L. and Tryggestad T. (ed.) *Women and International Peacekeeping* (London: Routledge, 2001); Olivera Simić, 'Does the Presence of Women Really Matter? Towards Combating Male Sexual Violence in Peacekeeping Operations', *International Peacekeeping* 17/4 (2010):188–199; Sahana Dharmapuri, 'Just Add Women and Stir?', *Parameters* 41/1 (2011):56–70

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Louise Olsson, 'Mainstreaming Gender in Multidimensional Peacekeeping: A Field Experience', *International Peacekeeping* 7/3 (2000):1–16; Karen Davis and Brian Mckee, 'Women in the Military: Facing a Warrior Framework', in Franklin Pinch, Alistar Macintyre, Phyllis Brown and Alan Akros (ed.), *Challenge and Change in the Military: Gender and Diversity Issues* (Ottawa: Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, Canadian Defence Force Academy, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Theo Farrell, 'Transnational norms and military development: constructing Ireland's professional army', *European Journal of International Relations* 7/1 (2001):63–102; Emily O. Goldman, 'The spread of Western military models to Ottoman Turkey and Meiji Japan', in Farrell and Terriff (ed.), *The Sources of Military change* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 41–68; Emily O. Goldman and Leslie C. Eliason, *The diffusion of military technology and ideas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, The United Nations Official Home Page, *In first for UN peacekeeping, all-female police unit arrives in Liberia* (30 January 2007). Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2007/01/207362-first-un-peacekeeping-all-female-police-unit-arrives-liberia> (last accessed: January 5, 2023); Lesley J. Pruitt, 'All-Female

At the same time, a substantial proportion of academics hints that outer events that do not attain the domestic dimension, such as a military defeat, or an outside threat have justified armed forces' choices behind a new organizational design in a much better way.<sup>22</sup>In such an atmosphere, the idea of embracing military innovation of all types and forms has also been suggested in order to “stay ahead of the game”,<sup>23</sup> and advance armed forces' services' war-winning edge.<sup>24</sup> All this is reflected in a frequently cited example of AFMU force structure innovation, the Norwegian Jegertroppen or Hunter Troop in 2013. This unit was officially formed to train female soldiers of the Norwegian Special Operation Commando (NORSOC) to a multitude of Special Operation Forces (SOF) and improve their operative capabilities both domestically and internationally.<sup>25</sup>

Episodes of military transformation are especially valid when one feels the hint of threatening changes into the air.<sup>26</sup>In this case, the adoption of existing specific innovations has thus been often touted as a valuable solution in an effort to fight an enemy,<sup>23</sup> the faster the better.<sup>27</sup>As a proof of this in 2013 in Rojava the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), a female militia that later converged into the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was founded with the aim of fighting Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) by deconstructing its patriarchal impositions.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, there is no lack of cases of military organizations' attempts to readjust their force structure through AFMUs because of internal forces or constraints. In 2017, following the request of eight religious female soldiers to serve into a separate department drafted exclusively for women due to religious domestic restraints, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) thought of re-adapting the mixed-gender Lavi HaBik'a battalion operating in the southern Jordan Valley to create an AFMUs.<sup>29</sup>

All these studies are key to understanding why militaries are tackling challenges and seizing opportunities for fast and unprecedented changes. However, there's no theoretical reasoning able to explain the circumstances that have supported or inhibited their diffusion, nor the motivations behind national innovation or adaptation through AFMUs, or the drivers below military organization reviewing existing forms of AFMUs to employ them in novel ways.

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Police Contingents: Feminism and the Discourse of Armed Protection', *International Peacekeeping* 20/1 (2013): 67-79, DOI: 10.1080/13533312.2012.761836; Lesley J. Pruitt, *The Women in Blue Helmets: Gender, Policing and the UN First All Female Peacekeeping Unit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*, 233–234

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Theo Farrell, 'The Dynamics of British Military Transformation', *International Affairs* 84/4 (2008):779.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Donald Rice, *The Air Force and National Security: Global Reach-Global Power: Reshaping the Future* (Washington DC: Department of the Air Force,1990).

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Frank Brundtland Steder and Nina Rones, 'Why Make a Special Platoon for Women', *Special Operations Journal* 5/1 (2019): 56, DOI: 10.1080/23296151.2019.1581434

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of international politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979);

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Airpower: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Roger Bilstein, "The Airplane and the American Experience", in Dominick Paisano (ed.), *The Airplane in American Culture* (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press 2003): 25.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Valentina Dean, 'Kurdish Female Fighters: the Western Depiction of YPJ Combatants in Rojava', *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation* (2019):1-29, DOI: 10.12893/gjcp.2019.1.7

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Yossi Yehoshua, 'Women warriors: a look at the all-female IDF combat battalions', *Magazine* (2017). Available at: <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4964597,00.html> (last accessed: January 4, 2023).

In conclusion, I contend that although previous research has positively influenced the discussion surrounding the usefulness of AFMUs for the progress of military organizations, a fresh perspective on military transformation warrants further investigation into these military assets.

To this end, the history of the FET and FAST units, the two predominant kinds of AFMUs worldwide, is examined in detail in the next subsection. In particular, I try to demonstrate that even while these subjects have been extensively discussed via a feminist and gender perspective, they nevertheless provide a rich environment for further discussion on the subject of military transformation.

### 3.3 The FET and FAST (force structure) innovation programs

Since the beginning of the new century, AFMUs have been increasingly employed by the most diverse military organizations in a variety of operational contexts. Reference available on these units is little and presents several theoretical, empirical, and methodological limitations.

In the theoretical side, Feminist and Gender domains have largely encouraged debate on FET to the point that the latter have been often framed as a tool for successfully (or ineffectively) implementing gender perspective in peace operations and military interventions<sup>30</sup> and as a case of armed forces instrumentalization of femininity in innovative tactics to war resolution.<sup>31</sup> Most existing studies mentioning the FET start with a discussion on the role of women with the armed forces and then proceed with the FET analysis as a great example of the utility of women in the military.<sup>32</sup> Some have stressed that FET came in handy for supporting the feminist war narrative in furtherance of women's rights in countries with low human rights records.<sup>33</sup> Others have underlined how FETs have been used to feed the debate on masculinist protection after 9/11.<sup>34</sup> Yet, others have framed the FET as an internal

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Stephanie K. Erwin, Lieutenant, 'The Veil of Kevlar: an Analysis of the Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan', master thesis, United States Navy M.A., Naval Postgraduate School (2012); Nicola Pratt, 'Reconceptualizing Gender, Reinscribing Racial-Sexual Boundaries in International Security', *International Studies Quarterly* 57/4 (2013): 778; Synne L Dyvik, 'Women as Practitioners and Targets. Gender and Counter Surgency in Afghanistan', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 16/3 (2014):410-429, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2013.779139>; Robert Egnell, Petter Hojem and Hannes Berts, *Gender, military effectiveness, and organizational change: The Swedish model* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Robert Egnell, 'Gender Perspectives and Military Effectiveness Implementing UNSCR 1325 and the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security', *PRISM* 6/1 (2016): 77.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Mesok, 'Affective Technologies of War: US Female Counterinsurgents and the Performance of Gendered Labor', *Radical History Review* 123 (2015): 60-86; Annick Wibben, Keally McBride, 'Counterinsurgency and Gender: The Case of the Female Engagement Teams', *E-International Relations* (2012):1.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, MAJ Ginger E. Beals, 'Women Marines in Counterinsurgency Operations: Lioness and Female N/A Engagement Teams', master thesis, USMC Command and Staff College (2010); Fatima Farina, *Donne nelle Forze Armate. Il servizio militare femminile in Italia e nella Nato* (Roma: Viella, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Annick T.R. Wibben and Keally McBride, 'Counterinsurgency and Gender: The Case of the Female Engagement Teams', *E-International Relations*, 2012, 1.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Nicola Pratt, *Reconceptualizing Gender, Reinscribing Racial-Sexual Boundaries in International Security*.

initiative launched to introduce a gender perspective within the military<sup>35</sup> or have used the FET to advance a gendered critique of the military organizations.<sup>36</sup>

While this understanding of the FET via a feminist and gendered viewpoint is substantial, it cannot be the sole interpretation. This is because, by doing so, the range of inquiries that the researchers have posed for this unit has remained rather constrained, while there's a myriad of unanswered questions regarding it that it would be worth investigating.<sup>37</sup>

Empirically, although evidence on these two teams is extraordinary and various, literature on FET—which is the most widespread instance of AFMUs—is limited, while reference on FAST is completely absent. This makes it even more urgent to open reflection on the topic.

Among the existing studies, with few exclusions,<sup>38</sup> the largest amount of research, has primarily been pursued or promoted by military institutions<sup>39</sup> and attained to the classified realm.<sup>40</sup> Looking at the outcomes, there is disagreement on the results obtained by FETs deployed on the ground. Most of the existing research took the view that the development of the FET program had an undiscussed effect in enhancing domestic debate on women combat exclusion law or the employment of females in military interventions.<sup>41</sup> Specifically, it has been argued that attaching FETs to ground combat units in COIN operations Iraq and in Afghanistan was key to boosting security, intelligence and information dissemination,<sup>42</sup> and relations building.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, there is a possibility that this state of the art may have resulted from favorable reporting due to pressure to do well. There exists, indeed, a larger

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Civil-Military Cooperation Centre of Excellence “Female Engagement Teams, A CCOE Observation Paper”.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Sippi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, “Seeking out their Afghan sisters: Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan”, CMI Working Paper (2014):1-55

<sup>37</sup> A handful of inquiries remain unresolved today. For instance, is the US the unique country that resorted to FETs to meet operational impending? Are there any other examples of states that have reshaped their force structure through FET so far? In this case, what are the circumstances that favour the integration of this asset? Conversely, which obstruct its assimilation? Do specific sorts of armed forces use FETs in other types of military interventions, or are FETs just used in COIN operations in Afghanistan? Which operational context might be the most suited to welcome this sort of innovation? Has the application of FET changed based on various military units or operating theaters? All of these questions remain unanswered as of this writing.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Annick T.R. Wibben and Keally McBride, *Counterinsurgency and Gender: The Case of the Female Engagement Teams*, 1-3

<sup>39</sup> These include the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, the U.S. Army War College in Pennsylvania, or the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, among many others.

<sup>40</sup> Most of the research on FETs pertains to “grey literature”, which consists of briefing materials, lessons learned, non-analytical reports, recommendations, and short articles not including official assessment on FETs, written by military officers or NCO officers, published or released, when the time comes, on defence sites.

See Beals, “Women Marines in Counterinsurgency Operations: Lioness and Female N/A Engagement Teams”; Stephanie K. Erwin, Lieutenant, *The Veil of Kevlar: an Analysis of the Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan*; Janet R. Holliday, Lieutenant Colonel, “US Army Female Engagement Teams: Professionalizing the Training and Looking Forward”, United States Army War College (2012); Kelly C. Meister, Major, “Rape as Weapon of War: Should Sexual Assault Medical Forensic Examiners (SAMFEs) be Added to Female Engagement Teams (FETs) in Africa?”, master thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS (2016); Sippi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, *Seeking out their Afghan sisters: Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan*.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Erwin *The veil of Kevlar*, 2

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Erwin *The veil of Kevlar*, 12. Beals, *Women Marines in Counterinsurgency Operations*, 8.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Beals, *Women Marines in Counterinsurgency Operations*.

number of critiques of the FET program. For instance, FET failures have been retracted back to the fact that the FET members program was based on unclear functions<sup>44</sup> and suffered from “the absence of an operational vision”. This made it “as ad hoc organizations recruited at random, poorly trained, and inadequately resourced”.<sup>45</sup> The program has been criticized for a lack of command support and mission clarity,<sup>46</sup> little authority or ability to address concerns voiced by the local people,<sup>44</sup> but also of unsuccessful integration into (US) COIN.<sup>47</sup> Such critiques have gone ahead to the point that FET has been defined as “a multimillion-dollar team without a clear purpose”<sup>48</sup> or that the employment of such initiative may have caused damages to military intervention, contributing to local instability by creating multiple ethical pitfalls.<sup>49</sup> As proof of this, no exhaustive study has been put forward to provide a convincing answer. According to an investigation, there has been just a sporadic attempt from the Joint Command (IJC) FET to perform a comprehensive assessment of all FETs in Afghanistan through a survey to capture as much information as possible on FET initiatives.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, there was no clear procedure for reporting the FET engagement with the local population. Therefore, it was impossible to objectively monitor and measure their effectiveness and impact on the ground.

As for the methodological side, there’s scarcity of structured qualitative or quantitative studies able to provide first-hand information regarding the current or former FET programs. To date, there does not exist any statistical investigation on the presence or employment of FETs in military interventions and there’re just a few studies that are based on authentic interviews. Furthermore, up until now, almost the whole current research has almost exclusively focused on the use of American FETs in Afghanistan. Scientific studies that have taken into consideration FET from other nationalities or that are deployed in different operational theaters can be counted on the fingertips. Therefore, there is an evident need to enlarge the pool of cases upon which to advance reflection on FET. Although the fact that the major users of the FET program have been Americans is indisputable, there are no academic studies on the experiences of other military organizations that have made use of FETs throughout the past decade. As there is no comparative study on the use of FETs. This provides a biased and incomplete picture of the current state of the art of FET conception and employment.

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, *Seeking out their Afghan sisters: Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan*.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Long Gail C. ‘Effectiveness of U.S. Military Female Engagement Teams.’ Master’s Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School (2012). <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a567705.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Erwin *The veil of Kevlar*.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Gabrielle Cook, ‘Counterinsurgency and Female Engagement Teams in the War in Afghanistan’, *E-International Relations* (2015): 1-19.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Karl W. Eikenberry, ‘The Limits of Counterinsurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan – The Other Side of the COIN’, *Foreign Affairs* 92 (2013).

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Richard Ledet, Pete A. Turner and Sharon Emeigh, ‘Recognizing the Ethical Pitfalls of Female Engagement in Conflict Zones’. *Journal of Military Ethics* 17/4 (2018): 1, DOI:<https://doi.org/10.1080/15027570.2019.1585619>

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Janet R. Holliday, Lieutenant Colonel, ‘Female Engagement Teams: The Need to Standardize Training and Employment’, *Military Review* (2018):28. Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2007/01/207362-first-un-peacekeeping-all-female-police-unit-arrives-liberia> (last accessed: June 7, 2024)

In conclusion, while gender and feminist studies of FET are unquestionably important—this study could not have been conducted without the availability of prior data on the subject deriving from these literature—focusing solely on these viewpoints makes it challenging to understand how FET has revolutionized the force structure of an increasing number of military organizations. Particularly in terms of how these studies have helped militaries begin to rethink who they are and how they conduct operations in the field. In a nutshell it is devoid of an analysis approach to force structure and FET from the Security Studies field, which is connected to the subject of military transformation.

This section has elucidated the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical gaps beneath the FET and FAST concepts and has explained the need of addressing these two military initiatives through the lens of military transformation. The next section fleshes out the choices behind the research design and the methods used to gather data for the three Essays composing this dissertation.

#### **4. Research design and strategy of data collection**

This dissertation presents a contribution by emphasizing the value of the force structure transformation process in military organizations. Namely, by concentrating on the genesis, spread, and development of AFMUs as an understudied yet noteworthy example of military force structure innovation.

For the purpose of gaining a greater understanding of the various nuances of military organizations' force structure redesign, I have broken down this study into three independent Essays.

Essay I attempts to trace the history of the FET program from its inception in 2009 to the present, as well as its geographic distribution across military organizations and various kinds of military interventions. Specifically, this study investigates the ways in which the US-developed FET concept spread to allies and partners around the globe in a variety of military interventions, including COIN operations, peacekeeping missions, bilateral training etc. I picked to use illustrative case studies to help the reader get a "feel" for how innovations spread throughout the cascade effect. These, in my opinion, enable me to draw attention to a variety of aspects of the events that are the subject of the analysis. They facilitate to depict, among other things, the stages of the cascade effect that the research describes, the connection that exists between the innovator and the adopters, and the impact that the transition from operational theater to actors and from actors to actors has on the innovation's evolution.

To prove this, I looked into the first military forces for creating a FET program in each phase identified, which deemed the invention valuable and therefore opted to implement it. Hence the article gives insight on the global dissemination of the (US) FET effort to the UK (2009), Italy (2010), Zambia (2015), Lebanon (2018). This selection makes sure that the scenarios considered accomplish significant divergence in both the independent and the dependent variables.

On the one hand, two of the main US allies in the Afghan War are represented by the UK and Italy. Despite having the same goals, objectives, command, etc., the UK's unique relationship with the US proved crucial in gaining access as the first to the FET program by joining exclusive US FET training. On the other hand, Italy learned about the FET initiative with a slight delay in time with all other Allies thanks to a shared directive from the (US-led) ISAF Joint Command in Kabul. Similarly, the investigation focuses on Zambia and Lebanon as representatives of the US's key partners in Africa and the Middle East. However, despite Lebanese centrality on important regional security issues in the eastern Mediterranean, the US did not inform and train the LAF directly; instead, it allowed Italy and other European partners to do so, including the FET program. This shows the US's relative commitment towards Lebanon. While this indicates an incredible financial commitment to peacekeeping operations involving the African partner, it also shows a commitment to training and equipping Zambezi personnel. Essay II looks on the transformative actions taken by mid-level commanders for the same military unit in two operational areas almost simultaneously. In doing so, it explores how commanders changed the troop force structures within their armed forces by launching the FAST initiative, which was sparked by the FET program that earlier commanders of the same armed force had adopted. I pursue two unique

in-theater missions (security and stability operation vs. peacekeeping mission) by using within-case analysis to emphasize variety and multiply observations in a country's processes (innovation vs. emulative adaptation). The rationale behind selecting a within-case design was to precisely handle complexities of critical junctures, permissive and productive conditions, and the constituent elements of causal possibility, closure, and constraint.<sup>51</sup> In light of this, the current study traces mid-level commanders' actions on the ground for generating conclusions on how transformation processes occur and capture sequences of characteristics within a single larger case.<sup>52</sup>

I chose the Italian case for two primary reasons. To begin, it allows the greatest variation in the dependent variable. The involvement of the Italian military organization in operations overseas is examined practically simultaneously (2010 and 2011) in two missions (ISAF and UNIFIL), which diverge in many fundamental features, including type of operation, mandate, contributing nations, among others. On the one hand, the Italian contingent deployed in Afghanistan (2010) emulated an already existing innovation (the FET program), the knowledge of which was shared with from another actor; Italy's forces deployed under UNIFIL (2011), on the other hand, contributed to the mission by developing a unique approach (the FAST initiative), which was eventually adopted by all the other Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) in the mission. Second, thus far, the Italian case may serve as the case zero from which to launch a reflection on the origins and trajectories of organizational change, innovation, and disruption and explain trends across cases. Analyzing the initial catalyst or trigger event within a military organization provides insights into the drivers, processes, and outcomes of transformative initiatives, offering valuable lessons for organizational adaptation and strategic management

In Essay III, I make an effort to show how the original FET concept has been reconsidered and revised to be used in a completely different application than designed. In the process, the study also seeks to comprehend the dynamics and difficulties associated with this shift in viewpoint. In order to do this, I made the choice to see how the FET concept went from an experienced nation with its workforce to a friendly one with no background on FET. And more precisely, to describe how the Italians imparted the FET practice to their close Lebanese counterpart, how the latter talked with the European instructors about how to modify the practice, and how they collaborated to enhance the concept to meet the requirements of the LAF. Choosing cases that are interrelated in some way, allowed me to explore relationships, dependencies, and causal mechanisms between them, investigating complex social phenomena, including power structures and networks of influence that may not be apparent in isolation. In organizational military studies, dependent case selection allowed me to investigate the ripple effects

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<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Andrew Bennett, Colin Elman, 'Complex Causal Relations and Case Study Methods: The Example of Path Dependence', *Political Analysis*, (2006b): 250-267

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Leanne C. Power, *Empirical Research and Writing. A Political Science Student's Practical Guide* (New York, NY: SAGE Publications 2015): 131.



of organizational decisions, events, or interventions. By selecting cases that are sequentially linked or mutually influenced, I traced the trajectories of organizational change, assessing the cumulative impact of interventions over time.

In keeping with the previous two Essays, the Italian military structure has emerged as a great example of a further refinement of the evolution of the armed forces' force structure. The Italian military officers engaged in FET operations are no longer questioned in this article as innovators or adopters, but rather as diffusers of the practice—more especially, as trainers. Conversely, the study centers on Lebanon as an adopter that actively contributed to the advancement and expansion of the FET idea by leaving its mark, rather than acquiring the practice passively. The study demonstrates how the continuous and constant contact between the two military organizations over the years has allowed for the creation of a context that encouraged not only the full exchange of information, but also moments of comparison and exchange on how to make the necessary changes to review the practice spread by the Italians and adapt it for domestic use by the Lebanese.

### **Interviews**

To gather all necessary information for these three Essays, I opted for an extensive qualitative design. This choice has several decisions underneath it. First, we know that rare is research exploring events of military transformation by gathering first-hand experiences of civilians and militaries directly participating in times of transition,<sup>53</sup> despite the fact this is highly significant and valuable.<sup>54</sup> Second, a qualitative approach enables deeper understanding of experiences, phenomena, and context, as it allows to gather rich, detailed information about why people think and behave the way they do, providing an in-depth understanding of human behavior.

Based on this, I decided to rely largely on original primary data obtained through semi-structured interviews and field observation and complement this information with triangulation from many independent sources.

Between Spring 2020 and Spring 2023, I conducted 130 in-person and online anonymous individual semi-structured interviews with military personnel directly involved in FET activities within the following operational types: International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Italian Bilateral Mission in Lebanon (MIBIL), MINUSCA, the UK-Zambia PDT, Resolute Support Mission (RSM).

A significant portion of these interviews has been used to develop Essay I, the starting point of this study. I interviewed military personnel from various countries<sup>55</sup> and of all ranks from OR-1 (Private E-

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<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Francesco N. Moro, Lorenzo Cicchi, Fabrizio Coticchia, 'Through military lenses. Perception of security threats and jointness in the Italian Air Force', *Defence Studies* (2018): 1-23, DOI: 10.1080/14702436.2018.1461014.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Thomas G. Mahnken, James R. FitzSimonds, 'Tread-heads or technophiles? Army officer attitudes toward transformation', *Parameters* 34/2 (2004):57-72.

<sup>55</sup> This list includes the following countries: Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Ghana, Italy, Lebanon, Malawi, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the UK, the US, Zambia.

1) to OF-6 (Brigadier General) who have dealt with FET in order to understand when and how this concept was diffused, and more specifically the dynamics behind the adoption of the FET concept, as well as its integration within the military organizations and its implementation on the ground. Civilian support has also become vital, going from academics to interpreters and journalists from different nations who have shared their insights with me.<sup>56</sup>

Understanding the relationships between innovators and adopters, the pathways by which innovation has spread, and how these relations have contributed to movers integrating the concept ahead of or behind others were the primary focuses of the questions. However, it is also important to consider how this concept has been embraced and used locally, as well as the involvement of the individuals who worked on the innovation's creation.

Essay II makes extensive use of the obtained material. I have conducted semi-structured interviews with Italian military officers deployed within ISAF and RS between 2006 and 2017 to gain insight into the implementation and operation of the FET program, and with Italian military personnel and UN civilian officers serving under UNIFIL between 2010 and 2022 to understand how the FAST concept originated from the FET initiative. These comprised forces from OR-8 to OF-6. Interviews with former PRT and civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) cell commanders involved in these programs were specifically conducted to gain insight into the historical and situational context in which these units operated, as well as the part they played in reviving Italian military organizations through innovation and adaptation. For Essay III, a significant number of semi-structured interviews were conducted with CIMIC staff members from Italy and Lebanon who have been active in FET training since 2018. These included military from OR-8 to OF-5 (Colonel) and aimed to comprehend the goals, difficulties, and outcomes of these teams as well as how they were organized (or meant to be constructed), utilized (or planned to be deployed), and intended for FET. In order to combine the literature on bilateral training and cooperation, interviews also proved useful in analyzing the relationship and cooperation between the components.

### **Fieldwork**

Additionally, fieldwork has become crucial to the realization of this study. Under ideal conditions, fieldwork should have been conducted in each of the operational types described above. These configurations were not practical, nevertheless, for the reasons listed below. First, there is a time constraint, as this project was launched in November 2020. FET activities in Afghanistan concluded by 2017, while PDT took place in Zambia in 2019. Therefore, it would not have been feasible to join FET members on the ground. Second, fieldwork in the CAR may only have been feasible if the Italian contingent—which is not involved in the mission—had been hosting it.

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<sup>56</sup> These include people coming from Afghanistan, Italy, Lebanon, Sweden, the UK and the US

For Essay II, one fieldwork was performed at UNIFIL in November 2022 under the supervision and guidance of the “Aosta” Brigade, and with prior authorization of the Italian and Lebanese Ministry of Defense (MoDs) and the UN Headquarters (HQs) to capture the employment of the FASTs on the ground, which had never been documented before. At Shama, I joined FAST activities to directly observe the teams at work and provide a first witness of their origin and performance on the ground. 24 hours contact with these units for multiple weeks helped me to concretely understand the time and efforts devoted by FAST members and commanders to this initiative. Deployment with the units was also extremely beneficial to collect direct feedback from Lebanese soldiers escorting FASTs and local population benefitting from FAST initiatives.

For Essay III, I conducted two fieldworks at the LAF CIMIC Directorate in Faiyadiyah, Lebanon, one in September 2022 and one in April-May 2023. The first fieldwork was carried out to familiarize with the LAF and their understanding of CIMIC. In that respect, I completed semi-structured interviews with the Lebanese CIMIC personnel to gain a deeper understanding of the rationale behind a Domestic CIMIC concept. The second fieldwork was instead performed as part of a specific FET course and training activities issued by a MNCG’s MTT in which selected CIMIC personnel from all the CIMIC Directorates in Lebanon participated. In this framework, I attended the FET course as an auditor, doing observation. I had constant, direct and informal exchanges and discussion with the CIMIC staff of the LAF CIMIC Directorate and the MNCG, who provided extensive explanations of the operations conducted and clarifications whenever necessary. Fieldwork was conducted closely with the support and constant feedback of both parts to report faithfully each step of the training and share the FET practice.

The extra value of this study comes from the memoirs of academics and journalists who have been embedded with the armed forces examined in the same period and shared their personal notes, books and diaries. In this sense, I also have attended several lessons-learned briefings, public interventions, and private seminars where some of the interviewees, both civilian and military, discussed their experiences after returning from the interventions analyzed.

Furthermore, the unwavering support of the Multinational CIMIC Group (MNCG) of Motta di Livenza, Italy—a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) specialized unit envisioned for tactical and operational CIMIC, promoter of the FET program and of the FAST initiative worldwide—has proven critical to recollect the details about what took place throughout the missions, especially in Afghanistan and Lebanon, and to better understand how armed forces of all the world have trained and continue to form the military personnel to be deployed in FET and FAST units or in support of them.

Finally, to increase validity of the study and compensate for possible interviewees’ lapses of memory over time, I integrated the material with reports from the American, British, Italian, Lebanese, Zambezi MoDs, NATO and UN websites, including slides, military reports, evaluations, unclassified documents, video, and pictures.

All this material proved vital in piecing together the historical memory of the FET and FAST programs, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of these force structure origination, development and diffusion.

## 5. Ethical considerations

Conducting research with military organizations required careful consideration of various factors, including the nature of the research, ethical considerations, and potential implications for individuals involved. To that purpose, I submitted the research project to the University of Genoa's Ethic Committee (which accepted it on April 21, 2022), as well as the several Ministries of Defence whose military may be engaged in the initiative. These include, specifically, the Italian Ministry of Defence, the Lebanese Ministry of Defence, and the Zambian Ministry of Defense. Such authorizations, issued on May 10, 2022, September 12, 2022, and January 18, 2023, respectively, were sought to ensure alignment with compliance with legal and regulatory frameworks, and adherence to ethical standards governing military research.

### *Interviews*

As for interviews, because of the delicate environment that the military world domain represents, I was specifically careful of two aspects that I list below.

First of all, each interview has been released on a voluntary basis and, in the case of interviews of military personnel or civilians working for military institutions of international organizations, prior consensus of their institutions.<sup>57</sup> In the military field, particularly, but not exclusively, ensuring that interviews are released voluntarily is crucial for upholding ethical standards, respecting individuals' rights, and maintaining the integrity of research practices. Releasing interviews voluntarily respected military and civilian personnel's agency and allowed them to decide whether they wanted to contribute to the research process without coercion or undue influence.

Secondly, many topics discussed on the military domain were sensitive or confidential, involving personal experiences, operational details, or classified information. This brings me to the second key point exacerbated as for ethical considerations. For each interview, I ensured all participants confidentiality and anonymity. I'd like to spend a few words on this topic because I am aware of the ramifications of doing research solely through anonymous interviews, which I carefully evaluated given the setting and objectives of my work.

I am aware that anonymity comes with cons. Specifically, it makes it challenging for other researchers to follow up with participants or verify the accuracy of the responses I collected. Without contact information or identifiers, academics may miss opportunities for clarifications or additional insights, doubting the credibility and reliability of the data collected. However, this thesis would like to highlight the benefit of conducting research preserving the anonymity of interviewees, which I clarify below.

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<sup>57</sup> Interviews have been authorized by military and civilian institutions in order to not violate legal and regulatory requirements, such as institutional review board (IRB) guidelines, data protection laws, and military regulations governing research conduct. Adhering to these standards was essential for ensuring the legality and legitimacy of the research process.

Since the very first interviews, I noticed that concealing the identities of the interviewees made them feel more comfortable providing honest and candid responses, leading to richer and more authentic data, especially when discussing sensitive or stigmatized topics. Actually, performing interviews in this way helped me to establish rapport and trust with many of the participants, building a personal connection between us. This is demonstrated by the fact that I re-interviewed some of the participants multiple times across the years or that I got in touch with them regularly after the interview to get feedback or crosscheck additional information received at a later time. This positively affected the depth of the interview and the quality of the data collected.

Putting forward anonymous interviews also reduced social desirability bias, as participants were more likely to express their true opinions and experiences without fear of judgment, pressure to conform to social norms or provide socially desirable responses or repercussions. Also, anonymous interviews helped to protect the privacy of interviewees. Because of the limited number of civilian and military dealing with the FET program, safeguarding participants' privacy by preventing the disclosure of their identity or sensitive personal information was particularly important when discussing sensitive topics or when participants belong to specific and selected groups.

Finally, ensuring the participation was anonymous increased participation in the research. It happened more than once that potential interviewees joined the research after being informed that their identity was protected. This was a very precious source for the research as it allowed me to increase the amount of data available, to complete the threads of the narrative and to enrich my story with details that were unknown before. This was especially the case of military personnel that feared negative consequences, such as career repercussions, retaliation, or harm.

In the end, releasing interviews voluntarily and anonymously ensured that individuals had control over the dissemination of their personal and professional information, safeguarding their privacy.

In summary, ensuring that interviews are released voluntarily in the military field has been essential for upholding ethical principles, protecting participants' rights and privacy, fostering trust and transparency, mitigating risks, and maintaining the validity and reliability of research findings. By addressing these ethical considerations, I tried to ensure that my research in the military field upheld the highest standards of integrity, respect, and social responsibility, while advancing knowledge and understanding for the benefit of military personnel, organizations, and society as a whole.

## *Fieldwork*

Similarly, the nature of the research required fieldwork to get firsthand knowledge and comprehend operational realities. Lebanon has been a focal point for regional conflicts, peacekeeping operations, and international interventions due to its geopolitical significance and historical tensions. The country hosts various multinational military missions, including UNIFIL, and bilateral missions, such as MIBIL, which plays a critical role in maintaining stability along the Lebanese-Israeli border. Conducting fieldwork within these missions could allow me to examine international efforts to promote peace, security, and stability in the region, as well as the challenges and opportunities associated with multinational cooperation, FET and FAST employment. However, conducting fieldwork in military missions in Lebanon presented significant challenges due to various practical, logistical, ethical, and security-related challenges. Access restrictions, safety concerns, resource limitations, and bureaucratic barriers often pose obstacles to fieldwork in military contexts, making it a rare and privileged opportunity for researchers. Despite all these evident challenges, I requested the UN to allow me to reach the Italian contingent stationed in UNIFIL's Sector East Area.

The request was approved on November 17, 2022. In addition, I traveled to Lebanon twice more, in September 2022 and April-May 2023, to document LAF training under MIBIL, prior authorization of Italian and Lebanese Ministries of Defenses. Thereby, in the end, fieldwork, represented, together with interviews, the foundation of my data collecting. The importance of fieldwork is highlighted in the following elements.

Fieldwork allowed me to observe and assess military training and operations, tactics, and procedures in real-time. By immersing myself in the operational environment, I gained a deeper understanding of the challenges, constraints, and dynamics faced by military personnel on the ground, as well as the nuances and complexities of the missions.

From the ethical viewpoint, fieldwork provided me with a contextual understanding of the socio-political, cultural, and environmental factors that influence military missions. Fieldwork allowed me to navigate complex ethical considerations, such as ensuring the protection of human subjects, respecting cultural sensitivities, and minimizing harm to local populations.

Ethical fieldwork involved being sensitive to the cultural norms, values, and practices of the local population in military mission areas. Throughout the fieldwork, I was invited by the military to respect cultural differences, avoid imposing my own biases or perspectives, and engage in meaningful dialogue and collaboration with the interpreter (and community members) to ensure that my activities were conducted in a culturally appropriate and respectful manner. This approach allowed me to collect rich, qualitative data through direct observation, interviews, and contact with key informants. This firsthand data was invaluable for generating insights, identifying patterns, and validating research hypotheses, contributing to more robust and evidence-based analysis.

Furthermore, fieldwork allowed me to validate theoretical frameworks, hypotheses, and assumptions against real-world experiences and observations. By testing theoretical concepts in the field, I refined my understanding of military dynamics and behaviors, enhancing the validity and reliability of my research findings. Fieldwork enabled me to see how the military assessed and responded to emergent crises, conflicts, or contingencies in real-time. By monitoring unfolding events on the ground, I saw how FET and FAST team leaders provided timely insights and recommendations to FET and FAST members, facilitating rapid adaptation and decision-making in dynamic and uncertain environments. In conclusion, by conducting fieldwork responsibly and ethically, I tried to uphold the principles of integrity, respect, and accountability in military research endeavors.



## **6. Findings and future avenues of research**

This manuscript is based on a few central questions: First, what explains the variation in the timing of adoption and diffusion of military innovations across armed forces and in diverse military interventions? Second, under what conditions (mid-level) commanders originate a ground-breaking innovation rather than seeking inspiration from others at the operational level? The third Essay, which is descriptive by its nature, proposes to explicitly grasp the distinguishing characteristics of military-military collaboration. In the following part, I attempt to answer those inquiries by focusing on the findings from each of the three Essays.

### *Essay I*

This study challenges the prevailing notion that military innovations are solely driven by competition and enmity, proposing instead that mutual support and coordinated cooperation among military organizations play a significant role in their dissemination. Introducing the Innovation Cascade Model (ICM), the research demonstrates that innovations are adopted by armed forces at different times and spread sequentially through a cascade process across diverse operational types. The paper highlights the uneven spacing of military transformation over time and identifies factors such as direct or indirect access to innovations and the nature of military relationships that influence the timing and integration of innovations.

The findings have important implications for policymakers and military strategists. By emphasizing the role of cooperation and mutual support in innovation diffusion, the study underscores the significance of building strong partnerships and networks among military organizations. It also raises concerns about the potential risks associated with large-scale emulation, such as delayed adoption due to coordination issues or the distortion of innovations as they spread rapidly and uncontrollably. This highlights the need for effective monitoring systems to track the actors involved in the global dissemination of military innovations and ensure that innovations are adapted and utilized appropriately to meet specific needs. The paper suggests several avenues for future research to enhance understanding of the dynamics of military innovation diffusion. Firstly, there is a need for more comprehensive studies to explore the nuances of force structure military innovations and their implications. This includes investigating unexplored networks of connections among militaries and examining how different types of innovations diffuse and evolve over time across various operational theaters. Additionally, future research could focus on determining the duration and outcome of military innovations and identifying the circumstances under which they are more likely to survive or disappear. Moreover, scholars could explore the applicability of the ICM to other military innovations and contexts, potentially uncovering new insights into the diffusion process. Overall, the research aims to pave the way for future empirical

investigations that contribute to a deeper understanding of military innovation diffusion and its impact on global security and defense.

### *Essay II*

The study focuses on understanding the conditions driving commanders to innovate or adapt at the operational level, particularly in the context of force structure alterations. It highlights the significance of Armed Forces Military Units (AFMUs) programs in reshaping military operations globally. By employing the commander-centered theory, the research examines the leadership dynamics and decision-making processes of mid-level commanders, particularly Italian commanders in ISAF and UNIFIL missions. It identifies the role of leadership positions, reliance on lessons learned (LL), and the availability of innovative ideas in influencing commanders' ability to introduce innovation. The study proposes potential transformation routes based on empirical evidence, leaving room for further exploration and refinement of the theory.

The findings of this research have several political and strategic implications. Firstly, it challenges the notion of an unbreakable tie between innovators and adopters, demonstrating that early adopters can evolve into innovators themselves. This underscores the importance of adaptive learning and experience utilization in military innovation processes. Secondly, the study highlights the significant role of mid-level commanders in promoting and shaping transformation within military operations. Their involvement can lead to consequential restructuring not only within their own organizations but also across multiple armed forces involved in missions. Thirdly, the research emphasizes the potential of understanding military professionals' behaviors and leveraging reliable lessons learned to facilitate successful armed forces' transformation. This suggests the need for enhanced theoretical frameworks and practical approaches to support policy delivery in defense and security.

The study opens up several avenues for future research. Firstly, there is a need for further investigation into the role and impact of mid-level commanders in driving military innovation and transformation. This includes exploring cases beyond the Italian context to assess the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, more research is needed to understand how sensitive understanding of military professionals' behaviors and lessons learned can influence policy delivery and transformation processes. Thirdly, future studies could delve into the evolving nature of AFMUs, such as the development of FET and FAST programs, and their adaptation to changing operational theaters. This includes examining the effectiveness of these programs in addressing emerging security challenges and their implications for future military interventions. Overall, the study provides a foundation for future empirical investigations into the dynamics of military innovation and transformation at the operational level.

### **Essay III**

The study examines the role of bilateral military cooperation, particularly in the context of Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) practices. It identifies the lack of attention given to smaller, more personal environments in previous research on military cooperation. By focusing on bilateral frameworks, the research highlights the factors that contribute to effective sharing, growth, and improvement of military practices, specifically CIMIC. Empirically, the study explores the collaboration between Italian and Lebanese CIMIC branches within the context of the MIBIL instance, demonstrating the potential for bilateral cooperation to enhance CIMIC practices.

The findings of this research have several political and strategic implications. Firstly, by emphasizing bilateral cooperation in military practices like CIMIC, the study underscores the importance of strengthening relationships between individual military organizations. This can lead to increased effectiveness in military interventions and operations, particularly in foreign missions where CIMIC plays a crucial role in engaging with local communities. Secondly, the study highlights the potential for bilateral frameworks to facilitate innovation and adaptation of military practices to meet the specific needs of individual countries. This can contribute to more tailored and effective military strategies, enhancing overall mission success and stability in conflict zones. Lastly, the focus on domestic CIMIC practices suggests implications for national security and stability, emphasizing the importance of engaging with local populations and addressing their needs to ensure mission success and long-term stability.

The study suggests several avenues for future research. Firstly, there is a need for further exploration of bilateral military cooperation in various contexts beyond CIMIC practices, to understand its broader implications for military effectiveness and international security. Additionally, comparative studies on domestic CIMIC practices in different countries, such as Ukraine and Georgia, can provide valuable insights into variations in implementation and effectiveness. Further research is also needed to identify the full potential of domestic CIMIC, including its challenges and ramifications, particularly in sensitive operations involving local populations. Additionally, there is scope for studying the role of CIMIC operators in engaging with their own nation's populace, and the impact of such engagement on mission success and stability. Overall, the study provides a foundation for future research on bilateral military cooperation and its implications for military effectiveness and international security.

## 7. Ongoing work

When combined, the findings in this thesis offer insights beyond those in the three articles when read separately. Although I spent some time in the preceding section discussing the avenues for future investigation of each Essay, I'd like to devote a few words in the following to some evidence I gathered over the course of three years but has yet to be used in this thesis. This is because, at the time of submitting this work, I am still missing some information and results that would allow me to finish a fourth Essay (Essay IV). That's unfortunate, because I indicated at the start of my thesis that my goal was to demonstrate to the reader how FET has evolved and altered throughout time.

The incomplete manuscript has been presented with the title "*Same, Same But Different. Why do Armed Forces Deploy Dissimilarly Using The Same Military Practice?*" in some key international events the International Study Association (ISA) and the British International Study Association (BISA) conferences in 2023, receiving enlightening insights that allowed me to proceed with this work over the subsequent months.

Essay IV contrasts how the FET program was conceived, integrated, and implemented by two major partners in two entirely distinct operational contexts (COIN operations vs. UN PKO mission). I review how the FET initiative was executed, albeit very differently, by Zambia, a close but undoubtedly secondary partner of the US that constantly receives training and support from most developed countries, and the UK, US's closest ally and one of the world's most powerful nations.

Findings demonstrate how the FET concept transformed tremendously by traveling across actors and operational theaters. I take a peek at how Zambian troops were trained in the theory and application of the FET program by the UK, an experienced and sophisticated user of FET units worldwide after the US, the program's inventor, and how they were advised on FET. We should expect that 1) Zambia will struggle to keep up with the UK and produce lower outcomes; 2) there should be convergence in modes of organizational form and operation between the British and Zambezi FET programs. However, I find that military organizations integrated teachings with their times and modalities, which deeply influenced the way they performed on the ground.

Actually, I show that Zambia outperformed its British allies in their achievements.

On the one hand, Commanders saw it as an imposition from upper levels (the US) and as an additional responsibility to day-to-day activity. This led to giving the initiative little thought and to reject almost all kinds of improvements to advance the initiative's essential premise. UK FET members were chosen at random: the British force sent in Afghanistan picked troops from the ground with no history in engagement, specific training or experience with the country's culture and social gendered situation because of the urgent need to build FET in less than a month. Additionally, because of combat restriction, British FETs were small teams of one to two to four women who were given a short time frame to reach out to local females. The UK carried out the FET program in a discontinuous fashion for less than three years, ranging from soft attempts to engage the local population to the execution of

searches and, sometimes, raids. This often led their peers (and superiors) to frequently make fun of them, making their performance frequently dismal.

Conversely, Zambia's elites boosted the FET effort to such an extent that Anglo-British officers releasing PDT were particularly asked to undergo FET training prior to joining the DCR. The initiative's goals, methodology for implementation, and training and teaching components of the program were all updated and modified. Furthermore, the Zambia FET program originated over a two-year period. This allowed the high Command to educate and specialize forthcoming FET personnel for many months on a wide range of elements for mission deployment. FETs included professional and technical individuals who might assist the population in a variety of tasks. Psychologists, physicians, and agronomists are just a few examples. Furthermore, by including all women in the ranks in FET operations, ZDF was able to organize FETs of ten to twenty women to cover several tasks on the ground and enhance their impact. The Zambian Battalion (ZAMBATT) thus performed regular and broad-based initiatives directed to the entire population, which were fully supported by the whole chain of command.

I built Essay IV on data gathered from interviews with former first UK FET members operating in Afghanistan between 2010 and 2012, BPST members (civilian and military), and first Zambezi FET commanders and members serving in MINUSCA.

The main goals of the interviews were to grasp how FET operators learned about the FET initiative, how its value was communicated to them and how they performed on the ground in practice. To better comprehend the kind of support these operators received while being deployed within FET units, a great deal of effort was devoted to understanding how male commanders and peers of FET members understood the FET initiative. Interviews with BSPT members also aided in clarifying the elements that Zambia's troops received from the UK and the parts that Zambia requested its trainers to change.

Much remains to be learned regarding the two military forces' cooperation on the FET issue, as well as the priority placed on this training. According to the interviews I conducted, the FET course, like the one for the Lebanese armed forces, was one of many modules on which the Zambian armed forces were trained by the English. However, despite constituting only a part of the training of the Zambian armed forces, the top-level Commanders have invested enormously in this aspect, training all the battalions destined for MONUSCO, both men and women, with the primary objective of operating more effectively on the territory; but also—and this is perhaps the most interesting result of this work, which is extremely linked to the results of Essay III—to make the Zambian armed forces a model for other T I feel it is worthwhile to investigate the final two issues.

It would also be fascinating to dive deeper into which elements/key aspects of FET training the Zambian forces have kept or discarded based on the indications of the English forces,

which ones they have improved, and whether new ones have been developed. At first glance, conversations with Zambian military personnel who have received FET training from the British in recent years and have put it into practice reveal the obvious “aesthetic” difference of Zambian FETs: much more numerous, much more varied in terms of composition, with a much richer, more attentive, punctual, and distinct program. However, the choices that led to these structural changes and what else was changed remain unclear.

## **PART TWO**

### **Presenting the Essays**

**The Innovation Cascade Model:  
The Global Diffusion of All-Female Military Units**

**Abstract**

This paper extends Roger's theory on the diffusion of innovations. It does so by presenting the Innovation Cascade Model (ICM)—to elucidate the sequential diffusion of military innovations across armed forces and diverse operational theaters. The model is applied to the case of AFMUs, a hitherto unexplored force structure innovation in Security Studies' literature. The research examines whether direct or indirect access to the innovation, together with a diversified consideration of allied and partnered nations by the innovator, affect the timing of dissemination of AFMUs' case in point: Female Engagement Teams (FETs). The paper employs a qualitative study to understand that FETs spread through a cascade-type process (I) outside conventional clusters of allies to partners scattered worldwide, and (II) across multiple operational types.

**Keywords:** Diffusion; Female Engagement Team; Innovation; Innovation Cascade Model; Time.

**Introduction**

Intuitively, once a military innovation is on the market, military organizations should promptly prioritize its acquisition if they consider it useful. Instead, innovations are typically subjected to various timing and diffusion pathways and incorporated into defense organizations on subsequent occasions by different countries and in heterogeneous operational contexts.<sup>58</sup> Over the past decades, the Security Studies scholarship has been posing increasing attention to the spread of military innovations.<sup>59</sup> Yet, despite empirical evidence of timing responsibility in separating, ordering, and shaping armed forces' transformational events, direct consideration of the timeline at which the innovation is propagated and assimilated by military organizations has received little attention. Hence, temporal relevance has long been neglected and has only lately begun to inform debates on military affairs.<sup>60</sup> Shedding light on this point is of the utmost importance for both civil and military practitioners, as well as for policymakers

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<sup>58</sup> This paper claims that in the context of military innovation, for a process to be deemed "diffusion", it requires (I) an innovation, plus (II) a population (social system) among which it is diffused, across (III) networks, a (IV) time as it propagates, and finally (V) the environment where it is distributed (operational theaters).

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Paul Bracken, 'Non-standard models of the diffusion of military technologies', *Defence Analysis* 14/2 (1998); Emily O. Goldman and Richard B. Andres, 'Systemic effects of military innovation and diffusion', *Security Studies* 8/4 (1999); Emily O. Goldman, 'Introduction: Military Diffusion and Transformation', in E. O. Goldman and T. G. Mahnken (ed.) *The Information Revolution in Military Affairs in Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004); Michael C. Horowitz, 'Nonstate Actors and the Diffusion of Innovations: The Case of Suicide Terrorism', *International Organization* 64/1 (2010).

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Andrew Carr, 'It's about time: Strategy and temporal phenomena', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44/3 (2018), 3; Olivier Schmitt, 'Wartime paradigms and the future of western military power', *International Affairs* 96/2 (2020), 401.



for several reasons. Military organizations, regardless of their power or worldwide standing, all strive to manage time regularly and efficiently to maximize effectiveness and nurture high performance. Time is critical for gauging the readiness of national armed forces, bolstering joint military effectiveness, understanding the potential threats connected with the global, uncontrolled spread of innovations, and planning future military operations, among other things.

Based on these shortcomings, this article poses a research question: what explains the variation in the timing of adoption and diffusion of military innovations across armed forces and in diverse military interventions? So far, the presence of a realm permeated by ceaseless enmity, competition, and uncertainty, combined with the impelling need to adapt, have naturally been ascribed as major boosts affecting the timing of military innovation diffusion. This paper does not question such a narrative, but highlights that diversity in the dissemination of military innovations at multiple times and in various operational kinds may also be attributable to mutual support and coordinated cooperation among military organizations. More specifically, to the innovator's allies and partners' distinguished access to the innovation (direct vs. indirect). This trait can be determined, in turn, by the innovator's unique orientation towards its allies and partners (close relationship vs. ordinary one).

This article broadens Roger's theory of innovation diffusion and advance the "Innovation Cascade Model" (ICM), to theorize about the chronological spread of military innovations throughout military organizations and across diverse operational contexts.<sup>61</sup> The ICM builds on early research suggesting that the process of dissemination starts when a military organization generates something novel (i.e. an equipment, an idea, a strategy etc.) that is previously unknown.<sup>62</sup> It also indicates that the way military organizations adopt innovations has to go through several stages that are intimately interconnected and that take the form of a cascade-type process. The model progresses through (at least) five phases of implementation. The first stage, *Turning Point* (t0), is triggered by a *disruptive event*, an organizational-wide disaster which is not covered by routine measures and that puts new demand to its context. The disruptive event drives the actor who experienced it, the *Pioneer*, to develop a specific innovation in response to the impending operational need on the ground. In the second phase, *Advent* (t1), the Pioneer's closest ally, the *First Adopter*, deployed in its exact military intervention, adopts the innovation by explicitly emulating it. In the third phase, *Emergence* (t2), the innovation reaches all other Pioneer's allies in the field, the *Second Adopters*, who absorb it by imitating it without having direct contact with the Pioneer. The fourth stage, *Expansion* (t3), sees the innovation spreading beyond the circle of allies to partners scattered around the globe, the *Third Adopters*. The latter incorporates the innovation in a second theatre of operation, drawing it from a combination of the early movers, including the Pioneer. Finally, in the last stage, *Propagation* (t4), the innovation is disseminated to the last movers, the *Fourth Adopters*, in a third military intervention by early actors other than the Pioneer.

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<sup>61</sup> Everett M., Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (5th ed. New York, NY: Free Press, 2003), 204-207.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas W. Valente, *Network Models of the Diffusion of Innovations* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 1995), 2.

In doing so, the article reveals the existence of diffusion patterns and varying acceptance and import behaviors of movers which range from the pressing urge to integrate the innovation as soon as feasible to more relaxed approaches aimed at incorporating the innovation afterward.

This paper contributes to the literature on military innovation and diffusion both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, the ICM offers additional insight to current conceptions on diffusion processes to better understand time-related trends of military innovation's dissemination across actors and operational contexts. Drawing on the temporal dimension helps us to show how military transformation events are unevenly spaced in time and shed light on the time lag between the origination of a military innovation, its diffusion and absorption amongst national armed forces deployed worldwide. The framework also discloses two valuable pieces of information. First, it uncovers that knowledge and experiences are extended widely to partners scattered around the globe, expanding beyond the conventional cluster of countries belonging to a closed network (i.e. an alliance) to a broader community of players (i.e. partners). Second, it highlights that innovations originate in a specific military intervention context but then travel across different operational types, requiring defense forces to adapt the innovation to suit diverse environments.

Conceptually, this article provides a double addition to the literature. To begin, conceiving the spread of innovation as a concatenation and sum of subsequent processes of transformation of a multitude of nations instead of a singular process in the global order allows access to a broad array of approaches that can result in a greater awareness of the entire diffusion phenomenon. Second, the research responds to the request for more qualitative analysis of innovation spread, which has so far relied mostly on quantitative and descriptive studies geared at probing the dissemination of innovations<sup>63</sup> rather than applying relative findings to theorize on them.<sup>64</sup>

Empirically, the model is applied to analyze and elucidate the diffusion of an untapped instance of force structure innovation: AFMUs). Observing the timing of dissemination of AFMUs is pertinent as it indicates that the reasons driving armed forces to propagate innovations go beyond the rationale of concurrence; that the nature of military innovations is not necessarily detrimental or harmful; and, finally, that not always adopting as first has perks. To prove this, the paper explores the dissemination of the most widespread instance of AFMUs: the Female Engagement Teams (FETs). The FET initiative was designed to allow female platoons deployed on the ground to carry out tailored socially sensitive operations that male members could not conduct. Specifically, female military personnel took steps to develop trust-based and enduring relationships with the Afghan women they encountered on patrols and gather relevant information on insurgents' movements.

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<sup>63</sup> David Kinsella, 'Conflict in Context: Arms Transfers and Third World Rivalries During the Cold War', *American Journal of Political Science* 38 (1994): 557-558

<sup>64</sup> Nils P. Gleditsch, *Research on Arms Races*, in N. P. Gleditsch and O. Njolstad (ed.) *Arms Races: Technological and Political Dynamics* (London: Sage Publication, 1990), 2-3.

Illustrative case studies are used to showcase any number of facets of the event to give the reader an intuitive view of the cascade and better understand the spread of innovations at distinct times. In order to gather data on the timeframe of the spread and adoption of FET in military organizations, the research paper used a qualitative interview-based study.<sup>65</sup> Between Spring 2020 and Spring 2023, I conducted 71 anonymous, individual, semi-structured interviews in person and online with military personnel participating in FET activities and training in the contexts of the following operational types: International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Italian Bilateral Mission in Lebanon (MIBIL), United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), and the UK-Zambia pre-deployment training (PDT). The research was also integrated with information inferred from NATO, United Nations (UN), and national defense websites along with grey literature, which proved vital in piecing together the historical memory of the FET program diffusion, including military reports, and evaluations.

The variation seen in the results is as follows. In 2008, the United States Marine Corps (USMC) launched the FET program in Farah Province, Afghanistan. Following its introduction, the United Kingdom (UK) forces began their FET program in Helmand Province the ensuing year (2009) with United States (US) help. Nonetheless, the programs implemented by the two Allies failed in both cases due to a lack of a clear strategy and backing from the whole chain of command, as well as suspicion from local women. Italy fell in line in 2010 creating its own FETs in the Herat Province, based on a FET directive given with the US. The program was successfully readapted by wiping the intelligent purpose that served as the foundation of the prior version and emphasizing on humanitarian assistance. Pursuing this initial phase of internal diffusion within the settings of (I) ISAF mission and (II) among North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO member states, the FET program stretched beyond the mission's borders to be adopted by military partners of the US active in other types of military interventions. In the first place, Zambia originated FET units during its PDT with the US and the UK in 2016 in prepping for deployment afterward in MINUSCA. Zambian soldiers were guided by educators from the US and the UK to disseminate FETs on the ground and gain the trust of locals transforming FET into a significant source of intelligence for the mission's success. Therefore, Zambian forces emerged as point of reference on the FET initiative for personnel participating in a number of UN operations. In a second circumstance, Lebanon learned about the FET program during MIBIL in 2018. Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) extended the Italy's humanitarian stance by reconfiguring the FET mission to use FETs on their own nation, providing support to a weak government and a populace ravaged socially and economically by border conflicts, inflation, and disease. Furthermore, LAF engaged in the FET program with the aim of serving as a model for Middle Eastern countries interested in joining in the FET initiative.

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<sup>65</sup> For the purposes of this study, the Ethics Committee for Research of the University of Genoa has expressed the favorable opinion n. 2022.26. The interview transcripts used in this paper are accessible upon request.

Two significant conclusions may be drawn from the findings. First, military innovation propagation is a layered and decentralized process. Innovations spread through distinct temporal phases, which are marked by the existence of unique players who adopt at different times over others, and who have specific responsibilities in molding the diffusion of the innovation. Additionally, the innovation is not confined to just one military intervention, but rather spreads across theaters of operation. Second, as the diffusion cascade expands, the distribution of the innovation eventually moves into the hands of following adopters, potentially affecting the identification of prospective new leaders and followers throughout the dissemination process.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The first section reviews the explanatory factors identified in the literature on military innovation and diffusion to make sense of the variation of the dependent variable and delineates its shortcomings. The second part introduces and explains the ICM. Specifically, the paper outlines the phases and actors of the model along with the theoretical expectations. In the third section, the research turns to empirical application and unpacks the time-related trends of FET diffusion. The paper uses the first military forces to build a FET program in each phase (*Turning Point*: the US; *Advent*: the UK; *Emergence*: Italy; *Expansion*: Zambia; *Propagation*: Lebanon) as illustrative case studies. The conclusion summarizes the article's core findings, their contribution to the Security Studies literature and discusses future avenues of research.

### **The Uncharted Potential of the Time Factor in Military Transformation**

Military organizations have become increasingly interested in AFMUs in the new century. Since the mid-2000s, an ever-growing number of countries have deployed multiple versions of these platoons in different stages and in heterogeneous operational environments, proving their flexibility to adapt to new operational demands at various intervals.<sup>66</sup> Yet, nothing in the literature in Security Studies is directly tied to the difference in their timing of adoption and diffusion at the hands of national armed forces in various military interventions. There is, instead, a growing body of studies about military innovation, and diffusion, from which we can draw potential advocated explanations that can inform us about the spread of AFMUs. This section demonstrates how the existing answers developed by this scholarship inadequately clarify the variation in the timing of adoption and dissemination of these units.

Over the past decades, external security requirements have been naturally acknowledged as major boosts affecting (the timing of) military transformation, including defeat or setback,<sup>67</sup> innovation by an opponent,<sup>68</sup> and international threats.<sup>69</sup> Such a rationale is based on a series of trickle-down assumptions. First, the (timing of) dissemination of military innovation affects the distribution of power among actors

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<sup>66</sup> Frank Brundtland Steder and Nina Rones, *Why Make a Special Platoon for 56*; Valentina Dean, *Kurdish Female Fighters: the Western Depiction of YPJ Combatants in Rojava*.

<sup>67</sup> Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine*, 47, 59, 79.

<sup>68</sup> Kimberly M. Zisk, *Engaging the Enemy: Organization Theory and Soviet Military Innovation, 1955–1991* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>69</sup> Theo Farrell, *The Dynamics of British Military Transformation*, 780.

at the global stage.<sup>70</sup> Incentives for military innovation or massive adaptation originate in a realm permeated by ceaseless enmity and competition. Thus, armed forces live a hasty race for survival and those countries that do not innovate or adapt (in time) are destined to perish.<sup>71</sup> Secondly, because of a climate of uncertainty, military organizations tend to seek for solutions and eventually end up with emulating the most powerful and successful in the system.<sup>72</sup> Accordingly, the emulation process is fast and universal, although a few studies have questioned this view.<sup>73</sup> Finally, in absence of clear directives and in great haste, there is a propensity to adopt innovations that are offensive in nature, that are consequently spread with a better frequency.<sup>74</sup> However, imitation is far from easy because of the growing complexity of military innovation.<sup>75</sup>

This paper overturns the aforementioned hypotheses by offering alternate explanations for the propagation of military innovations. Some considerations are in order. First, the article demonstrates that the competitive logic is conflicting with the timing of dissemination of AFMUs, as the adoption and diffusion of AFMUs has never occurred in light of a climate of opposition, and even less of hostility. Rather, the reasons for the rapid dissemination of AFMUs may be led back to an atmosphere conducive to mutual support and coordinated cooperation across military organizations. Thereby, the adoption or otherwise of AFMUs has never determined an impact on armed forces' survival. Alternatively, its adoption may be weighted by effectiveness. Second, there are most important discrepancies in the emulation assumptions. On the one hand, the existing literature has shown that leading countries are often the inspiration for military organizations.<sup>76</sup> This paper does not oppose these findings, but will prove that even non-influential and less-powerful militaries can be a major source of inspiration for other armed forces. We'll discover that military organizations frequently draw experiences and capabilities from more than one actor, rather than a single player. On the other hand, the paper shows that military innovation diffusion is not uniform. Though, states have often resorted to AFMUs at different times between 2010 and 2023. Third, the rationale whereby offensive innovations spread faster than non-offensive is flawed. Instead, the AFMUs case study indicates that non-offensive military

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<sup>70</sup> Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, 'The Spread of Military Innovations: Adoption Capacity Theory, Tactical Incentives, and the Case of Suicide Terrorism', *Security Studies* 23/3 (2014), 514.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 77; Terry Terriff, 'Innovate or die': Organizational culture and the origins of maneuver warfare in the United States Marine Corps', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29/3 (2006).

<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 176-177; John Lynn A. 'The Evolution of Army Style in the Modern West, 800-2000', *International History Review* 18/3 (1996), 509.

<sup>73</sup> João Resende-Santos, 'Anarchy and the Emulation of Military Systems: Military organization and technology in South America, 1870-1930', *Security Studies* 5/3 (1996), 213.

<sup>74</sup> Stephen Van Evera, 'The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War', *International Security* 9/1 (1984).

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, 'The Diffusion of Drone Warfare? Industrial, Infrastructural, and Organizational Constraints', *Security Studies* 25/1 (2016), 3; Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, 'Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet: Military-Technological Superiority and the Limits of Imitation, Reverse Engineering, and Cyber Espionage', *International Security* 43/3 (2019), 142.

<sup>76</sup> João Resende-Santos, 'Anarchy and the Emulation of Military Systems: Military organization and technology in South America, 1870-1930', *Security Studies* 5/3 (1996), 200.

innovations might disseminate very quickly. Perhaps more than offensive countries.<sup>77</sup>

This section has provided the academic context and theoretical foundation for my research of innovation dissemination in the upcoming sections. From a theoretical and empirical standpoint, the literature review on military innovation diffusion divulged that, while all these studies made valuable contributions to academic analysis, they had no direct impact on informing on the variation in the timing of adoption and spread of AFMUs across multiple operational theaters.

### **The Innovation Cascade Model: the Timing and Sequencing of Military Innovations' Origination and Diffusion**

There are at least three motivations for why we need to expand Roger's theory with a model that can capture the phases of military innovations' diffusion across armed forces and diverse operational interventions. From a conceptual standpoint, a plurality of research has recognized the significance of time by purposefully documenting that changes within military organizations proceed in (sequential) stages.<sup>78</sup> The ICM complements to current research by suggesting a systematic procedure for understanding the diffusion of military innovations in large-N studies, minimizing fragmentation of the analysis. Second, theoretically, little research has looked closely into the mechanisms that drive states to originate or replicate military transformations at distinct times.<sup>79</sup> Specifically, few studies have ever ventured to theorize the further dissemination of experiences, skills, and capacities to successive generations of adopters (i.e. second, third, fourth movers) and their further absorption. Finally, previous empirical works on military innovation remain mainly confined to a limited period and type of military intervention—the war in Afghanistan (2001-2021)—and have largely omitted to investigate innovation and diffusion dynamics in other significant operational settings occurring concurrently. Bilateral missions, PDTs, and peacekeeping missions are just a few examples. We conclude from these data that such an internal metamorphosis may result from extraordinary circumstances, with little room for interpretation.

Building on these shortcomings, the paper applies Roger's intuitions to the military dimension to allow us to identify not only the motivations that lead armed forces to innovate ahead of or behind others, but also their characteristics, such as the mechanisms through which information is exchanged and the

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<sup>77</sup> Consider nuclear-powered assault submarines (SSN), which, while entering service well before 1954, had been adopted by only a tiny number of countries by 2023. The Nautilus was the world's first nuclear-powered assault submarine, debuted by the US in 1954. Notwithstanding the fact that about 70 years have gone, SSN are now the sole domain of the navy of the six major nuclear powers: China, France, India, Russia, the UK, and the US.

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Fabrizio Coticchia and Francesco Niccolò Moro, 'Learning From Others? Emulation and Change in the Italian Armed Forces Since 2001', *Armed Forces & Society* 42/4 (2016); Torunn Laugen Haaland, 'The Limits to Learning in Military Operations: Bottom-up Adaptation in the Norwegian Army in Northern Afghanistan, 2007–2012', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39/7 (2016); Maarten Broekhof, Martijn Kitzen and Frans Osinga, *A Tale of Two Mosuls, The resurrection of the Iraqi armed forces and the military defeat of ISIS*; Olivier Schmitt, 'French Military Adaptation in the Afghan War: Looking Inward or Outward?', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40/4 (2017).

<sup>79</sup> Moritz Weiss, 'How to become a first mover? Mechanisms of military innovation and the development of drones', *European Journal of International Security* 3/2 (2017).

social context in which transmission occurs. The framework unravels that military innovation goes beyond the early movers to include a broader plethora of actors. Similarly, it shows that innovations do not diffuse solely within their place of origin, but rather, that they travel to reach new operational contexts. The model is motivated by qualities that have a major impact on the way and the timing the model progresses.

To commence with, knowing the level of access that a military organization has to the innovation helps us understand why certain countries change earlier than others. The framework reveals that part of the diffusion cascade falls within the category of the broad class of “contagion” model,<sup>80</sup> which means that the spread of military innovations may occur (I) following a direct contact of an adopter with the Pioneer or (II) through a secondary spread rather than immediate communication. Knowledge transmission, therefore, can be provided by direct or indirect contact with the source of innovation. In sum, the article forecasts that nations that have real interaction with the innovator are more likely to be first and easily cognizant of the existence of an innovation compared to nations that do not.

In the second place, the ICM claims that the diffusion of innovations across militaries and operational theaters not only is shaped by direct or indirect interaction between actors but also by the kind of bond between the innovator and potential adopters.<sup>81</sup> Drawing on existing studies on innovation diffusion, we can conclude that entertaining a solid military cooperation with the innovator or being part of its restricted net is also a necessary precondition for new actors to learn about the existence of a new military innovation and master it in a short timeframe.<sup>82</sup> The ICM thus categorizes the movers between “allies” and “partners”. According to previous research on military transformation,<sup>83</sup> the ICM derives that member states of military alliances share models or ways of war through collaboration and realize benefits in military innovation. Alliances generally involve streams of knowledge and experiences from a core country to non-core states (secondary core countries). The paper thus expects that exposing the innovation in the context of an alliance amplifies the possibilities of the innovation being absorbed (swiftly) by a certain number of innovator’s allied countries. Similarly, the presence of such actors in multinational interventions (i.e. bilateral training or multinational exercises) not only allow the innovation to move across to other kinds of operational types but to additionally be exposed to distinct military organizations, such as partnered countries. In this scenario, secondary countries usually begin to give comparable training to peripheral countries, acting as core nations, based on the expertise gained

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<sup>80</sup> See, for example, Peyton Young, ‘Innovation Diffusion in Heterogeneous Populations: Contagion, Social Influence, and Social Learning’, *American Economic Review* 99/5 (2009), 1900.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas W., Zarzeki, *Arms Diffusion: the Spread of Military Innovations in the International System* (New York: Routledge, ed. 2020), 37.

<sup>82</sup> Jack L. Walker, ‘The Diffusion of Innovation Among the American States’, *American Political Science Review* 63 (1969), 880-899.

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, Jon Schmid, Matthew Brummer and Mark Z. Taylor, ‘Innovation and Alliances’, *Review of Policy Research* 34 (2017), 1; Theo Farrell, *Military adaptation and organizational convergence in war: Insurgents and international forces in Afghanistan*, 7-8.

from core countries.<sup>84</sup> It must be highlighted, however, that even within the “allies” and “partners”, some states have closer military ties with the innovator than others. This circumstance inevitably implies that certain nations can learn about the presence of new innovations before all else, even if they are members of the same alliance or partnership (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1*  
*The diffusion of military innovations across movers*

	<b>Direct access to the innovation</b>	<b>Indirect access to the innovation</b>
<b>Ally</b>	First Adopter	Second Adopter
<b>Partner</b>	Third Adopter	Fourth Adopter

The ICM contributes to broadening current perspectives on the diffusion dynamics of military innovation. The model shows that the dissemination process of military innovations is not evenly spaced in time and should, rather, be conceived as geographically dispersed decision trees. One of the central propositions of the ICM is that the progression of origination and spread of military innovation can be analytically broken down in distinct, sequential, temporal phases that, unlike iterative models, are performed only once in a chronological succession. All movers produce an output (intermediate result) based on both current and previously gathered elements. This output is used as an input for the next stages, resulting in a spillover effect, which determines the generation of new phases and actors, explaining the time lag in the origination of a military innovation and its subsequent adoption and diffusion at the hands of national armed forces worldwide.

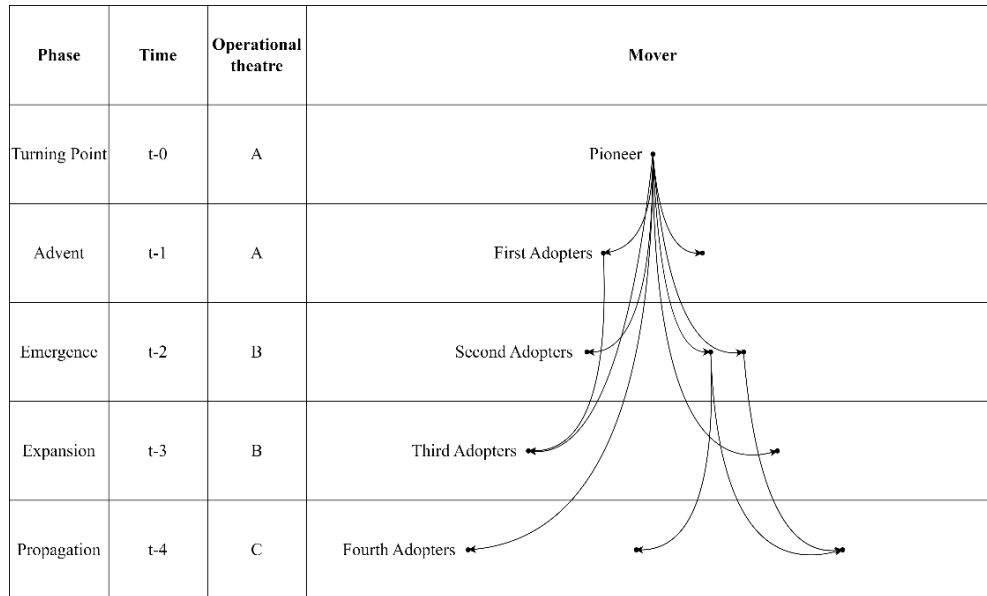
The ICM progresses through the implementation of (at least) five phases—*Turning Point* (t0), *Advent* (t1), *Emergence* (t2), *Expansion* (t3) and *Propagation* (t4); and the emergence of their relative actor/s at each stage—the *Pioneer* (t0), the *First Adopters* (t1), the *Second Adopters* (t2), the *Third Adopters* (t3), and the *Fourth Adopters* (t4) (see Figure 2).

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<sup>84</sup> See, for example, Abdulkadir, Varoglu, Mehmet Cakar and Nejat Basim. ‘An unusual bi-national military cooperation’, in J. Soeters and P. Manigart, *Military Cooperation in Multinational Peace Operations* (Routledge, London, 2008), 117-119.



*Figure 2*  
*The Innovation Cascade Model*



**The “Turning Point” phase (t0) and the Pioneer:** The inception phase, or *Turning Point* (t0), originates from a *disruptive event*. A disruptive event creates a sense of chaos, confusion and/ or even distress to the military who goes through it, putting new demands on the organizational functions. Under this circumstance, the military organization initially experiences a sort of crisis. It then progressively begins to behave proactively to select the best course of action for the scenario. The actor thus becomes more courageous and adventurous, recognizing newfound commitment and managing the issue surfaced, resolving it. The Turning Point phase is distinguished by the presence of a trailblazer conceiver, the *Pioneer*, a military organization who sees present limitations as hindrances to future opportunities and undertakes a necessary work of change which results in military innovation.

**The “Advent” phase (t1) and the First Adopters:** The subsequent phase, *Advent* (t1), is characterized by the spread of military innovation from its original source outwards to one or more actors. This phase involves a flow of knowledge, expertise, and experience from the Pioneer to its core allies: the *First Adopters*. The latter, like the Pioneer, are under the same overwhelming pressure on the ground and feel the same impelling need to solve it. The First Adopters, unlike all other future movers, have a special relationship with the Pioneer, which manifests itself in direct contact with them and subsequent exchange of information, techniques, equipment, among many others. This makes them the early mover to be aware of the innovation and potentially able to emulate it.

**The “Emergence” phase (t2) and the Second Adopters:** *Emergence* phase (t2) follows the Advent phase. At this point in time, the military innovation sustains a second, wider, diffusion towards the

*Second Adopters.* The latter, like the Pioneer, are deployed in the same military intervention and share with it the immediate incentive to innovate to face the impelling operational requirement and solve it. However, they do not have a distinctive bond with the Pioneer, nor are they necessarily deployed in the same area of interest (AOI) as the Pioneer. Consequently, Second Adopters do not have direct contact with it or receive active support in acquiring the innovation. This makes them the second movers, capable of absorbing innovation after the First Adopters and before the coming movers.

**The “Expansion” phase (t3) and the Third Adopters:** This phase entails the flow of knowledge, skills, and expertise from the First Adopters (or a combination of them and the Pioneer) to long-term partner countries, the *Third Adopters*. Starting an adaptation process requires gathering and double-checking information on existing innovations. Such movers are not inherently risk-takers, and it may require longer inspections and clarity from several parties to realize the benefits of change. Nonetheless, there is more. Third Adopters are not just outside the Pioneer’s strict circle of allies, but they are also active in a military setting other than the one in which the invention first emerged. This implies they have a lesser probability of being involved in the innovator’s military activities than the First and Second Adopters. Yet, they are directly supported in the acquisition of the innovation by the early movers who lead the way. As a result, they absorb it before the ultimate adopters.

**The “Propagation” phase (t4) and the Fourth Adopters:** *Propagation* phase is the last stage so far identified by the ICM. It continues the Expansion phase and sees the introduction of the *Fourth Adopters*. These actors share two features with the Third Adopters. First, they are displaced from the side of innovation genesis. Therefore, they are more likely to learn about the innovation after the First and the Second Adopters. Second, they do not face an immediate need on the ground for an ongoing military operation, but rather want to employ it in a future military intervention. However, unlike the Third Adopters, they do not necessarily have a tight relationship with the Pioneer. Being less involved in the Pioneer’s actions helps to explain why they do not engage with it directly and instead absorb the innovation through a secondary channel, typically a Second or Third Adopter who must prove the validity of the innovation.

Ultimately, I postulate an alternative order of innovation assimilation among military organizations based on unexplored characteristics. Allied countries with preferential access to the Pioneer absorb the innovation as first (First Adopters); allied nations with secondary exposure to the innovation integrate it as second (Second Adopters); partner military organizations in close relationship with the Pioneer or the First Adopters incorporate the innovation as third (Third Adopters). Finally, partner countries who have had an indirect connection with the innovation embrace it last.

This section has elucidated the phases of the ICM. In doing so, it has also highlighted the characteristics of the movers that allow its development. The illustrative case studies that make up the foundation of FET will be presented in the next section.

### **Illustrative Case Studies: The Origination, Diffusion and Adoption of Female Engagement Teams**

While attempting to comprehend variations in the timing of diffusion and adoption of military innovations among armed forces of various operational kinds, the case of AFMUs seems especially pertinent. The end of the Cold War has dramatically impacted the rearrangement of most military organizations across the world. Western armed forces have reorganized their force structure to be more mobile, adaptable, and integrated, particularly for expeditionary missions.<sup>85</sup> Notably, modern forces, in recent crisis-management, peace operations and counterinsurgency (COIN) have placed an emphasis on joint, network-centric components. In the past decade, military organizations all around the world have adapted to overcome major operational gender sensitivities by developing various forms of AFMUs (i.e. *Norwegian Jegertroppen, Team Delta, Team Lioness* etc.). Among these is the FET program.

To test the ICM and offer the reader a “feel” for the clear and comprehensive picture of the spread of AFMUs over time across armed forces and operational contexts, the paper chose four illustrative case studies. The scenarios considered accomplish significant variation in both the independent and the dependent variables.<sup>86</sup> This section tracks the FET program’s history from its inception in 2009 to the present, as well as its geographical spread. To do so, it uses the first military forces to build a FET program in each phase, which deemed the invention valuable and therefore opted to implement it.<sup>87</sup> Hence, the article gives insight on the global dissemination of the (US) FET effort to the UK (2009), Italy (2010), Zambia (2015), Lebanon (2018), (see Figure 3).

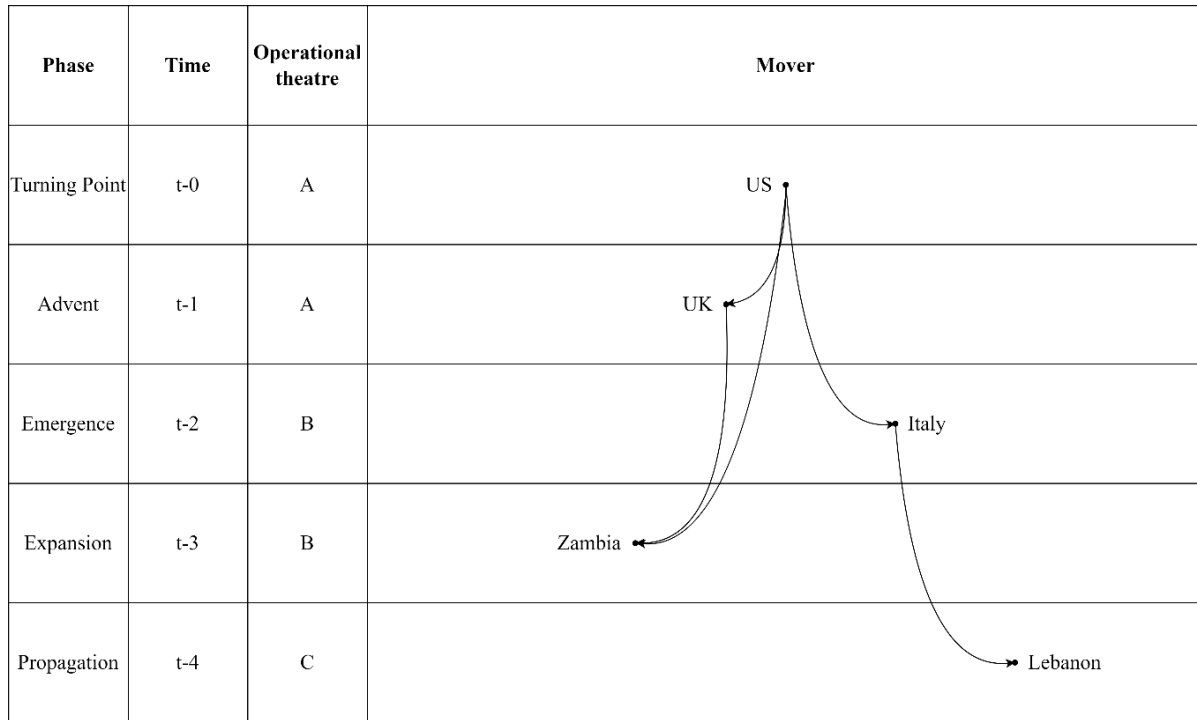
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<sup>85</sup> Theo Farrell, Sten Rynning, and Terry Terriff, *Transforming Military Power since the Cold War: The United States, Britain, and France, 1991-2012* 3, 8, 286.

<sup>86</sup> For the independent variable, the article first analyzed the access to the innovation: direct, namely when armed forces are operates in the same area of interest in close contact; and indirect, when troops are situated far and their physical connection is not tangible. This variable is combined with the innovator’s diverse consideration of countries. It differentiates between allied countries, that is, countries connected by a special tie intended at collaborating on defense and security issues; and partners, countries that cooperate with the Allies on a regular basis, but are unable to participate in the Alliance’s advantages and duties.

<sup>87</sup> As a result, the article does not investigate the instances of states that were aware of the program simultaneously as others (for example, US ally countries that received the FET directive at the same time as Italy), as the latter chose not to implement the initiative. The paper additionally overlooks the study of nations that, after discovering of the FET effort, were eager to implement the program but lacked the funds and/or skills to get launched (for example, numerous African countries such as Cameroon).

*Figure 3*  
*The Innovation Cascade Model: An Empirical Application*



**The “Turning Point” Phase and the “Pioneer”: Afghanistan 2009, the US FET Program**

Following the 9/11 attacks on the US, the UN-mandated ISAF deployment was created in December 2001. NATO took up the mission in 2003, widening its activities. The Coalition boosted troop numbers more than fivefold to fight against a determined Taliban insurgency, especially in the country’s southern and eastern regions, which had seen unprecedented violence. Among the several tactics used to entice the rebels, the Allies, primarily the Americans, conducted daily patrols and raids in Afghan households to collect atmospherics. Yet, in a gender-segregated society like Afghanistan, devout Muslims were acutely susceptible to non-family males, mainly non-Muslim males searching for the Muslim female counterpart. Therefore, male Coalition soldiers were barred from entering dwellings or socializing with local women in order not to dishonor them. This method had induced insurgents to exploit the resulting gap, disguising themselves as women to hide explosives and illegal items. Almost all the military participating in the battle ignored this issue in the early decade of the mission. All of this was until a *disruptive event* struck.

By early summer 2009, about 50,000 US forces were stationed in Afghanistan, mostly in the provinces of Balkh, Delaram, Herat, Helmand, Kandahar, Kunar, Logar, Parvan, Zabul, and Wardak. A catastrophe occurred in July 2009, when US Marines trapped Taliban combatants and a group of women within a mud-brick compound in the hamlet of Khan Neshin, Helmand, under British operating

area.<sup>88</sup> After persuading the insurgents to release the captives, two groups of individuals fled the refuge. As the Marines entered the compound, they found no one: the Taliban had eluded capture by wearing women's burqa robes. This episode—the latter and most serious of analogous ones—prompted broader American thinking on how to handle comparable operational demands, and paved the way for a larger reconsideration of the need to engage with the Afghan local population, particularly women. Against this backdrop, the concept of FET definitely emerged inside the USMC, ushering in the *Turning Point* phase and recognizing the US as the *Pioneer*.

The idea of an all-female team was not exotic to Americans. The US knowledge gained over the years in Ambar province, Iraq, was crucial for improving and updating a form of military innovation already in their toolkit: *Task Force Lioness*. Between 2004 and 2005, the US forces developed the first all-female military units, simply known as “Teams Lioness” (TL), to address similar gender sensitivities throughout Iraq. Based on the TL experience, the USMC, in the vest of Commanding Officers of Ground Combat Element (GCE) 3rd Battalion, 8th Marines (3/8) and Combat Logistics Battalion 3 (CLB-3), started establishing and formalize a program aimed at interacting with Afghan women in late 2008.<sup>89</sup> In February 2009, a few women from the CLB-3 stationed in Farah were separated from the few USMC women already deployed in Afghanistan and sent to infantry battalions. They were required to organize a *shura*—a meeting/consultation—with Afghan women to identify and address their problems and needs, as well as to facilitate search efforts.<sup>90</sup> This became Afghanistan's first official FET. The Marine Expeditionary Force-Afghanistan (MEB-A) in Helmand Province later extended the FET idea into a fully financed program. In April 2010, they were assigned to Helmand province. Consequently, all US Army maneuver battalions and Joint-sourced Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT)—the unit promoting reconstruction and development—operating in ISAF were requested to deploy FET members within their line-ups by August 2010.<sup>91</sup>

Despite all efforts, the US FET program was a failure for a variety of reasons: from the lack of indicators to evaluate or quantify the platoons' growth or performance to the very little awareness inside the military of the potential and actual involvement of women, both within and supporting the Afghan insurgency.<sup>92</sup> In the end, Afghans were able to readily exploit US FETs. All these concerns, along with a lack of tangible outcomes between 2010 and 2012, caused the US to cancel the initiative before the end of 2014.

### **The “Advent” Phase and the “First Adopter”: Afghanistan 2009, the UK FET Program**

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<sup>88</sup> Barbara Starr, ‘Official: Afghan Militants Fled Dressed as Women’, CNN, 6 July 2009, [www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/07/06/afghanistan.marine.standoff/](http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/07/06/afghanistan.marine.standoff/)

<sup>89</sup> Ginger E. Beal, *Women marines in Counterinsurgency Operations: Lioness and Female N/A Engagement Teams*, 17

<sup>90</sup> Stephanie Erwin, *The Veil of Kavlar*, 11.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with an American Academic (February 2021).

<sup>92</sup> Sippi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, *Seeking out their Afghan sisters*.

Throughout the late twentieth century, the US has been involved in an increasing number of multinational initiatives, ranging from Balkan peacekeeping to humanitarian missions in Somalia and Haiti to the Kosovo war. Therefore, it is not surprising that the US has long been viewed as a primary guide for many of its allies and partners. The war in Afghanistan reinforced the US' prominent role as a leading member of NATO, and as a major source of innovation. Well after USMC FETs, additional female groups formed shortly after, kicking off the *Emergence* phase. Not only other US military branches, such as the US Army, but also NATO's (US) closest ally, the UK, began the FET program in late 2009. The American and British counterparts had enjoyed unique warm and friendly relations for more than 70 years, even before NATO was established, and had long sought to foster international military cooperation, especially in times of strife and civil conflict, establishing a relationship unique in its kind, which turned it into the *First Adopter*.

Since 2001, the UK has participated in military operations in Afghanistan, deploying soldiers to Helmand, Herat, Kandahar provinces, and the ISAF Headquarters in Kabul. Considering the breadth of the nation, the UK's support rose to significant proportions, namely in 2010, when the country's boots-on-the-ground increased substantially, reaching a strength of over 9,000 people. At the time, the UK and the US had an unprecedented defense relationship. The British soldiers had previously frequently worked alongside the Americans throughout a variety of missions, representing the US's principal partner and supporter in Afghanistan. On May 1, 2006, the British forces were requested to expand ISAF's area of responsibility to the Helmand province and took over command of the PRT in Lashkar Gah from the US in Afghanistan's south. The USMC post, *Camp Leatherneck*, and the main British base in Afghanistan and former Task Force Helmand base, *Camp Bastion*, were conjoined in Helmand Province. The allies operated on the battlefield with a level of interoperability and familiarity that was unique in its breadth. For instance, the US Marines' Task Force Leatherneck and the UK-led Task Force Helmand used to host one another's forces to conduct close-knit, constant training, exchange personnel routinely, and perform current operations jointly.<sup>93</sup> The Americans shared the FET practice with their historical and most important ally at one of these joint training sessions. Between September 2009 and May 2010 (Operation Herrick XI), the USMC and the British Army began to explore the probable future deployment of FETs. Toward the end of 2009, a one-day training was conducted in Lashkar Gah, when USMC FET troops shared their program experiences with a few female British soldiers of the Psychological Operations Group (POG).<sup>94</sup> A plan for conducting prospective FET activities was thus created and delivered to the British HQ for approval. Before it became operational in 2010, some informal UK FET deployments were undertaken by female British Army servicewomen till Spring

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<sup>93</sup> Interviews with American NC Officers (February and March 2021) and British Officers (July 2021).

<sup>94</sup> Interview with a British Officer (March 2021).

2010. However, it was only in May 2010, indeed, that two British female military soldiers of the 1st Battalion, The Royal Regiment of Scotland in Helmand Province, completed a 9-day FET course offered by the USMC at *Camp Leatherneck*. British troops were thus tasked with establishing the first British FET in Combined Force Nad-e Ali in Helmand over the next four months.<sup>95</sup> Whilst some teams have been operational since late May, the FET program formally launched in Helmand province on 1 October 2010, as part of Operation Herrick XII.<sup>96</sup> Therefore, the UK was the early (and unique) *First Adopter* to implement the FET program.

In this case, too, the FET program was the victim of an array of events that rendered it ineffective. Among these, the primary concerns pertain to the combat dilemma and the chronic lack of interest from the leadership, which led the UK to implement a random and improvised recruitment of personnel missing the training, knowledge, and competence to carry out such a delicate duty.<sup>97</sup> All these motives combined to make FET a peripheral activity to major operations, not adequately entrenched in military planning, ending in its termination before 2013.

### **The “Emergence” Phase and the “Second Adopters”: Afghanistan 2010, the Italian FET Program**

Italy, among other nations, held some of the required preconditions for instituting a FET program in 2010, becoming the first *Second Adopter* to integrate the FET practice in the framework of the *Emergence* phase. Italy was one of the Coalition’s most active NATO members, although it lacked the UK’s unique affinity with the US. Italian soldiers were stationed in a specific area of Afghanistan (West), where US presence was restricted in comparison to most forces in the country’s eastern and southern regions. A series of events culminated in the establishment of the Italian FET program at the end of Spring 2010, when Italy expressed the need to engage with the local female population with the Americans.

Italy’s engagement in Afghanistan started in January 2002. Being the fifth largest supporter to the war in terms of manpower, Italian military effort was considerable and reached a contribution of more than 3,000 personnel at the beginning of 2010. Although Italy had detachments in the districts of Farah, Qala-yi Nau, Bala Murghab, Bakwa, and Gulistan, the bulk of the Italian Armed Forces were concentrated in the Herat province in western Afghanistan. Thus far, Italy and the US have maintained long-standing military partnerships and defense collaboration. The Italian military had wholeheartedly supported interoperability, becoming one of Europe’s most ardent supporters of US military initiatives in Afghanistan.

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<sup>95</sup> British Ministry of Defence, ‘First British soldiers pass female engagement course in Helmand’, GOV.UK, 24 May 2010, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/first-british-soldiers-pass-female-engagement-course-in-helmand>.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with a British Officer (June 2021).

<sup>97</sup> Interviews 1,2,3,6 paper 2

Italy was under charge of Regional Command West (RC-W), comprising the provinces of Badghis, Farah, Ghor, and Herat and worked closely with the Americans in military planning, intelligence sharing, and military operations execution. In 2010, Task Force Herat was headquartered at *Camp Arena*, which housed a tiny component of the US Army having no understanding of FET. On February 23, 2010, a US Army Major from the Human Terrain Command held a strategic update to suggest to the Commander of the International Security Assistance Force (COMISAF) the issuing of specific advice to standardize female engagements for ISAF units.<sup>98</sup> On 20 April 2010, the Light Infantry Brigade “Taurinense” took over responsibility of the Italian PRT in Herat. According to data gathered, despite the presence of a female translator during formal shuras between Italian troops and civilians, Afghan women frequently felt uncomfortable while dealing with male soldiers.<sup>99</sup> At the end of April 2010, former XIV PRT Commander invited an Italian female Officer to join following *shuras* to encourage a more spontaneous interaction with local women.<sup>100</sup> In the coming weeks, there would be more of the same. In this context, *Camp Vianini*, former PRT base, was entirely manned by Italian Army personnel. The Italian female troops involved in the first female engagement had no direct interaction with or direction from USMC FETs. Therefore, while a comparable FET concept was already taking shape inside the Italian contingent, the proper structure and long-term aim of the US FET program was still short of in this early stage of engagement. A more precise and detailed concept came to life thanks to the US stimulus on May 31, 2010, when the US Commanding General signed the “ISAF Tactical Directive on Female Engagement”, which was endorsed by NATO in Afghanistan and disseminated by ISAF HQ.<sup>101</sup> The Directive was actively circulated towards all national contingents deployed in Afghanistan so that Commanders might take notice of it. Italy swiftly adopted it and established the first FET: “When we came to Afghanistan, we weren’t the firstborns of this wave on women’s emancipation, but the Americans were undoubtedly the driving factor for the development of FETs”.<sup>102</sup> Italy was thus the first of the *Second Adopters* to introduce the FET practice within its ranks. The Italian approach was far removed from the Anglo-American one. FET initiatives, which were heavily centered on civic-military cooperation (CIMIC), were aimed at vast segments of civil society (ranging from youngsters to the elderly) and scattered in streets, schools, and hospitals, accompanied by huge contributions of primary supplies.<sup>101</sup> This was matched by a deeper understanding of the role that women, both foreign military and civilian, might play in the operational setting and the progression of the conflict. Given their popularity, Italian FET activities continued even after the PRT split in 2014, until 2017.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Major Maria Vedder, ‘Building Confidence with the Population: Proposal for Military Females to Engage Afghan Females’ 23 February 2010 (Kabul, Afghanistan: ISAF Headquarters), <https://info.publicintelligence.net/ISAF-FemaleEngagement.pdf>

<sup>99</sup> Interviews with Italian Officers (September and October 2021).

<sup>100</sup> Interviews with Italian Officers (September and October 2021).

<sup>101</sup> NATO, ISAF Tactical Directive on Female Engagement (Kabul, Afghanistan: ISAF Headquarters), 31 May 2010, 1.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with an Italian Officer (October 2021).



## **The “Expansion Phase” and the “Second Adopters”: Central African Republic (CAR) 2015, the Zambezi FET Program**

By 2010, both Italy and the UK had adopted the FET innovation from the US. Within a few years, other national contingents scattered around the globe expressed a willingness to innovate through FET. The propagation of the FET program from a combination of the *Pioneer* and the *First Adopters* in the contexts of an ad hoc PDT in Zambia defined the *Expansion* phase. This stage highlights two fundamental themes of this research. First, it signifies the exact moment when the innovation expanded beyond the conventional circle of allies fitting into a closed network (such as Italy and the UK within NATO) to spread to partners distributed around the world (i.e. Zambia). Second, the *Expansion* phase discloses that innovations are not anchored to a unique theatre of operation. They, instead, travel across diverse military interventions. In fact, within this stage, the FET program is not anymore diffused in the context of COIN operations in Afghanistan, but is rather disseminated within the framework of Zambia PDT in Lusaka. The analysis below depicts the spread of FETs at the hands of the US and the UK forces to Zambia’s ones in 2015. The Zambia FET program formally originated in late 2018 as a result of a joint effort by the UK and the US trainers with Zambezi troops.<sup>103</sup> However, the Zambian Armed Forces (ZAF) were informed about the existence of FET in late 2015. At the time, Zambia’s ties with the US and the UK were quite tight. Zambia has worked hard in recent years, particularly in 2015, to strengthen its military alliance with the Americans. The UK and Zambia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in October 2015 to provide British military training and assistance to the ZAF. At the same time, the US tried to strengthen partnerships for ZAF to participate in security and humanitarian disaster relief activities throughout Africa. Long-standing links between the UK, the US, and Zambia became critical in boosting military relations and restoring mutual commitment to military cooperation, particularly in the field of peacekeeping. Between January and March 2016, the American and the British Army trainers of the Global Peace Operation Initiative (GPOI) and the British Peace Support Team (BPST)— major global supporters of peacekeeping operations in terms of financial commitment and personnel and equipment provision—began to prepare ZAF for future deployment within the MINUSCA mission, ZAF.<sup>104</sup>

The two Western nations offered to assist Zambia with unique preparatory packages, including a course on how to create and drill FET. It was in the context of this joint PDT that the Zambian contingent (ZAMBATT 3) learned of the FET program. The introduction of Zambian FETs was part of the UN’s “new approach” which attempted to bridge gaps in supporting vulnerable communities in peace operations.<sup>105</sup> According to research, some African military, including those of Cameroon, Ghana, and Zambia, had previously suggested interest and considered the possible benefits of establishing female

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<sup>103</sup> Interviews with Zambezi Officers (February and April 2022).

<sup>104</sup> Interviews with UN Official (October 2022).

<sup>105</sup> Interviews with Zambezi Officers (April 2022).

units.<sup>106</sup> As a result of the large proportion of women deployed in peacekeeping operations, some of them would be able to deploy FETs. And yet, they missed FET's theoretical foundation and empirical applicability. In this framework, both the American and British armed forces offered to share their FET expertise with their African counterparts. This became possible also because the ZAF FET program was carefully researched and designed for at least two years at the Nanking Peace Mission Training Centre in Lusaka with the constant and direct presence of American and British trainers before Zambia forces deployed FETs in MINUSCA. This enabled the African country to derive maximum benefit from the knowledge and expertise and to become the first Second Adopters to resort to the FET practice.

The re-adapted Zambezi FET program is regarded as an achievement and is used as a model for how to execute this program throughout the UN. The program's effectiveness is due to an assortment of elements that set it apart from its counterparts' (US and UK) approaches. First, there was widespread support from the chain of command, particularly at the top, which invested in the education and training of FET members for a long time before deploying them in the theater. Second, the mission was popular due to a large presence of female troops who were organized broadly in FETs operating around the country. The ongoing engagement with the local community, along with the establishment of a long-term range of activities, makes it simpler for them to win local confidence and become an essential hub for intelligence.

### **The “Propagation” Phase and the “Fourth Adopters”: Lebanon 2018, the Lebanese FET Program**

The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) were the first *Fourth Adopters* to englobe the FET program in 2018 within the *Propagation* phase. At the time, Lebanon was an important US partner on a wide range of regional security issues in the Middle East. The American armed forces had collaborated with the LAF on a variety of issues, including control and regulation of arms transfers, border integrity preservation, counterterrorism, maritime security, disrupting terrorist facilitations, and training. The US military aid program was created to address Lebanon's defense needs and to help the Lebanese response. More precisely, the International Military Education Training (IMET) program for Lebanon was the world's fourth biggest IMET program, supported by the US, and trains LAF soldiers in a variety of fields such as civil-military relations, explosive ordnance disposal (EOD), and close air support. The US was one of the key countries that helped Lebanon with its defense. However, there was no direct information FET transfer between them, nor was Lebanon the US key partner in the regional area. FET training, on the other hand, was not part of US' scheduled activities. FET development was made possible by a long-standing and solid defense relationship with a *Second Adopter*, Italy, whose troops' presence in the hosting country, Lebanon, has long been a bedrock of Lebanon's security.

Initial LAF approach with the FET program indeed took place within the setting of MIBIL in 2018.

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<sup>106</sup> Interviews with Ghanaian and Zambezi Officers (February 2021 and March 2023).

MIBIL, established in March 2015 in support of the LAF and National Security Forces personnel, fell within the wider context of the initiatives performed by the UN's "International Support Group for Lebanon" (ISG). Against this backdrop, unique bilateral initiatives in the realm of LAF training were commenced. The Italian Multinational CIMIC Group (MNCG), a NATO multinational civil-military cooperation organization directed and supported by the Italian Army, was anticipated to provide a set of CIMIC courses for the MIBIL mission in 2018.<sup>107</sup> The FET course was included in the MNCG's package deals and was explicitly requested by the LAF. It was first held in July 2018 at the CIMIC Directorate in Faiyadiyah, in Mount Lebanon.<sup>108</sup> Apart from 2020, the MNCG's rotating Italian Mobile Training Team (MTT) has been releasing a FET training to the LAF since Summer 2018.<sup>109</sup> Between April and May 2023, the MNCG conducted with the LAF the final and most intensive training to assist them in creating a clear framework for their FET endeavor. The purpose of the one-month interaction was to assist the LAF in organizing how they would use their FET to deal with cross-border issues with Syria.<sup>110</sup>

To date, the Lebanese FET program has experienced the most drastic transformation ever witnessed. The LAF intends to deploy the FET program in an unprecedented fashion, employing FET units on a domestic rather than expeditionary basis, giving rise to what the military refers to as "Domestic CIMIC". This adaptation underlines the evolution of the Italians' CIMIC expertise in adapting FETs for household usage to relieve internal tensions and diminish them at the border. Furthermore, one of the LAF's ultimate goals will be to become a CIMIC hub for the Middle East, to disseminate its manner of operation, including the FET practice, to a number of regional fragile countries and provide them with an element to help the government and the people. To accomplish this, the MNCG and the LAF are advocating a procedure known as the "Training of the Trainers" (TOT) approach, which involves master trainers instructing new trainers who are less acquainted with the FET idea to spread the practice better and quickly. I thus expect this will expand the ICM by adding more phases and actors.

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<sup>107</sup> Interview with Italian Officers and NC Officers (March 2021).

<sup>108</sup> Interview with an Italian NC Officer (September 2021).

<sup>109</sup> Interview with a Lebanese Officer (September 2022)

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Lebanese Officers (September 2022).

## Conclusion

Why do militaries adopt innovations at different points in time and across a number of varying operational theaters? Current literature in Security Studies leads back such changes to realist constructs run by trends of enmity and competition. This paper has demonstrated instead that the dissemination of knowledge and experiences can also be powered by mutual support and coordinated cooperation among military organizations. To prove this, the present study has introduced a new model—the ICM—to shed light on the sequential diffusion of new tactics, practices, and procedures among armed forces and military interventions worldwide. The model has not only illustrated that innovations are adopted by armed forces at different times, but also that they are spread sequentially from military to military by means of a cascade process and across diverse operational types.

Theoretically, the paper has shown how phenomena of military transformation are unevenly spaced in time and that the adoption and diffusion of military innovation is often delayed or postponed by different countries. On the one hand, mover's timing (capacity) to absorb the innovation earlier depends on their direct or indirect access to the innovation. On the other hand, different timing of innovation's integration is related to the tenor of military relationship movers entertain with the innovator. In this context, centring on time-related trends has also helped to identify patterns and strategic approaches that are better suited for early movers and later adopters (i.e. the identity of the states).

Conceptually, the article has stressed the need to consider the diffusion of innovations through a connected and global perspective, rather than looking at diffusion phenomena as fragments of it and analyzing them individually. In this sense, the generalizability of the model might allow scholars to disentangle multiple and complex phenomena of military innovations' diffusion so far handled individually. Hence, the application of this model to other instances of military innovations might turn useful to recognize that the universe of admissible observations in real life may be broader than the universe to which a single case study wishes to generalize.

Empirically, this study has offered the first, yet partial, historical track record of the FET program. We have observed that there's a strong mission hierarchy of innovation diffusion. We saw that Italy and the UK, as among the closest allies of the *Pioneer* (the US), were the first to take on the FET initiative, later extended to partners scattered worldwide (Lebanon and Zambia). Therefore, the US FET program first spread within the ISAF mission and remained at exclusive disposal of those member participating in the Coalition committed in Afghanistan to be later disseminated beyond the ISAF context (i.e. MINUSCA, MIBIL) only at a second stage. And yet, within alliances and partnerships, those with favored networks innovate ahead of others.

This research's findings bare important implications for both scholars and practitioners. In political terms, this study hopes to enhance reflections on the events that such a kind of diffusion phenomenon might originate. On the one hand, large-scale emulation poses a problem of internal and external coordination. For one, time lags in the adoption of an innovation can adversely impact the readiness of

national armed forces. On the other hand, there is a chance that an innovation traveling quickly and out of control might assume a different form than the initial one and that might be used to meet diverse demands that those for which it was specifically designed. Therefore, this paper encourages further reflection on the need to properly consider the setup of a monitoring system capable of tracking and collecting evidence of the actors involved in a process of global dissemination of military innovations. More comprehensive studies are necessary to improve understanding on relevant dynamics dealing with force structure military innovations and seem particularly promising. The paper hopes to raise reflection on unexplored networks of connections among militaries at the basis of such diffusion processes, which remain largely overlooked. It also encourages pondering on whether the ICM can be applied to other military innovations. In this sense, different types of innovation diffused may lead to divergent dynamics of spread, identifying distinct pathways of dissemination over time across actors involved in a number of operational theaters. Additional research has to be done also to determine the duration and outcome of military innovation and under what circumstances are they more prone to survive or disappear. This research aims to provide new avenues for future empirical investigations on the diffusion of military innovations.

**Inspiring Transformation? Exploring Mid-level Commanders' Roles in Driving Military Organizations: the Case of All-Female Military Units**

**Abstract**

Transformation is a *process du jour* in the military. As the nature of warfare evolves, there has been a growing demand for increasingly versatile leaders who could effectively set direction for their subordinates while also driving execution, serving as agents of change at all echelons (strategic, operational, and tactical). Although a few studies have hinged on commanders' strategic and tactical performance, there is, however, no systematic exhaustive explanation of the circumstances outlining why commanders adapt and innovate at operational level. To that purpose, this paper proposes a commander-centered theory, which clarifies mid-level leader's (Senior and Junior Officers) role in inspiring a transformative vision and fostering reform by generating or adopting (emulating) innovations to match new operational demands. The theory is developed to the case of AFMUs, whose employment in a variety of battlefields is among the most uncharted, yet observable, ramifications of military force structure change. I found that information asymmetry between the commander and progress of the mission may affect leadership's ability to innovate. This variable is shaped, in turn, by commanders' acumen to make the most of lessons learned (LL) and advocate the need for change. To support the argument, I conducted 57 semi-structured interviews with uniformed personnel deployed in Afghanistan and Lebanon between 2010 and 2022, combined with a fieldwork at the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). These experiences serve as a framework for the first, fine-grained empirical analyses of Italian emulation of the Female Engagement Team (FET) program in Afghanistan and creation of the Female Assessment/ Analysis Support Team (FAST) initiative in Lebanon.

**Keywords:** All-Female Military Units; Commanders; Emulative Adaptation; Female Assessment/Analysis Support Team; Female Engagement Team; Innovation.

**Introduction**

Over the past decades, existing scholarship in Security Studies has increased our understanding of commanders engaged in transformational processes primarily at the strategic and tactical levels of analysis.<sup>111</sup> And yet, there is a lack of a thorough grasp of how mid-level commanders (Senior and Junior Officers) are redefining long-standing conventions of what makes today's military organizations resourceful and versatile on the operational level of war. Specifically, an examination of the mechanisms driving command authorities serving in operational warfare to adapt or innovate on the

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<sup>111</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, "Taliban adaptations and innovations", *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 24/1 (2013): 8-9.

ground is missing; which is critical, as mid-level commanders are responsible for disseminating the Force Commander's purpose by matching the goals of strategy with the nuances of tactics, including campaign and major operations planning and execution. In the words of the Deputy Chief of the Italian Defense Staff, Army Corps General Carmine Masiello, "A challenge that awaits us is a generation of leaders who understand how to imagine new scenarios. Because rankings are occasionally used as filters, we must avoid a hierarchical architecture. It is difficult for a young lieutenant colonel to make his point in the military. There are several filters, and few individuals are willing to question their own. Therefore, the ability to elevate the thoughts of young people must be cultivated".<sup>112</sup>

Based on this shortcoming, I propose the following research question: under what conditions (mid-level) commanders originate a ground-breaking innovations rather than seeking inspiration from others at the operational level? No previous studies, to the author's knowledge, have attempted to throw light on this topic. To elucidate this feature, I advance a commander-centered theory, which theorizes on different sorts of scenarios enabling mid-level commanders to embark on diverse transformative journeys.

I consider two components related to commander's standing and entrepreneurship: (I) the information asymmetry deriving from distinct positions of military command in an armed conflict (leader vs. follower), and (II) the commanders' propensity or otherwise to tap into potential of historical records that may serve as impetus for change (lessons learned vs. observations). The theory expects that a commander directing a mission will innovate by providing a more detailed perspective of what is occurring on the ground and gathering documented evidence that reflects background experience from the past. On the contrary, it assumes a commander acting as a follower in a military intervention, bereft of relevant references from prior missions, to be guided by those who are more experienced.

The theory has identified two more potential transformation routes, which consider the events that a leader may simply rely on observations, just as a follower may bank on solid lessons gained. Admittedly, the study lacks actual data for the final two pathways, therefore it is only conjecture. However, these theorizing attempts, as far as imperfect explanations of a phenomenon, should be considered as part of a creative and iterative theory building process; in the sense that, given a chance, may evolve, complete, and redefine the theory at a later time.<sup>113</sup>

Empirically, this study contributes to the literature on military transformation and leadership in a novel way by applying the theory to the Italian case, which was picked for two primary reasons.

First, adaptation and innovation are key components of the broader process of Italian Armed Forces' force structure restructuring in a wide spectrum of military interventions.<sup>114</sup> Specifically, involvement

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<sup>112</sup> Chiara Rossi, "Tutte le prossime sfide dell'ecosistema Difesa italiana", *StartMagazine* <https://www.startmag.it/innovazione/tutte-le-prossime-sfide-dellecosistema-difesa/> (last accessed June 29, 2023)

<sup>113</sup> Suzanne Rivard, 'Theory building is neither an art nor a science. It is a craft', *Journal of Information Technology* 36/3 (2021): 316–328, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268396220911938>

<sup>114</sup> Fabrizio Coticchia, Francesco N. Moro, *The transformation of Italian armed forces in comparative perspective: adapt, improvise, overcome?* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015)

in these initiatives has grown into a unique aspect of Italy's international role and credibility as one of NATO's and UN's most active countries in multinational missions, demonstrating exceptional competence in civil-military collaboration, and long-term stability operations. Second, the Italian case displays the development of leadership as a key trait for the armed forces' self-improvement.

Findings show that between 2010 and 2013, Italy's sustained armed commitment in Afghanistan and in Lebanon compelled mid-level commanders to adopt and create specific AFMUs to match two specular operational demands. In the first event, the commander of the Italian Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) urged to gain access to the local women while deployed in one of the most war-torn and gender-segregated countries of the world, Afghanistan. And yet, the preconditions for innovating were exceptionally weak, as the Italian PRT commander not only lacked a full understanding of the operational progress outside of the Italian-led Regional Command West (RC-W), but he also could not rely on any historical background of prior female deployment that may have served as basis to innovate. This prompted him to emulate the United States Marine Corps (USMC) Female Engagement Team (FET) program, which continued to operate in the Italian PRT until 2017.

The second challenge Italian commanders addressed was granting local female representatives' access to the military mission ongoing in Lebanon. In 2011, the Italian Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) commander had the desire of getting a better understanding of Lebanese society, its problems, and the urges of the population through the lens of the nation's women. From that perspective, his active leadership of the mission, together with his ability to fully rely on early lessons learned (LL) from Afghanistan (2010), gave rise to the Female Assessment/ Analysis Support Team (FAST) initiative. FAST was established together with the Gender Advisory Unit Lebanon, which eventually assumed supervision of the program to ensure its long-term sustainability through the UNIFIL mission. In this sense, the FAST program has been officially running since 2013, with an interruption during the Covid-19 epidemic. FAST has grown well-established in Italian military organizations and has quickly become a standardized procedure applied by all UNIFIL Battalions (e.g. Ghanaian, Indonesian, Malaysian, South Korean etc.).

This article makes substantial theoretical and empirical contributions to the scholarly debate on military transformation, and more broadly to the area of Security Studies. Theoretically speaking, by outlining a commander-centered theory, the paper first offers a point of departure for further discussion and research into the role of military commanders in shaping events of armed forces transformation at the operational level.

Second, by focusing on the shifting dynamics of middle-size countries, the research extends the existing, and yet limited debate on them,<sup>115</sup> the remodeling of which is critical to indicating political backing for

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<sup>115</sup> Tom Dyson, "Managing Convergence: German Military Doctrine and Capabilities in the 21st Century", *Defence Studies* 11/2 (2011): 244-270, DOI: 10.1080/14702436.2011.590047; Guillem Colom Piella, "Transforming the Spanish military", *Defence Studies*, 16/1 (2016): 1-19, DOI: 10.1080/14702436.2016.1146078; Barış Ateş, *Military Innovation in Türkiye: An Overview of the Post- Cold War Era* (London: Routledge, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003327127>



an organization (e.g. NATO), a cause, or a military operation. In doing so, the study shows how these nations are instead becoming an essential resource for contemporary military interventions seeing the absence of great powers such as France, the United Kingdom (UK) and the US, which have fully captured the attention of Security Studies' scholars thus far.<sup>116</sup> Third, by fostering reflection on the significance of AFMUs, the paper allows to convey on how they are concretely changing the military's force structure. Finally, the paper offers the first, accurate empirical documentation of two major instances of AFMUs, the FET and the FAST, which are the result of two distinct processes of emulative adaptation and innovation, respectively, of the Italian armed forces.

I used a qualitative case study design to obtain original primary data for this study. I inductively constructed a generalizable theoretical explanation from empirical evidence using within-case theory-building. In this sense, I deduced from the facts of the case in question that a systematic, causal mechanism is at play.<sup>117</sup> The analysis of the Italian case, while (yet) not representative of a larger scenario, may be illustrative of a double internal redesign that other nations involved in expeditionary operations in the new century could have undertaken but did not.

I conducted 57 semi-structured interviews with Italian military personnel who engaged in FET and FAST programs between 2010 and 2022.<sup>118</sup> The study was also supplemented with memoirs of Italian academics and journalists embedded with the Italian forces, as well as primary sources extrapolated from lessons-learned briefings, public interventions, and private seminars. TI undertook fieldwork in Lebanon to enrich the research.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section reviews the literature on commanders' role in shaping military transformation and lays out its shortcomings. The second part presents the commander-centered theory to explain how military organizations embark upon different processes of change. In the third place, the theoretical framework is empirically applied to analyze the Italian missions in Afghanistan and in Lebanon and the relative emulative adoption of FET and creation of FAST programs. Finally, the paper outlines some conclusions and provides recommendation paths for further theoretical and empirical investigation at the hands of both the academic and military communities interested in phenomena of military transformation.

## **Literature review**

In the past years, military leadership has become a great source of public contention.<sup>119</sup> Particularly, emphasis on leadership has been skewed toward strategic and tactical levels of command. On the one

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<sup>116</sup> Chad C. Serena, *A Revolution in Military Adaptation: The US Army in the Iraq War* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011); Sergio Catignani, "Getting COIN" at the Tactical Level: Reassessing Counter-Insurgency Adaptation in the British Army', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35/4 (2012): 513–539; Olivier Schmitt, *French Military Adaptation in the Afghan War*.

<sup>117</sup> Tullia G. Falleti, Julia F. Lynch, "Context and Causal Mechanisms in Political Analysis", *Comparative Political Studies* 42/9 (2009): 1143–1166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414009331724>

<sup>118</sup> The list of the interviews done for this paper is accessible upon request.

<sup>119</sup> Anthony King, "On command", *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2022) DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2022.2139243

hand, top-level commanders have often been discredited for their choices and performance in modern operational contexts, rather than being lauded for their achievements.<sup>120</sup> Junior commanders, on the other hand, have been recognized for taking on major duties in complicated operations, displaying bravery, skill, and loyalty, and contributing to their contingent's adaptation to operational obstacles.<sup>121</sup> There exists, however, limited theorizing on the relevance of mid-level commanders on armed forces' transformation at operational warfare.<sup>122</sup> Some research has explored the role of "middle managers", or "field commanders" in advancing change, but these studies present several limitations.

First, this literature is silent on the circumstances leading them to establish distinct routes of change, thus failing to recognize when they are prone to adapt or innovate on the ground. Second, present studies have mostly explored commanders' responsibilities in producing and shaping unique outcomes in post-conflict transitions,<sup>123</sup> while an in-depth analysis of their role in driving change in conflict scenarios, as well as in peacekeeping processes, is thus far absent. Such a scant regard for mid-level commanders' input may be underpinned by the fact that their role has been frequently marginalized, since they are normally distanced from interacting directly with the enemy and have no part in coordinating campaigns or strategic choices for the military.<sup>124</sup> And yet, the study of their endeavor is paramount as what occurs at the operational thinking serves as both a platform and a structure for establishing visions affirming the principles, and guiding the organization's transition. That is, the commander's capacity to fully envision the progression of events until the final goal of a massive operation or campaign is achieved.

As proof of this, we are now not only assisting at the increasing relevance of the operational site of military transformation, but also, and consequently, to the players promoting change. For many years, the divisional level of command has been acknowledged as the strategic level's unit par excellence, as

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<sup>120</sup> Tim Bird, Alex Marshall, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost its Way* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Dan Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of Iraq and Afghanistan* (New York: First Mariner Books 2015); Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable* (London: Vintage, 2018).

<sup>121</sup> George Dimitriu, Gijs Tuinman & Martijn van der Vorm, 'Formative Years: Military Adaptation of Dutch Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan', *Special Operations Journal*, 2:2 (2016): 146-166, DOI: 10.1080/23296151.2016.1239987

<sup>122</sup> Raphael D. Marcus, 'Military Innovation and Tactical Adaptation in the Israel-Hizballah Conflict: The Institutionalization of Lesson-Learning in the IDF', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2014), DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2014.923767

<sup>123</sup> Sarah Zukerman Daly, 'The Dark Side of Power-Sharing: Middle Managers and Civil War Recurrence', *Comparative Politics* 46/3 (2014): 333-53; Philip A. Martin, 'Commander-Community Ties after Civil War', *Journal of Peace Research* 58/4 (2021): 778-93; Sally Sharif, 'Can the Rebel Body Function without its Visible Heads? The Role of Mid-Level Commanders in Peacebuilding', *International Peacekeeping* 29/5 (2022): 709-740.

<sup>124</sup> Leonard Wonga, Paul Bliese, Dennis McGurkb, 'Military leadership: A context specific review', *The Leadership Quarterly* 14 (2003): 671.

well as the primary scene of substantial armed forces restructuring. However, because the armed forces have been reformed in terms of size and mission, we can see that the true center of gravity has gradually been relocated. Most notably, the (empowered) Brigade has supplanted the Division as the operational unit of choice.<sup>125</sup> Therefore, the primary actors of change have likewise transitioned from Flag Commissioned Officers to Senior and Junior Officers. This shift is not accidental. According to some research, “Military leadership is both an art and a science”.<sup>126</sup> Therefore, the goal for force vision is more than just having new equipment and technology. It also relies on future commanders displaying “vision, innovation, and creativity”.<sup>127</sup> In this sense, mid-level commanders have frequently been considered more open to seeking and embracing counterintuitive solutions than their superiors.<sup>128</sup> Displaying these qualities is crucial in the unpredictable and fragmented combat environment of the twenty-first century, when adaptable commanders have become an immensely valuable resource. This transitional stage is also combined with a shift in the command paradigm, as mid-level commanders eschew traditional top-level commanders’ individualism<sup>129</sup> in favor of a more collective approach. Most notably, the collective effort sees commanders dilute authority along the chain of command to share some of the decision-making burden while staying at the very heart of choice in operations, empowering staff officers and subordinates with more responsibilities.<sup>130</sup>

In sum, the extant literature outlines several circumstances that may assist explain why militaries are tackling challenges and seizing opportunities for fast and unprecedented changes at operational level, but none delivers a definitive answer. No theoretical reasoning seems to be able to explain the motivations leading commanders to undertake specific military transformations that can result in adaptation or innovation at operational level. To this end, in the next section I’ll put forward an original theoretical framework that might clarify this variation.

### **Identifying distinct military forces transformational paths at the operational level: the case for a commander-centered theory.**

We still lack a full comprehension of the circumstances driving commanders to engage in military change at the operational level. To this end, this article proposes the commander-centered theory to highlight the important role of mid-level commanders in driving transformational events at the operational front. Before we get into the heart of the framework, it is crucial to review how

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<sup>125</sup> Anthony King, *The Transformation of Europe’s Armed Forces*, 177

<sup>126</sup> Mark R. Lewis, “Army Transformation and Junior Officers Exodus”, *Armed Forces & Society*, 31/1 (2004): 63-93, <https://doi.org.10.1177/0095327C0403100104>

<sup>127</sup> US Army Training and Doctrine Command Pamphlet 525-5, Force XXI Operations, chapter 4.

<sup>128</sup> David Tohn and Jaron Wharton, “Learning Under Fire: Progress and Dissent in the US Military”, *Survival* 51/4 (2009): 31-48

<sup>129</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Command: the politics of military operations from Korea to Ukraine* (London: Allen Lane, 2022); Jim Storr, *Something Rotten* (Havant: Howgate 2002), xi.

<sup>130</sup> Anthony King, *Command: The Twenty-First-Century General* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

contemporary scholars have conceptualized military transformation, particularly military innovation and adaptation, which are the primary themes of this article.

### ***Understanding military change: military innovation and emulative adaptation***

There is no agreed-upon definition of what military innovation and adaptation are despite several decades of research into military transformation studies.<sup>131</sup> For years, a substantial portion of academics has allocated a distinct value to military innovation and adaptation. Whilst military adaptation has traditionally been thought of as a less significant change, a phenomenon of limited or no impact at all on military organizational structures, military innovation has been defined as the creation or use of a value-added novelty in the military domain, the real “game changer”, entailing a more striking impact on military organizations.<sup>132</sup> Drawing on fewer inquiries, this research considers military innovation and adaptation as two alternative endpoints on a continuum scale.<sup>133</sup> Innovative thinking and adaptability of armed forces are both crucial in different respects for strengthening defense and security institutions, as well as to ensure the good governance of military interventions and enhancing the effectiveness of the organization on the ground. Recognizing this is essential to stress the two processes’ equal importance and make clear that no one of them predominates over the other. However, to investigate in concrete terms how armed forces may be both adaptive and inventive, it is also imperative to make an attempt to identify the features and characteristics that enable the differentiation between these two transformational processes.

This study specifies five conceptual parameters that might aid in their classification. These are discussed below: scope, scale, time horizon, assimilation, and direction (Figure 1).

Accordingly, both emulative adaptation and innovation processes share the aim of allowing armed forces on the ground to operate better and to improve and raise the qualitative standard of their performance in the field. And yet, whereas innovation has the ultimate scope of producing a creative and imaginative outcome which is concretized with the eventual launch of a something never seen before on the ground (e.g a new doctrine, equipment, or military asset etc.) at the hands of a unique military organization, adaptation is the result of an emulation-based behavior made by one or more armed forces with the aim of imitating an already existing model, drawing experiences and knowledge provided by another military actor.

Thus, in terms of magnitude, innovation is portrayed as a larger and longest outward-looking process that seeks civilian backing while seeking a broader reform that may impact the mission’s overall performance in the future. On the contrary, adaptation is conceived as a smaller-scale inward-looking

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<sup>131</sup> Michael C. Horowitz, Shira Pindyck, “What is a military innovation and why it matters”, *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2022): 2, DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2022.2038572.

<sup>132</sup> Stephen P. Rosen, ‘New ways of war: understanding military innovation,’ *International Security* 13/1 (1988): 134; Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation in War: With Fear of Change* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 309.

<sup>133</sup> Theo Farrell, Frans Osinga, James A. Russell, *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan*, 7.

activity that is limited to the military domain solely, as remodeling is not intended to oversee the entire mission, only a specific armed force.

The time horizons of the outputs of the transformational processes are also varied. The consequence of innovation is expected to outlast the commander’s limited presence on the ground and to be carried out even after the rotational period of boots-on-the-ground is completed. In this way, it is conceived as an ongoing endeavor that should survive the key point. Adaptation, on the other hand, is defined as a short-term activity taken in response to long-term innovation, where followers just temporarily absorb the innovation.

Furthermore, the distinction between innovation and adaptation is that the former requires the institutionalization of change in military education and training as well as organizational procedures, whilst the latter does not.

When it comes to mission direction, because the requirement for the entire organization to endure a broader reform that may affect the mission’s future effectiveness is the premise for innovation, the renovating process necessitates to rely on the teamwork of the civilian staff members operating in a mission and the military contingents, which facilitates the military in revising the mission’s route throughout a military intervention. On the contrary, since adaptation is a process involving only those commanders on call wishing to acquire the output of the innovation process and follow the path taken by the innovator without necessarily pioneering the entire organization, the civilian component is frequently left out of reform planning.

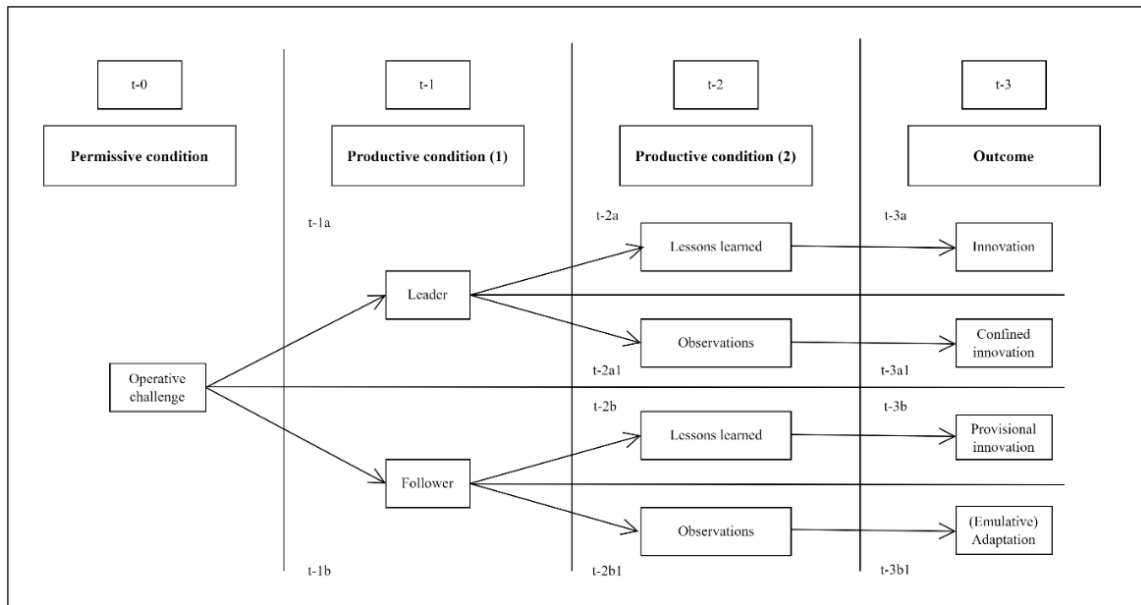
*Figure 1: Distinction between Innovation and (Emulative) Adaptation*

	<b>Innovation</b>	<b>(Emulative) Adaptation</b>
<b>Scope</b>	Invention	Imitation
<b>Scale</b>	Outward, broader	Inward, narrower
<b>Time-horizon</b>	Long-term	Short-term
<b>Assimilation</b>	Institutionalization	Non-institutionalization
<b>Direction</b>	Civil-Military	Civil

***Explaining variation between military innovation and emulative adaptation: the commander-centered theory***

Having clarified this, we can now dwell on how the theory operates (Figure 2).

*Figure 2: The commander-centered theory*



The theory unpacks the causal chain, explicates and analyzes the mechanisms and stages leading a commander to embark on diverse transformational routes (t-3). In short, I contend that various mission positions of authority and differential access to historical cases move commanders to engage in alternative transformation processes. The kick-off of all outcomes is marked by the appearance of an

historical moment that lays the ground for a critical juncture.<sup>134</sup> The model leverages on Hillel’s distinction between two types of causal circumstances at work during the critical juncture to explain the subsequent emergence of the two distinct routes (innovation and emulative adaptation).<sup>135</sup>

In line with existing studies on military adaptation and innovation,<sup>136</sup> the processes start with an unprecedented operational challenge the—*permissive condition*—at the heart of a potential military’s

<sup>134</sup> Giovanni Capoccia, Daniel R. Kelemen, ‘The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism’, *World Politics* 59/3 (2007): 348.

<sup>135</sup> In his work, Hillel distinguishes between the *permissive conditions*, namely those “factors or conditions that change the underlying context to increase the causal power of agency or contingency and thus the prospects for divergence”; and the *productive conditions*, notably the aspects of a critical juncture that “operate within the possibility space bounded by the permissive condition” and that “shape the initial outcomes that diverge across cases”.

Soifer Hillel D., “The Causal Logic of Critical Junctures”, *Comparative Political Studies* 45/12 (2012): 1574–1575, DOI: 10.1177/0010414012463902 <http://cps.sagepub.com>

<sup>136</sup> Farrell et al., *Military Adaptation in Afghanistan*, 3.

major shift, and that provides the foundation for a new situation in which deviation from the prior streamlined way is possible (t-0). The theory resonates with current studies in that historical events do not always, and frequently do not ever, manifest themselves at the same time and with the same intensity for everyone. In this sense, one might claim that variation in the duration and footprint of the historical moment might already determine some divergence in military behavior. These factors, however, have little bearing on the outcome since permissive circumstances alone are not sufficient to generate variance in the outcome.

At that point, *productive conditions* follow, which generate additional results that will persist even after the permissive conditions fade away and the historical moment terminates.

The theory first explores the role played by commanders in an expeditionary mission. Latest studies have scarcely examined the implications of specific contributing countries' position within a mission on their prospects for change. And yet, this emphasis is crucial to see if and how nations' roles might affect the commander's choices in driving transformation processes. To better clarify this point, the framework first differentiates between "leaders" and "followers" (t-1). Here the "leader" is defined as the most engaged state in a military intervention both at the command level (in terms of political and diplomatic efforts), and in the field (in terms of military contribution), which ensure following countries fully capture its direction; and as "follower" the state contributing to the mission with a smaller contingent and observing the opinions, teachings, and commands of the leading country.

In an ideal scenario, all countries engaging in military intervention share the same type and amount of information while carrying out their duties. According to the model, this optimal condition is frequently not the case since leaders and followers have various sorts or amounts of knowledge because of their position in a mission. This imbalance does not arise from the deliberate action of sharing misguided or incomplete quantities of data related to security considerations or to keep confidentiality on classified material, but rather from the fact that there is a sharp divide of roles in a mission and power throughout hierarchical levels and concise prescriptions about how leaders and followers are expected to communicate and exchange knowledge. Information power structure is mostly reliant on chain of command. Therefore, information asymmetry is by default, namely incidental rather than purposeful. To further understand this issue, the theory examines what kind of unique knowledge each military has access to and how they handle the information at their disposal to make strategic thinking.

Leaders and followers enjoy a different degree of understanding of what happens on the ground, what is working well and what is not, where the mission can be improved and what might be needed to match specific operational challenges. This might include, of course, the need to develop or adopt a certain strategy, doctrine, or asset, that could revolutionize or enhance military effectiveness. Thus, being the leader of a mission means it can enjoy a privileged position because its prominent role allows the leader to have a complete picture of the failures/success on the ground, but also to assess their frequency and

magnitude. On the contrary, the follower is rewarded with less benefit as a consequence of its disadvantaged status. The follower has thus a limited understanding of what is going on in other operational centers, and will hardly be able to perform an all-around evaluation of the situation and concretely determine if a certain incident is an isolated case or a trend that may repeat again.

However, the mere fact of being a mission leader does not mechanically ensure he or she will be able to develop innovation on its own, just as being a follower does not necessarily guarantee that it would start a process of adaptation. The leader must bring together the skills and knowledge present throughout the organization. To undertake a process of change is therefore necessary to dispose of specific expertise and knowledge that open the doors to renovation.<sup>137</sup> In this sense, learning from the past can be considered the underlying premise for and critical contributor to all commanders' development. Operational experiences, I argue, will have a significant impact on the military participating in the operations. They symbolize the military organization's commitment to a certain mission, as well as the possibility for commanders to learn from and capitalize on earlier mistakes.

To this purpose, the theory advances a second distinction and identifies two categories that may be made accessible to mission commanders (t-2). These include LL, designated as experiences our outcomes of a particular course of action—whether positive or negative—that has a significant impact on command structure to the extent that it can determine a subsequent shift in the military organizations; and “observations”, defined as raw data identified before, during or after a critical event and simple appreciation of them. This unlocks an alternate dichotomy, which opens the way to a new situation that should be considered since it affects the development of the processes. The framework argues that a second productive condition that allows commanders to innovate or adapt rests on the availability of leveraging on observations or LL. Clearly, even when LL are clear and self-evident, they do not necessarily guarantee their instantaneous assimilation by the commanders and his or her subordinates.<sup>138</sup> The presence or absence of observation or LL is tied directly to the commander's foresight to leverage on them, regardless of if he or she is acting as a leader or a follower in a mission. The commander-centered theory is based on the premise that every commander can solve issues and be creative. Military leaders must constantly initiate and adapt to change, while at the same time provide a clear vision and sense of direction (mission) for their organizations. As either a nutshell, both the ambition and the mechanism for building that vision provide the drive for change throughout the organization. Based on this assumption, the model argues that each commander may potentially be an agent of change. Most notably, that commanders can be the major supporter of transformation or the first obstacle to

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<sup>137</sup> Ronit Kark, Tair Karazi-Presler, Sarit Tubi, “Paradox and Challenges in Military Leadership”, *Leadership Leadership and Management* 8 (2016): 165. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/S1479-35712016000008031>

<sup>138</sup> Torunn L. Haaland, The Limits to Learning in Military Operations: Bottom-up Adaptation in the Norwegian Army in Northern Afghanistan, 2007–2012, 2; Zenon Waliński, “The Role of a Commander in Military Lessons Learned Systems”, *Journal of corporate responsibility and leadership* 2/1 (2016): 97.



innovation or adaptation as they are “‘responsible for everything the unit does or fails to do’”.<sup>139</sup> To do so, not only he or she must be aware of the realities that will enable him or her to accomplish the mission in the best way possible, thus having the strategic acumen to be creative and resourceful, but he or she should also develop and share his or her personal vision for the organization to his or her subordinates so that they buy into it and help turn it into a reality. These considerations open a variety of potential pathways. To guarantee LL implementation, the commander must have a major effect on military morale, namely establishing confidence with the soldiers under his or her leadership to ensure that the change is necessary to complete the mission successfully and on time. Therefore, according to the model, innovation (t-3a) is feasible when the commander not only leads a mission, gaining a full grasp of the operation’s development, but also when he or she can leverage prior experiences to generate new strategic planning. On the contrary, emulative adaptation (t-3b1) occurs from a lack of complete information of the mission’s progress, which is amplified by a lack of solid precedents from the past from which to draw inspiration.

Yet, it is possible that a leader may only depend on observations, just as a follower may rely on solid lessons learned. Within these scenarios, I offer two possible outcomes. If a leader becomes aware of basic observations made in the past, it is quite possible, but not certain, that he or she will reach the same conclusion as previous commanders. In this case, no innovation process would be initiated (missed opportunity). This, I believe, is the most reasonable theory. Nonetheless, if the material is deemed beneficial, it is feasible that an innovation project may be constructed on top of it with or without the participation of the civilian staff of the mission—which would not necessarily have a large influence on the military organization as a whole. I assume it is more conceivable that the innovation process will involve, at least in the early phase, a more limited section of the armed forces and that it will only be stretched to all branches and potentially additional allies or partners present in the operational environment later on (t-3a1: confined innovation). This will have implications in terms of time horizon and absorption. Similarly, a follower who comes into possession of relevant material that may be exploited to innovate, would be able to initiate a creative process that could culminate in the introduction of an innovation. Yet, because this is a procedure inside a single armed unit, the civilian component of the mission, if present, is unlikely to be informed or participate in the transformation process. Even if it is, it is uncertain that knowledge will be disseminated or shared with any other contingents participating in the mission. In the latter case, the longevity of the invention remains dependent on the rotation of the contingent in the theater, as well as the motivation of the new commander to preserve and support it, making its existence and effective institutionalization fragile (t-3b: provisional innovation).

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<sup>139</sup> U.S. Army (1990a). Field Manual 22 – 100, Army leadership. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, paragraph 2.6

This section has suggested and presented a novel theoretical framework for unpacking the dynamics of military organizations' reform processes at the operational level. In doing so, the commander-centered theory has explored the role played by commanders in military operations, as well as their ability to draw on earlier operational experiences to make the most of them and initiate change and identified four potential transformation routes, although only two of them had actual evidence. To this end, in the coming parts the article will assess the stages and mechanisms behind those crucial, single—yet inherently linked—events that led the Italian contingent to emulate the FET in Afghanistan and originate the FAST in Lebanon. The study, therefore, leaves other researchers the possibility to complement the theory with missing cases (confined innovation and provisional innovation).

### **Research design, methods, and data collection**

Within-case analysis was used to highlight diversity and multiply observations in a country's processes (innovation vs. emulative adaptation) pursued into two distinct in-theater missions (security and stability operation vs. peacekeeping mission). Within-case design was chosen specifically to address the complexities of critical junctures, permissive and productive conditions, and the constituent elements of causal possibility, closure, and constraint.<sup>140</sup> In light of this, the current study traced mid-level commanders actions on the ground for generating conclusions on how transformation processes occur and capture sequences of characteristics within a single larger case.<sup>141</sup>

I chose the Italian case for two primary reasons. To begin, it allows the greatest variation in the dependent variable. The involvement of the Italian military organization in operations overseas is examined practically simultaneously (2010 and 2011) in two missions (ISAF and UNIFIL), which diverge in many fundamental features, including type of operation, mandate, contributing nations, among others. On the one hand, the Italian contingent deployed in Afghanistan (2010) emulated an already existing innovation (the FET program), the knowledge of which was shared with from another actor; Italy's forces deployed under UNIFIL (2011), on the other hand, contributed to the mission by developing a unique approach (the FAST initiative), which was eventually adopted by all the other Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) in the mission. Second, thus far, the Italian case may serve as the case zero from which to launch a reflection on the subject and explain trends across cases. As a result, even though there's no confirmation of this, the Italian event may be reflective of a larger population of cases that has undergone comparable routes in the same or different types of military operations.

In terms of method, rare is the research exploring events of military transformation by gathering first-hand experiences of civilians and militaries directly participating in times of transition,<sup>142</sup> despite the

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<sup>140</sup> Andrew Bennett, Colin Elman, *Complex Causal Relations and Case Study Methods: The Example of Path Dependence*.

<sup>141</sup> Leanne C. Power, *Empirical Research and Writing. A Political Science Student's Practical Guide*, 131.

<sup>142</sup> Francesco N. Moro, Lorenzo Cicchi, Fabrizio Coticchia, 'Through military lenses. Perception of security threats and jointness in the Italian Air Force', *Defence Studies* (2018): 1-23, DOI: 10.1080/14702436.2018.1461014.

fact this is highly significant and valuable.<sup>143</sup> In light of this, original primary data for this research have been collected through an extensive qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews and observation on the ground. The gathering of empirical data should be considered as an evolving procedure which has been based on the triangulation of independent, different sources. I relied extensively on elite interviews conducted with key players directly involved in the transformation events examined. Between 2021 and 2022, I have conducted 57 semi-structured interviews with Italian military officers deployed within the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Resolute Support Mission (RSM), and UNIFIL within the timeframe 2010-2022. Interviews with former PRT and CIMIC cell commanders and their subordinates took place to further learn about the historical and situational environment in which they operated, as well as the role they played in the renovation of Italian military organizations. Fieldwork was also performed at UNIFIL in November 2022 under the supervision and guidance of the Brigata “Aosta”, and with prior authorization of the Italian and Lebanese Ministry of Defence (MoDs) and the UN Headquarters (HQs) to capture the employment of the FASTs on the ground, which had never been documented before. The extra value of this study comes from the memoirs of Italian academics and journalists who have been embedded with the Italian Armed Forces in the same period. I also have attended several lessons-learned briefings, public interventions, and private seminars where some of the interviewees discussed their experiences after returning from Afghanistan and Lebanon. In this regard, the unwavering support of the Multinational CIMIC Group (MNCG) of Motta di Livenza, Italy—a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) specialized unit envisioned for tactical and operational CIMIC—has proven critical to recollect the details about what took place throughout the missions, especially in Afghanistan, and to better understand how the Italian Armed Forces have trained and continue to form the military personnel from a variety of countries to be deployed in FET and FAST units or in support of them. Finally, to compensate for possible interviewees’ lapses of memory over time, I integrated the material with reports from the MoD and UN websites to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of Italian military organization reform.

### **The emulative adoption of the Female Engagement Team program in the ISAF mission (2010)**

In this section, I argue that in 2010 the Italian PRT commander serving in Afghanistan could not generate any AFMU project from scratch at the time, forcing him to imitate a previously existing solution from the US, the FET. Nonetheless, I contend that the Italian experience with FET in ISAF has become crucial for future innovation of the Italian military organization in Lebanon under FAST. Therefore, this section offers insight on the circumstances that caused the Italian commanders in Afghanistan to rely on the American approach to restructure the Italian military.

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<sup>143</sup> Thomas G. Mahnken, James R. FitzSimonds, “Tread-heads or technophiles? Army officer attitudes toward transformation”, *Parameters* 34/2 (2004): 57–72.

The reasons behind this rationale rest on two major aspects. The first concerns the US's leading role in the mission opposite to that of Italy as a follower. In Afghanistan the US served the ISAF mission as the principal leadership cadre of the international military Coalition. The duties of the Regional Command (RC) leadership were often delegated to other Coalition members, but the ultimate responsibility of the mission rested on the US Command. This was valid especially since 2007, when the US first took command of ISAF to never let it go till the end of the mission in 2014. Furthermore, the (US) Commander of ISAF (COMISAF) directed the three major organizations of the mission: the ISAF Joint Command (IJC), the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan and the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A). The US also had deployed, since the beginning of the war (2001) more than 100,000 soldiers by early Summer 2010 (more than half of the whole number of ISAF troops) in the provinces of Balkh, Delaram, Helmand, Kandahar, Parvan, Zabul, to mention a few. The COMISAF had thus a comprehensive understanding of what was happening on the ground, but also a decision-making role exceeding the Italian one.

For its part, Italy's engagement in Afghanistan had started almost right away, in January 2002. Italy also could boast to have assumed the ISAF Command, but just one time in 2005. The country was leading, however, the RC-W, a multinational military formation controlling the provinces of Badghis, Farah, Ghor, and Herat and was the fifth largest supporter of the war in terms of manpower, with more than 3,000 personnel at the beginning of 2010. Italy had detachments deployed in the districts of Farah, Qalayi Nau, Bala Murghab, Bakwa, and Gulistan, but the bulk of the Forces served especially in the Herat province. Therefore, the commander had little knowledge of what happened in the other operational centers of the mission outside the RC-W. In sum, the role of the Italian PRT commander at the time, as far as important, was certainly not comparable with that of the COMISAF.

The second motivation on which the theory levers to explain why the American military leadership serving in ISAF developed a form of innovation while Italy cadre adapted by emulating FET is the presence of solid LL in the range of the American expeditionary experiences and the opposite lack of valuable references on the Italian military background that the commanders could have used to encourage the redesign of the armed forces through AFMUs. The Afghan war proved to be a complex and intricate scenario where to innovate. In the early years of the Afghan war the Allies had completely failed to engage local women, who had thus far been invisible to them. In a country segregated by gender, such as Afghanistan was, this aspect was completely neglected by all the militaries involved in the conflict, determining negative strategic consequences that slowed the accomplishment of the mission. However, following a serious accident where the US Marines let a group of Taliban to flee disguised as women because of cultural restrictions on interacting with the female gender, the need to engage with Afghan women became an imperative for almost all the member states and partners belonging to the Coalition. The setup of a specific all-female military asset required not only a full understanding of what was happening in the field, but also a more rooted, domestic, predisposition to change. The abovementioned incident was not a one-off experienced by the Americans only. At the

time, also the British and the Italian forces, among many others, had weighed against analogous issues with Afghan women, and the US were conscious of it.<sup>144</sup> To put a stop to similar incidents that the Coalition members had been suffering throughout the Afghan war, the COMISAF relied on the American's solid experience with *Team Lioness* in Iraq to originate a special program—the FET—and win access to local Afghan population in the same July 2009. In 2010 there were the preconditions for a military organization shift within the Italian military, but not the conditions for drawing on innovation. In 2010 there was nothing new in the Italian Armed Forces with the idea of women tasked to do engagement with the local population. All Herat PRT commanders between 2010 and 2014 were visibly convinced about the necessity to adopt an integrated approach to fight Taliban insurgency.<sup>145</sup> However, before 2009, there had been some resistance in employing women in the theater.<sup>146</sup> Italy was the last NATO member to open its ranks to women only in September 1999. The presence of female soldiers in the Italian armed forces had required the Italian military organization and their commanders to make both cultural and organizational efforts that had never been faced before. Women presence within the military was accompanied by a renovation of approach in the management of human resources, both in terms of life within the organization and for the aspect related to joint employment while carrying out their institutional tasks. It was especially in these last points that such newness demanded a radical shift in mentality of those who, so far, had opposed the idea of allowing women to enlist to the armed forces, including, first and foremost, commanders.<sup>147</sup> Female soldiers of all the four Italian armed forces had been employed abroad in all operational positions since 2006. The existence of women in the military soon proved to be a major facilitator for approaching the female component of the populations encountered during missions abroad, such as in the Balkan peninsula and Iraq in past years. By establishing direct contact with them, female engagement aimed at facilitating the achievement of the mission objectives.<sup>148</sup> Earlier instances of engagement activities conducted as a team first showed up in “Operation Leone”, held in Southern Lebanon, between 12 April and 9 October 2007.<sup>149</sup> In that circumstance, the 186° Italian Parachute Regiment of Siena (“Folgore”), operating in Ma’raka established the “Team Delta” (“Delta” signifying “Donne”—Women). The operational nucleus was composed only of female military personnel and was grounded for a limited time with the purpose of creating a connection with local women, job opportunities and protecting them.<sup>150</sup> This experience turned out to be extremely valuable and precious for the Italian armed forces, expression, and symbol of openness towards change. However, because of their sporadic nature, these initiatives were never

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<sup>144</sup> Interview with an Italian Officer, online, November 2021.

<sup>145</sup> Interviews with Italian Officers, September, October, and November, online, 2021.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with an Italian Officer, Treviso, Italy, March 2021.

<sup>147</sup> Debora Corbi, *Ufficiale e Gentildonna. Cronaca di una rivoluzione nelle Forze Armate Italiane* (Firenze: Logisma, 2014).

<sup>148</sup> Interviews with Italian Officers, Treviso, Italy, March 2021.

<sup>149</sup> Interview with an Italian Officer, Treviso, Italy, March 2021.

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Italian Officer, online, September 2021.

identified as LL that might be eventually studied and analyzed for potential future circumstances and the attention given to them remained circumscribed to the relative short-time of the mission.

The requirement for a FET was not solicited by the PRT until April 2010, when the Light Infantry Brigade “Taurinense” was deployed in the western area of the region of Afghanistan. The Alpini of Taurinense carried out numerous activities, such as training, consultancy and assistance activities to benefit the Afghan National Army and Afghan institutions, but most of all, local population. In April 2010, the Herat XIV PRT (a Colonel) commander tripled the Italian budget for the realization of long-term projects, mainly devoted to support the most vulnerable groups of the population, namely minors and women. A greater awareness of the role that women could play in the operational context was thus beginning to mature in the new generations of Italian Officers. It is exactly in this context that the FET program was initiated. As proof of this there are the testimonies of some Officers who remembered that during official *shuras* (meetings/ consultations with the elders of the tribes and families, at local ceremonies) between Italian military and locals on a work project, Afghan women felt embarrassed when interacting with male soldiers. “Although we had a female interpreter, they struggled to interact with us. The situation was visibly tense, and conversations did not take place naturally”, an Officer declared.<sup>151</sup> As a result of repeated episodes of this kind, the Colonel requested the only Italian female Officer deployed with the Italian contingent to join following *shuras* to encourage a more spontaneous interaction with local women. “Afghan females appeared immediately more proactive and genuinely inclined to open themselves to Italian female soldiers”, stated a NC Officer.<sup>152</sup> Similar events had occurred frequently and contributed towards giving a significant boost to the creation of the Italian FET program. However, while a similar idea was certainly already taking shape within the Italian PRT commander, a more precise and detailed concept came to life thanks to the US stimulus. In Spring 2010, a specific call for FET was launched by the former COMISAF as part of the population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy. At the end of May, the “Engagement With Afghan Females Directive” was shared by the Americans to the Italian counterpart, providing guidance on how to create and deploy FETs.<sup>153</sup> The program was immediately adopted by a number of contingents deployed in Afghanistan, including Italy. The Italian commander thus picked up existing COMISAF indications on FET from the Kabul command, readapting them to the specific needs of the Herat province. The integration of the FET program was rapid, but its acceptance as a valuable program has not always been easy. In several cases the Italian FET members reported not receiving the support they expected from male colleagues when carrying out their FET duties.<sup>154</sup> Some commanders who followed after held that

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<sup>151</sup> Interview with an Italian Officer, online, September 2021.

<sup>152</sup> Interview with an Italian NC Officer, online, October 2021.

<sup>153</sup> Headquarters International Security Assistance Forces, *Engagement with Afghan Females Directive* (May 31, 2010). Available at: [https://cryptome.org/dodi/100531\\_EngagementwAFFemales\\_ISAF-3.pdf](https://cryptome.org/dodi/100531_EngagementwAFFemales_ISAF-3.pdf) (last accessed: January 5, 2023).

<sup>154</sup> Interviews with Italian Officers, online, September, October, and November 2021.

they have been initially skeptical about the FET program, to regret at after having deployed FET units.<sup>155</sup> Therefore, notwithstanding some resistance in the deployment of FET had occurred, small changes that appears superficial or with zero impact had a role in determining long term effects. In this sense, it would be wrong to believe that little, but relevant signs of openness were dismissed by the Italian military organization. Rather, we should consider them to have provided the foundation for a future more revolutionary transformation. In this regard, it is worth noting that, unlike Lebanon (2006), the Italian contingent documented and valued FET efforts in Afghanistan. In the aftermath of FET deployments, FET team leaders began uploading reports on their operations to a specific, shared, ISAF computer system, the Combined Information Data Network Exchange (CIDNE), allowing the mission to track classified information about FET deployments.

In conclusion, despite Italy's undeniable determination to change in 2010, the Italian PRT commander was not in the position to innovate through AFMUs. The lack of understanding of the mission's progress, along with a few observations on the employment of AFMUs in the past, led him to emulate the US FET practice. The program was created primarily with the participation of the military component, with little or no support from the PRT's civilian equivalent. Yet, there are some optimistic observations that reflect the organization's willingness to explore reform through AFMUs and that will be exhaustively discussed in the coming section. First, the Italian commanders who followed each other were keen on maintaining track on FET activities at both the world and state levels. Second, the FET practice lasted even after the PRT disbanded in 2014. These final two elements, I believe, were critical in setting a significant shift in the minds of Italian future leaders, prompting them to innovate via FAST in Lebanon shortly after.

### **The origination of the FAST program in the UNIFIL mission (2011)**

To date, there exists no study that has addressed the reasoning and origin behind the FAST unit. Here I argue that the FAST program is the result of an unprecedented force structure innovation process initiated by the Italian Armed Forces. To demonstrate this, the paragraph is structured to first delve into the role played by the Italian CIMIC cell commander in Lebanon in 2011 to allow confrontation with the part performed by the Italian PRT commander in Afghanistan. Second, the research illustrates the FAST's origination, aims and scopes to show why this military asset cannot be considered as an "upgraded version" of the FET program and why it instead represents a distinct innovation.

In the late years, Italy has boosted its contribution to national and international security by continuing to increase the amount of military operations abroad.<sup>156</sup> In this context, the country has rapidly turned into the Western largest displayer of boots-on-the-ground in peacekeeping missions,<sup>157</sup> how even the most

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<sup>155</sup> Interview with an Italian Officer, Rome, Italy, August 2021.

<sup>156</sup> Valerio Vignoli, Fabrizio Coticchia, "Italy's Military Operations Abroad (1945–2020): Data, Patterns, and Trends", *International Peacekeeping* (2022):13, DOI: 10.1080/13533312.2022.2054044.

<sup>157</sup> This data was drawn from the UN's Peacekeeping website: [https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/02\\_country\\_ranking\\_55\\_october\\_2022.pdf](https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/02_country_ranking_55_october_2022.pdf) (last accessed January 26, 2023)

committed in the field.<sup>158</sup> The Italian diplomatic and military support to the operations in Lebanon has been widely recognized both at domestic and international levels. Militarily speaking, the country has contributed to UNIFIL since 1979, being the mission's longest-serving unit. Since 2006, Italy has taken a very active position in supporting the new UN mission, mandate and force (UNIFIL II), playing a key role both in terms of mission leadership and troop commitments. On the decision-making level, the mission's command, held by France until February 2007, has, since then, always been Italian run, with a few exceptions during the years 2010-2012, 2016-2018, and 2022-present. Between 2007 and 2023, four of seven Major Generals (Head of Mission and Force Commander, HoM/FC) were Italian. Furthermore, UNIFIL Sector West Headquarters (UNIFIL SW HQs) has always been under the responsibility of an Italian Commander Brigade General (UNIFIL Sector West Commander). Throughout this time, Italy has deeply underwritten a series of key initiatives that have ranged from the pacification of the Blue Line to the deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in the southern part of the country after decades of being absent, from the coordination of tripartite meetings between UNIFIL, the LAF and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to naval and land patrolling, just to mention some. Italian commitment in supporting the mission through peacekeeping activities has often been praised,<sup>159</sup> especially for its CIMIC asset. All this ensured that Italy had a comprehensive understanding of what was happening on the ground, of what might be necessary to improve the operations, and why it was the most suited country to lead the mission.<sup>160</sup>

Although the leading role assumed by Italy in the UNIFIL mission has proved determinant for the origination of the FAST initiative, there's one additional element that allowed the Italian CIMIC cell commander to start a process of innovation: the availability of Italian LL on the FET program and the perspicacity and ability of the Italian commander to also rely on them to devise the FAST initiative. In this section, I claim that these factors have set the context for the country's shift from follower in the ISAF mission to leader in UNIFIL. The success of FET as a unit of engagement is supported by the fact that the Italian program, unlike all the other FET programs existing in Afghanistan (e.g. Romania, the UK, the US etc.)—which began to disband in 2012 and definitely ended in the aftermath of the change of the mission mandate in early 2015—was carried out until 2017, notwithstanding the closure of the Herat PRT on March 31, 2014.<sup>161</sup> This has not resulted in the FET program being included within a specific doctrine (no country in the world has done so), but it has allowed the Italian PRT commanders

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<sup>158</sup> Stefano Costalli, Andrea Ruggeri, "Italy and Its International Relations. Getting Real on Relative Positions", *Italian Political Science* 15/1 (2020): 23. <https://italianpoliticalscience.com/index.php/ips/article/view/131> (last accessed: January 24, 2023).

<sup>159</sup> Manon Derriennic, "Italy's and China's Commitment to Africa's Peace and Security Architecture", in de Guttry, Sommaro, and Zhu (ed.), *China's and Italy's Participation in Peacekeeping Operations: Existing Models, Emerging Challenges* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014): 160-161.

<sup>160</sup> Marina Calulli, "National Prerogatives in Multilateral Peacekeeping: Italy in Lebanese Perception and Rome's Role within UNIFIL II", *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 88 (2014): 202.

<sup>161</sup> Interview with an Italian Officer, online, November 2021.



to recognize it as a valuable practice. This pattern of events shows that the adoption of FET from the Italian military has turned useful to open debate within the Italian Armed Forces on the use of AFMUs in military interventions and to progress further towards the enhancement of the initiative. This was possible also because between 2010 and 2013, the activities conducted by the Italian FETs on the Afghan soil—either positive or negative—have been regularly reported to the to “Analisi, Valutazioni, Ammaestramenti e Correttivi” (AVAC), the national section of the Italian Joint Operations HQs, the Comando Operativo di Vertice Interforze (COVI), devoted to the collection of lessons learned. Although historical records remain classified and not visible to the public realm, they are available to the military personnel, and organizations that engage with militaries, such as the UN. This has meant that, even those soldiers who had not been deployed in Afghanistan who had not supported the Coalition forces in Afghanistan, got to know about what the FET initiative was about and what had been done with FETs in the field. It does not surprise then that when you are faced with an operational need that has to do with local female engagement, one immediately looks at the FET program.

In 2011, a Captain of the Italian Army, head of the CIMIC cell in the base of Naqoura (UNIFIL HQs) between 2011 and 2012 during the takeover of the Mechanised Brigade “Pinerolo” noted that in the course of liaison and engagement activities with local representatives, the answers regarding everyday challenges, lack and exigencies of the population, were mostly given by men and were more or less, always the same.<sup>162</sup> The Officer was pretty aware of the approach employed by FET in Afghanistan towards the local population and of what had not worked properly. On this basis, the CIMIC cell expressed the need for having a clearer picture of the human soil, of the perspective of the whole population (including that of women), which is referred to as the “civil environment”. This need of getting a tailor-made tool to get into the mind of the population is in line with existing studies supporting the Italian unique civil-military approach towards peacekeeping.<sup>163</sup> One might thus think at this point that the foundations under which the FET and the FAST programs were based, and the aims and scopes of the two initiatives were almost the same. The FAST was a military asset that, rightfully, could have been easily mistaken for FET. It in fact found similarities in the American FETs as it was also composed of women only; but it also resembled the Italian version of FETs in that it was also conceived as a program strongly oriented to the support of the population and improvement of life conditions. However, the FAST program differed from the FET on several key aspects. In terms of final aim, while the FET was created to gain access to a part of the population otherwise not engageable, in Lebanon women did not experience gender segregation, the FAST initiative was formed in order to include local women into the mission’s affairs so as to allow the UN personnel (both civilian and military) the right instruments to

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<sup>162</sup> Interview with an Italian Officer, online, September 2022.

<sup>163</sup> Fabrizio, Cotichia, Giampiero Giacomello, “Helping Hands: Civil–Military Cooperation and Italy’s Military Operation Abroad”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 20/3-4 (2009): 606; Chiara Ruffa, *Military Cultures in Peace and Stability Operations. Afghanistan and Lebanon* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Chiara Ruffa, ‘Military Cultures and Force Employment in Peace Operations’, *Security Studies* 26/3 (2017): 391- 422, DOI: 10.1080/09636412.2017.1306393.

furnish support to various activities addressed to the population, counting development cooperation and humanitarian projects. However, it is vital to understand these two programs have been differently conceived, by looking at a number of parameters (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Distinction between the FET and FAST programs

	FET	FAST
<b>Scope</b>	Emulation from the US	Creation from scratch
<b>Scale</b>	Single country (Italy)	All mission contingents
<b>Time-horizon</b>	Short-term (2010-2017)	Long-term (2013- )
<b>Assimilation</b>	Discretion of the commander	Integrated into the command structure
<b>Direction</b>	PRT	Gender Advisory Unit + CIMIC branch

The FET program is something that was devised by the military only to be used by the militaries on a short-term perspective corresponding to a limited time period, the rotational turn (usually 6 months). Traditionally, the military has indeed used a more executive style in order to optimize their impact in a relatively brief deployment term.<sup>164</sup> Once this time had passed, the management of the program was passed to other FET members and so the program restarted from the beginning, with new tasks to be accomplished in new villages depending on the sensibility of the commander, but without terms of continuity. On the contrary, civilian mission personnel typically remain for a longer period of time, giving them more versatility for creating long-term strategies and networks of cooperative connections with local actors and the population.<sup>165</sup> The FAST project was indeed designed by militaries and civilians for the benefit of the population. The idea was that of having a flexible part represented by the military component rotating every few months and a fixed civilian component of the mission (the Gender Advisory Unit Lebanon) that would remain operative on the ground, and that acted as *trait d'union* between the local women and the soldiers rotating throughout the mission. The FAST initiative was thus thought by both the CIMIC cell in Naqoura and by the Gender Advisory Unit to be a long-term program destined to “survive” the six months of the rotational period and rather be stable over time.<sup>166</sup> This is a

<sup>164</sup> Thomas R. Mockaitis, “Reluctant partners: civil–military cooperation in Kosovo”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 15/2 (2004): 38–69. doi:10.1080/0959231042000282625

<sup>165</sup> Ellen Furnari, ‘The role of relationships in the emergence of peace’, in: Peter Verbeek and Benjamin A. Peters (eds.) *Peace ethology: behavioral processes and systems of peace* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 133–152.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with an Italian Officer, online, September 2022; Interview with a UNIFIL Officer, Naqoura, Lebanon,

crucial aspect to be considered, because with the creation of this program there was a comprehensive realization on the part of the military leadership of its own limits in the mission. This is the very reason why the CIMIC cell commander suggested (and obtained) to ‘‘pass the baton’’ to those who can ensure continuity in the field: the UN civilian officials at the HQs. The Gender Affairs Office was thus considered crucial in bridging the gap between frequently rotating international peacekeepers and the local social milieu. The proposal of the FAST project was thus written by a civil-military combination of UNIFIL personnel and then officially forwarded on the UN chain of command in 2012.<sup>167</sup> After authorization, FASTs became fully operational starting from 2013 under the guidance of the Gender Advisory Unit Lebanon, although the FAST program was officialized through a specific Directive only in October 2015. Nowadays (2023), to guarantee the correct implementation of the FAST activities, UNIFIL makes use of two special profiles: the Gender Advisors, two female officers in charge of supporting the commanders with the implementation of a correct gender perspective throughout the mission; and the Gender Focal Points (GFP), specific figures who have the task of translating, on the advice of the Gender Advisors, the policies, directives and mandates pertaining to the perspective of generally in transversal actions on all activities, when and where appropriate.<sup>168</sup> GFPs, both men and women, are indicated to UNIFIL before arriving at SW HQs and SE HQs. Once in the field, they attend a two-days gender training which qualifies them as GFP. The female component of the GFP is recognized as a FAST operator. FAST teams have been active both in Sector East (SE) and Sector West (SW) until the outbreak of COVID-19 epidemic in March 2020. This event pared down to the bone peacekeepers’ opportunities for contact with the local population. As such, external activities conducted outside of the UNIFIL bases supported by the FAST presence were limited, if not frozen, for almost two years. FAST activities within the Joint Task Force Lebanon-Sector West officially started again at the beginning of 2022, when the Cavalry Brigade ‘‘Pozzuolo del Friuli’’ assumed the lead of the mission. However, it has been only at the end of the Summer 2022 that FAST assets have come back in full flow after a general improvement of the status of the pandemic in Lebanon, with the rotation of the Mechanised Brigade ‘‘Aosta’’.

In sum, since 2013, the Italian contingent has been the maximum developer and supporter of the FAST initiative throughout the whole UNIFIL area of responsibility. To ensure the best implementation of the FAST program, the current Italian contingent is taking extra steps, which are mostly under the responsibility of the Italian Gender Advisor (GENAD). These include, for instance, conducting intense awareness-raising and throughout SW’s troops, organizing additional ad hoc insights on FAST and rewriting the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) so that the progress obtained is not lost and can therefore be of support to the subsequent Brigades.<sup>169</sup> These results are consistent with current scholarship

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November 2022.

<sup>167</sup> Interviews with two UN Officials, Naqoura, Lebanon, November 2022

<sup>168</sup> Interview with an Italian Officer, July 2022.

<sup>169</sup> Interview with an Italian Officer, Shama, Lebanon, November 2022.

recognising a characteristic Italian approach in the field which is firmly rooted in CIMIC. Furthermore, the Italian CIMIC commanders are making sure all FAST activities conducted in SW are properly tracked on a specific UN platform—Tech—which allows each BATTs to report on FAST activities performed on the ground. Various aspects of the initiative certainly deserve major attention but there's room for solution in the coming years.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the conditions driving commanders innovate or adapt at operational level. Specifically, when it comes to force structure alterations, the development of AFMUs programs have proved to be particularly significant since they have profoundly reshaped the way armed forces conduct military operations across the world.

To shed light on this point, this research has advanced the commander-centered theory. The framework has investigated (I) the position of leadership as opposed to that of follower; and (II) the possibility/propensity of the commanders to rely on potential of LL or mere observations, identifying four potential outcomes, two of which have been empirically explored.

By exploring the Italian mid-level commanders' experiences in ISAF and UNIFIL, this article has seized the chance to reply to the request for more investigation into the Italian commitment to peacekeeping with specialized units in UN missions.<sup>170</sup> The study has demonstrated how Italy's subordinated position in the Afghanistan, combined with a lack of foundations on which to build change, has penalized the Italian mid-level commander authority in bringing forward creative ideas, allowing him to embrace only an already tested solution offered by the Americans. On the contrary, being the leading country in UNIFIL, along with the availability of reliable LL, has equipped Italian mid-level commanders with a comprehensive view of what was desired on the ground, enabling it to introduce innovation. The study has proposed two more plausible transformation routes, but they remain only conjecture. Therefore, the research leaves other researchers the possibility to complement the theory with further cases.

This analysis has also uncovered some important policy implications. First, the analysis of the Italian case is an excellent illustration of how to overturn the propensity to believe that the tie between inventors and adopters is unbreakable is definitive. In this regard, the essay has shown how today's early adopters might easily become tomorrow's innovators. This demonstrates that emulative adaptation is more than just following the latest trend. Adapting effectively is being able to learn from one's experiences, making the most of them, and gaining new abilities that allow a military to move on to a leadership role. Second, the paper aspires to spark further discussion about the role of mid-level commanders in promoting and shaping transformation within military operations, determining consequential

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<sup>170</sup> Giulia Tercovich, "Italy and UN peacekeeping: constant transformation", *International Peacekeeping* 23/5, (2016): 695, DOI: 10.1080/13533312.2016.1235094.

restructuring not only for a single military organization, but potentially for a number of other armed forces involved in a mission. As such, additional investigation is required to determine whether transformation changes occur in the absence of a prominent involvement and responsibility of mid-level commanders. Third, the question of whether a sensitive understanding of military professionals' behaviors, combined with the presence of reliable lessons learned, can make a significant difference in facilitating successful armed forces' transformation and policy delivery in defense and security remains undertheorized. I conclude that even if the improvement is just marginal, it can have significant beneficial consequences for individuals working with the military and, most importantly, for civilians at the front lines of peacekeeping, stabilization, and COIN, but further examination is required to investigate this aspect. Fourth, the article suggests there's something exceptional with AFMUs. FET and FAST are both operational innovations used to involve the local populace, but in diverse ways. Over the past decade, a growing number of nations have adopted and used these military assets in a broader range of military interventions. Time increasing demands have opened the necessity for AMFUs in military interventions, whose future is inextricably linked to the likelihood of new security challenges. Therefore, it will be crucial to comprehend how the armed services will develop FET and FAST programs and alter the initial idea in response to the ever-changing operational theaters.

## **Ignition Creative: How Italian-Lebanese Military Bilateral Cooperation Sparked the “Domestic CIMIC” Approach**

### **Abstract**

This article recounts military-military contact in the context of bilateral missions, a subject that has received little (if any) attention in Security Studies literature despite its significance for the creation of novel approaches to enhance training and deployment. To this end, the study empirically depicts the interaction of the Italian CIMIC staff with their Lebanese CIMIC partners in the framework of the Italian Bilateral Mission in Lebanon (MIBIL). Specifically, the paper explains how such an interface has generated a meaningful reinterpretation of how to perform CIMIC in the field to use it outside of the expeditionary setting and instead execute it in a homeland scenario (“Domestic CIMIC”). This is explored by showing how the FET practice—a key CIMIC program—was adapted and altered to match the needs of the LAF after being imported from their Italian counterpart. Data for this research were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with Italian and Lebanese CIMIC staff, as well as participant observations during two fieldworks at the LAF CIMIC Directorate of Faiyadiyah in Lebanon between 2022 and 2023.

**Key words:** Domestic CIMIC, FET, LAF, MIBIL, Military Cooperation.

### **Introduction**

Military cooperation has become an increasingly widespread phenomenon across military organizations.<sup>171</sup> In past decades, several studies have inspected the peculiarity of joint training among armed forces, but they present three major limitations.

First, most of these instances have analyzed the coordination and cooperation between (Western) military allies—particularly European countries—sharing standards, command structures, combined capabilities.<sup>172</sup> Nonetheless, cases of exchange of knowledge and training between military partners with diverse policies, action plans, cultural, religious and social differences—that makes relationships between military organizations so compelling—remain the minority and need to be inquired and comprehended.

Second, the bulk of previous research has predominantly inquired instances of cooperation in the context of large, multinational missions, which have made co-existence sometimes forced, even

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<sup>171</sup> Varoglu A., Cakar M. and Basim N., ‘An unusual bi-national military cooperation’, 117.

<sup>172</sup> Anthony King, *The Transformation of Europe’s Armed Forces*, 81; Chin, W., ‘Anglo American military cooperation in Afghanistan 2001–2014’, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 15/2 (2017): 121-142, DOI: 10.1080/14794012.2016.1268790

dictating unfavorable impressions, aggravation, and frictions among contingents.<sup>173</sup> There is, however, an acute desire to explore joint training phenomena in the milieu of more intimate types of military engagement. The latter have thus far gone uncharted but provide a whole other environment to be considered, with relative challenges and facilitations annexed.

Finally, while much emphasis has been placed on co-existence that have led to instances of isomorphism,<sup>174</sup> few studies have highlighted the opposite, namely when joint training has resulted in varying outcomes in the assimilation, development or conduct of practices. In this sense, this article observes how healthy debate and comparison might instill an incentive to reassess the military organizations' specifications and performance in a manner distinct from the other counterpart.

The LAF are a case in point. Since 2015, the Italian Armed Forces have been constantly providing specialized training to the LAF as part of the Italian Bilateral Mission in Lebanon (MIBIL). Starting 2018, personnel from the Multinational CIMIC Group's (MNCG) Mobile Training Teams (MTT) have issued specific preparation on a renowned North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) practice, the FET, to Lebanese CIMIC members. However, in past years, the LAF have voiced their intention to adapt the version of the FET program supplied by their Western partners to deploy FETs in a homeland scenario, rather than an expeditionary one. These changes, I argue, were not without difficulty, but constructive, two-way interface and resolute and steady cooperation eventually yielded beneficial outcomes.

Therefore, this paper offers to explicitly understand the distinctive features of military-military collaboration, that might have a significant influence on the way and setting to which military practices propagate, as well as on their potential advancement.

The interaction of troops with local authorities and a country's populace (CIMIC) is one of most interesting practices to be queried, for two reasons. First, focus on CIMIC is pertinent given the significant distinctions in (I) how soldiers are trained,<sup>175</sup> (II) how they internalize their operational experiences,<sup>176</sup> and (III) how they interact with communities.<sup>177</sup> Second, while there are clear parallels directing militaries on the use of weaponry, rules of engagement (RoE) etc., there is a dearth of references on how to train professional troops to execute their duties with sensitivity towards the local

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<sup>173</sup> Joseph Soeters and René Moelker, *Putting the Collaboration to the Test*, in U. Hagen vom, P. Klein, R. Moelker & J. M. M. L. Soeters (Ed.), *True Love. A study in multinationality within 1 (German/Netherlands) Corps*, Breda & Strausberg: SOWI, (2003): 127-146; Hedlund E., L. Weibull, & J. M. M. L. Soeters (2008). Swedish-Irish cooperation in Liberia. In J. J. M. M. L. Soeters & P. Manigart (Ed.) *Military Cooperation in Multinational Peace Operations*, 154-155, London: Routledge

<sup>174</sup> Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff (Ed.), *The sources of military change* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002)

<sup>175</sup> Fetherstrom A. B., & C. Nordstrom, 'Overcoming Habitus in Conflict Management: UN Peacekeeping and War Zone Ethnography', *Peace & Change*, 20/1 (1995):108

<sup>176</sup> Christoph Harig, Nicole Jenne & Chiara Ruffa, 'Operational experiences, military role conceptions, and their influence on civil-military relations', *European Journal of International Security* 7/1 (2002), 1-17

<sup>177</sup> Duffey T., 'Cultural issues in contemporary peacekeeping', *International Peacekeeping*, 7/1 (2000): 147-148, DOI: 10.1080/13533310008413823

community.<sup>178</sup> Specifically, the paper shows how the CIMIC has been revised to be applied in a context beyond the expeditionary setting and its relative dynamics and challenges. There is hence a need to bridge this theoretical and practical scientific gap by considering the role of CIMIC in homeland scenarios (“Domestic CIMIC”).

The paper provides a two-fold theoretical and empirical contribution to the literature in military cooperation, CIMIC, and, more broadly, to the field of Security Studies. Theoretically, the current study first addresses military exchanges and efforts between armed forces operating in bilateral missions, often neglected by the existing scholarship, as opposed to (NATO and UN) multinational operations, which have served as the most important operational laboratories where CIMIC knowledge and practices have been developed and tested.<sup>179</sup> Second, the research adds to the scholarship on military cooperation to focus on the conditions where CIMIC practice is considered and readapted. In doing so, it presents a first, broad conceptualization of the “Domestic CIMIC” approach. Looking at CIMIC outside of the traditional peacekeeping or peace support mission environment and from a domestic viewpoint uncovers new layers of practice that impact its effectiveness and provides a deeper understanding of the complexities of civil-military interaction.

Empirically, the analysis looks beyond the extensively researched (NATO) CIMIC users, such as Canada, Denmark, and the UK,<sup>180</sup> among many others, to focus on little, yet key actors who are frequently unnoticed by the current body of research. This study thus addresses how the LAF have developed their peculiar reinterpretation of the NATO CIMIC concept in the period from 2009 to 2023 by “Lebanizing” it. It does this by exploring the Italian-Lebanese engagement in the setting of MIBIL, in the Middle East, where many bilateral exercises involving NATO members and non-NATO partners occur. This choice of actors and missions enables me to uncover the roles of CIMIC officers across distinct sites. The situation of Lebanon indeed matters as its approach to CIMIC differs from that of occidental nations, despite its reliance on know-how and training from several Western countries, particularly Italy. LAF, in fact, operates in a unique strategic framework, with distinctive organizational culture, objective, and structure.

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<sup>178</sup> Jelušič, L. & Pograjč, B, ‘Sociological aspects of cooperation among Italian, Hungarian, and Slovenian soldiers in MLF Unit: diversities for better efficiency or not?’. In J. M. M. L. Soeters and P. Manigart (Ed.) *Military Cooperation in Multinational Peace Operations* (2008): 141, London: Routledge

<sup>179</sup> Gordon, S., ‘Understanding the Priorities for Civil-Military Co-Operation (CIMIC)’, *Journal of Humanitarian Assistance* (2001), <https://www.jha.ac/articles/a068.htm>; Noll, J., & S. Rietjens. Learning the Hard Way: NATO’s Civil-Military Cooperation. In M. Webber & A. Hyde-Price (Ed.) *Theorising NATO*. London: Routledge (2015): 231-232

<sup>180</sup> Jackson M. & Gordon S., ‘Rewiring Interventions? UK Provincial Reconstruction Teams and ‘Stabilization’, *International Peacekeeping* 14/5 (2007): 647-661, DOI: 10.1080/13533310701753990; (2008). Rietjens S. J. H., ‘Managing Civil-Military Cooperation Experiences from the Dutch Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan’, *Armed Forces & Society*, 34(2), 173-207; Ryerson, C. , ‘The Pacification of Soldiering, and the Militarization of Development: Contradictions Inherent in Provincial Reconstruction in Afghanistan’, *Globalizations*, 9/1 (2012): 53–71. doi:10.1080/14747731.2012.627720



The research shows that training activities do not always follow a top-down vectorial approach. That is, not everyone who receives training, who theoretically should be in the armed forces in need of assistance, help, or guidance, does so passively. Rather, the concept is reversed, with recipients being those who instead develop and test unique approaches that might potentially bring benefits and novelties. In this sense, throughout the bilateral cooperation process, both parties might learn things from the other that can have a direct impact on their thinking about practices, and manner of working. The case study is based on a range of primary sources, including two fieldwork sessions at the LAF CIMIC Directorate in Faiyadiyah between September 2022 and May 2023, semi-structured interviews, and informal exchanges and discussion with CIMIC staff from both the Italian and Lebanese forces, and participant observation.

Paper findings reveal, first and foremost, that constant, bilateral interaction and cooperation among armed forces can be a valid contributing factor to successful military renovation. Secondly, I observe that constructive comparison may not only produce beneficial outcomes, but also that the fruits of this interface might possibly be extended to other actors interested in the evolving form of the original practice.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section of this research reviews the main literature's shortcomings in joint cooperation and bilateral missions. Second, the article discusses the significance of regular, active and on equal terms engagement among armed forces as a prerequisite for productive dialogue aiming towards the renovation of practices. Third, the paper discusses the significance of bilateral contexts for the revision of the CIMIC practice and introduces the rationale behind the Domestic CIMIC. Fourth, the research illustrates research design and strategies of data collection. Fourth, it delves into MIBIL case study, presenting how the joint training between the Italian and Lebanese CIMIC staff occurred and how the LAF readapted the NATO CIMIC concept to "Lebanize" it through the case of FET. Finally, the paper draws the conclusions and outlines future study directions.

### **Literature review**

Over the past decades, the study of military cooperation has captured plenty of interest. Much emphasis has been posed on Western allies' interaction, particularly European countries' efforts to internationalize the European Union (EU) and NATO dimension by deploying together in a variety of contexts,<sup>181</sup> and building up multinational military units of all sort.<sup>182</sup> Military cooperation has therefore

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<sup>181</sup> Dechesne M., C. Van Den Berg, & J. M. M. L. Soeters, 'International Collaboration under Threat: A Field Study in Kabul', *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 24/1 (2007):25–36. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26275165>; Leonhard N., G. Aubry, M. Casas Santero, & B. Jankowski, 'Military Co- operation in Multinational Missions: The Case of EUFOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina', Strasbourg: SOWI, FORUM International (2008).

<sup>182</sup> Anthony King, 'Towards a Transnational Europe: The Case of the Armed Forces', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 8/3 (2005): 321–40; Anthony King, 'Towards a European Military Culture?', *Defence Studies* 6/3 (2006): 257–77

been predominantly associated with international operations, mainly peacekeeping and peace support missions,<sup>183</sup> whereas military cooperation during exercises remains an enigmatic area, notwithstanding the evident increase of the number of drills in the past thirty years (Wolfley, 2021, 2).<sup>184</sup>

The literature has shown that among the limited references to the latter, international consortiums have proven fallacious or elusive on several occasions, causing mishaps and unanticipated expenses in multinational cooperation. This is the event, for instance, of a few Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) members. These included Indonesia and the Philippines in particular, who preferred to act independently, implementing bilateral counterterrorism initiatives with extra-regional actors, primarily the US, in the aftermath of ASEAN failure to provide an integrated basis for developing meaningful collaboration among its partners following 9/11.<sup>185</sup> Or consider Russia, whose availability in facilitating joint military training to prevent acts of terror and uprisings among adjacent nations<sup>186</sup> has been interpreted as an attempt by a major power to influence some of its partners.

Furthermore, multinational exercises have frequently been seen via an ambiguous light. In some cases, they have been suggested to be amongst the most meaningful signals of a great power's overall support for its security partners for future actions.<sup>187</sup> Some other authors have characterized exercises as significant tools capable of escalating conflicts and raising the likelihood of war.<sup>188</sup>

Certain bilateral settings have also shown a similar hidden purpose. Throughout the years, it has been maintained that Western nations have consistently trained, equipped, and counseled their partners in areas conducive to advancing democracy in post-conflict states,<sup>189</sup> and maintaining relations and legacies in former colonies.<sup>190</sup> However, when it comes to bilateral frameworks, the connotation, as well as the consequences of the training, are typically less negative than multinational exercises.

One of the most striking features of this remark is that bilateral training is frequently set up to allow military units to gain expertise on specialized and ad hoc solutions. This means that, contrary to popular belief, militaries frequently choose a different or modified option rather than mimicking solutions

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<sup>183</sup> Soeters, J. M. M. L. & Manigart P., *Military Cooperation in Multinational Peace Operations* (London: Routledge, 2008)

<sup>184</sup> Wolfley, K. J., 'Military Statecraft and the Use of Multinational Exercises in World Politics', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 17/2 (2021)

<sup>185</sup> Chow, J. T., ASEAN Counterterrorism Cooperation Since 9/11. *Asian Survey*, 45/2 (2021): 302-321

<sup>186</sup> De Haas, M., 'War Games of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization: Drills on the Move!', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 29/3 (2016): 378-406, 404 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2016.1200383>.

<sup>187</sup> McManus, R. W., & M. D. Nieman, 'Identifying the Level of Major Power Support Signaled for Protégés: A Latent Measure Approach', *Journal of Peace Research*, 56/3 (2019): 364-78. doi:10.1177/0022343318808842.

<sup>188</sup> Snyder, G. H., *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Kuo, R., & B. D. Blankenship, 'Deterrence and Restraint: Do Joint Military Exercises Escalate Conflict?', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 66/1 (2022): 3-31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200272111023147>

<sup>189</sup> Harkness, K., 'Security Assistance in Africa: The Case for More', *Parameters*, 45/2 (2015), 13-24, <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00062677/00010>

<sup>190</sup> Wilén, N., 'Tintin is No Longer in the Congo—A Transformative Analysis of Belgian Defence Policies in Central Africa', *Royal Military Academy* (2013. Accessed 30 May, 2023; Eck K. & C. Ruffa., 'Military Training and Decolonisation in the British Empire', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 51/1 (2023): 156-181, 156 DOI: 10.1080/03086534.2022.2084937

offered by the provider,<sup>191</sup> resulting in innovation in training and deployment. In this context, modification of practices may include the revision of procedures that have been traditionally accepted as granted. So far, bilateral partnerships have primarily focused on important and sensible areas of transnational policing, such as agreements and training intended at strengthening bilateral border security cooperation, encouraging intelligence sharing among partners,<sup>192</sup> bolstering maritime surveillance,<sup>193</sup> developing a counter terrorist agenda<sup>194</sup> among many others.

Among revised practices is CIMIC. To date, both in fact and academically, the focus of CIMIC has been primarily on the modern expeditionary international context (Kristoffersen, 2006; Rietjens, 2008; Armstrong, 2011),<sup>195</sup> in a bid to tackle the issues presented by unresolved dispute between opposing forces (Kasselmann, 2012, 18). Therefore the literature has not managed to explore how the CIMIC practice has been rethought to be employed in domestic scenarios, and tested in extraordinary conditions. The next section will illustrate how the intimate setting of the bilateral mission has proved critical for the revision of the traditional CIMIC practice to develop the Domestic CIMIC approach.

### **The relevance of the bilateral framework in rethinking the established CIMIC practice**

The redesign of existing practices in two-side frameworks has been poorly investigated thus far. And yet, bilateral settings provide optimal net value addition to armed forces (both diffuser and recipients) to prosper and evolve. One of the most significant and intriguing reconceptualization of practices observed in bilateral setups concerns the conduct of CIMIC activities.

A proper information transfer on one side and following assimilation on the other require a less strict setting consenting to a greater degree of communication and interaction among specific national components. This is something, I argue, that multinational exercises—which may include over 100,000 troops—can hardly provide. The right scale for this exchange is thus at bilateral level, that creates a more relaxed and intimate environment among friendly forces; namely, at company or, at most, battalion size. The tangible fruit of processes held at this density of personnel are pathways established over time having a periodic character and providing continuity over years, meant at cultivating and strengthening confidence between nations and mutual trust.

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<sup>191</sup> DiMaggio, P.J. & W. Powell., 'The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields', *American Sociological Review*, 48/2 (1983): 602–22

<sup>192</sup> Acharya, A., Regional Military-Security Cooperation in the Third World: A Conceptual Analysis of the Relevance and Limitations of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). *Journal of Peace Research*, 29/1 (1992): 7–21, 13

<sup>193</sup> Yuzava T., 'ASEAN in the Era of Japan-China Tensions: Diplomatic Opportunities or Strategic Dilemmas?'. in A. Chong (Ed.) *International Security in the Asia-Pacific Transcending ASEAN towards Transitional Polycentrism*, Palgrave (2018):149-173, 157.

<sup>194</sup> Bachmann, J. & J. Hönke, 'Peace and Security as Counterterrorism? The Political Effects of Liberal Interventions in Kenya', *African Affairs*, 109/434 (2010): 97–114, <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adp069>

<sup>195</sup> Kristoffersen, L., Soldiers or saints?: Norwegian civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) in Afghanistan, *Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies* (2006): 1-32; Rietjens S. J. H, 'Providing Relief. The Case of the Dutch Engineers in Kosovo', In M. T. I. B. Bollen & S. Rietjens (Ed.) *Managing Civil-Military Cooperation. A 24/7 Joint Effort for Stability* (2008): 89-107, London: Routledge

Bilateral contexts, I argue, also offer a perceptibly higher level of knowledge than multinational exercises.<sup>196</sup> Two-sided events afford a unique opportunity to revise existing approaches, to design a case-by-case approach tailored to the recipients' requirements, to train partner soldiers to use specific weapons, equipment, and assistance to precise units, professionalizing local forces for ad hoc circumstances. This suggests that the diffusers provide recipients with not just training facilities, but also theoretical and practical knowledge to fit individual operational contexts' requirements. The transfer of the CIMIC capacity accurately depicts this condition.

CIMIC is a practice that was originally intended to be used specifically abroad. The aim is to contribute to the more effective achievement of larger military goals through close cooperation with civilian actors. To satisfy such demand, CIMIC military professionals have raised the need for additional background and practical knowledge,<sup>197</sup> which must be developed either by practice or through specialized exercises and forms of training.<sup>198</sup> Regardless, multinational environments have used an improvised, pragmatic, and ad hoc approach to civil-military collaboration.<sup>199</sup> According to early research, the training that CIMIC officers have got in past years has frequently proved sometimes insufficient considering the complexity of the responsibilities that they eventually have to face when deploying. The majority of the training has mostly been based on simple problem-solving exercises aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the military operation,<sup>200</sup> while more basic and theoretical issues, on the other hand, remained unaddressed.<sup>201</sup> Some CIMIC personnel previously deployed in the UN setting had no specific training at all.<sup>202</sup> In this regard, multinational frameworks have often proven unsatisfactory in providing CIMIC officers with the necessary training to operate on the ground.

Recently, the CIMIC practice has broadened its scope of action by being applied on a domestic level as well. "Domestic CIMIC"—namely implementing CIMIC within national borders—in contrast to the standard NATO CIMIC approach, is part of a national mission, pointed at the local civil environment

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<sup>196</sup> Simon S.W., 'Theater Security Cooperation in the US Pacific Command: An Assessment and Projection', *NBR Analysis*, 14/2 (2003).

<sup>197</sup> Adler, E., & V. Pouliot., 'International Practices: Introduction and Framework', In E. Adler & V. Pouliot (Ed.) *International Practices*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2011): 3–35.

<sup>198</sup> Ankersen, C., *The Politics of Civil-Military Cooperation: Canada in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Furnari, E., 'Creating Knowledge in and about Conflicted Contexts: How Peacekeepers Know What Works. *Thammasat Review* 18/1 (2015): 102–127

<sup>199</sup> Currey, C. J., *A New Model for Military/Nongovernmental Relations in Post-conflict Operations* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2003)

<sup>200</sup> Ankersen, C., *The Politics of Civil-Military Cooperation: Canada in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan*, 117–119;

<sup>201</sup> Ankersen, C., *The Politics of Civil-Military Cooperation: Canada in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan*, 114–123

<sup>202</sup> Ruffa, C., 'What Peacekeepers Think and Do: An Exploratory Study of French, Ghanaian, Italian, and South Korean Armies in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon', *Armed Forces & Society*, 40/2 (2014): 199–225, 208

and, indirectly, the country's stability, resilience, and interest. As a result, it is a practice evolving in response to shifting national objectives as well as the problems provided by an extremely unpredictable, interconnected, and complex security environment. Domestic CIMIC functions in the area of last resort, which means that national forces support the government institution to the government's effectiveness. As a result, everything the military does is in accordance with national and international law and fits within a "All-of-Government" strategy, in collaboration with ministries and government entities.

Domestic CIMIC is more complicated than international CIMIC because of the personal bonds that CIMIC operators have with the local populace. This requests CIMIC operators to use softer or gentler skills than regular CIMIC troops. I suggest that the presence of a solid, bilateral mission involving friendly forces offers the ideal conditions for developing and organizing this specialized training. Indeed, a dual setup consents instructors to expose students to higher levels of complexity, deconstructed cultural stereotypes, and unpredictability<sup>203</sup> rather than providing easy solutions and clear-cut commands on how to relate with the population. I expect training programs to be carried out in dedicated CIMIC centers and that material passed down from senior CIMIC personnel will motivate students to improve their own training standards or gain specialized skills. Bilateral training therefore allows both parties to share ideas, exchange perspectives, and learn about diverse cultures, traditions, and languages. Participation in training, educational courses and programs, and seminars diluted over time exposes all military personnel involved to the viewpoints of their foreign military counterparts on current regional and worldwide security concerns, trends, and practices. This helps, I argue, change minds or, at least, provides a better regard for other countries' perspectives, which fosters mutual understanding. In this sense, I also finally expect that the officers' operational experience will influence the design and development of the bilateral training through their comments and suggestions.

In this section I have elucidated the increasing value of bilateral settings in rethinking existing practices. After briefly introducing the study design, the paper will discuss how Lebanese and Italian CIMIC specialists collaborated to build a new CIMIC concept in the framework of MIBIL to assist the LAF in meeting its internal demands.

### **Research design, method and strategy of data collection**

To address the research inquiry, namely, to better analyze bilateral military interaction and how they can lead to the origination of a Domestic CIMIC approach, the study uses a qualitative method. This investigation was conducted during a nine-month period, that is, from September 2022 to May 2023. The core of the research was structured into two independent phases at the LAF CIMIC Directorate in Faiyadiyah, Lebanon.

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<sup>203</sup> Albro, R., & B. Ivey, *Cultural awareness in the military: Developments and implications for future humanitarian cooperation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 11

The first fieldwork was carried out in September 2022, allowing me to familiarize with the LAF and their understanding of CIMIC. In that respect, I completed semi-structured interviews with the Lebanese CIMIC personnel to gain a deeper understanding of the rationale behind a Domestic CIMIC concept. The second fieldwork was instead performed in April and May 2023 as part of a specific FET course and training activities issued by a MNCG's MTT in which selected CIMIC personnel from all the CIMIC Directorates in Lebanon participated. In this framework, I attended the FET course as an auditor, doing observation. I had constant, direct and informal exchanges and discussion with the CIMIC staff of the LAF CIMIC Directorate and the MNCG, who provided extensive explanations of the operations conducted and clarifications whenever necessary.

To increase validity of the study, I employed both methodological and data source triangulation. This data has been supplemented with integrative material furnished by MIBIL HQ and LAF CIMIC Directorate HQ, which include slides, unclassified documents, video, and pictures. Finally, the CIMIC members of the LAF CIMIC Directorate and the MNCG reviewed the research to confirm the findings.

### **The need for a Domestic CIMIC approach in Lebanon: the case presentation**

In recent decades, Lebanon has been profoundly affected by a multitude of events that have compromised the country's stability and security as never before. The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and the Israeli-Lebanese conflict (1948-present) have left the Land of the Cedars in ruins. The Palestinian and Syrian refugee migratory flows that erupted during the Palestine War (1947-1949) and the Syrian Civil War (2011-present) have added supplementary distress to the nation; today (2023) ranked first for number of hosting refugees per capita—approximately 1.5 million. The 2008 tensions between the pro-government and opposition parties also deeply led to much social and political instability, pushing the country to the brink of a new civil war. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with the 2020 ammonium nitrate explosion at the Beirut port, have exacerbated the situation. Major fuel shortages have resulted in widespread electricity blackouts, lasting up to 23 hours per day, keeping large portions of the country in darkness for long periods. During the last three years, the economic crisis has culminated in severe inflation (around 270%) and the Lebanese pound lost 95% of its value. As a result, consumer goods prices have risen in a country where vital commodities such as water, electricity, gasoline, and pharmaceuticals are now all sold directly in dollars. All this has led to irreversible combinations of events, including economic depression, social unrest, and policy inaction, which have resulted in one the worst humanitarian and financial disasters in the country's history.

These circumstances also heavily hurt the Army. And yet, despite the challenging circumstances that exist amid the numerous fluid variables, the LAF maintains a steady and consistent presence in the country. Today, LAF's core mission is national defense, aimed at neutralizing any internal or foreign threats or attacks on national security, along with ensuring internal stability. However, the LAF also tremendously contributes to the country's social development efforts and relief operations, so long as

they do not interfere with the armed forces' capacity to safeguard the country. For all these reasons, both the international community and the local population regard the LAF as the country's protector and the glue holding the multifaceted mosaic of cultures and confessions together.

To deal with this complex picture, the LAF have consistently relied on the support of external countries in recent years. Through UNIFIL, first and foremost, but also via specific bilateral initiatives aimed at developing and strengthening some specific capacities and better interacting with the Lebanese population providing it its whole support. In this framework, MIBIL, established in 2015, has indicated Italy's firm commitment to support the LAF in the development of CIMIC capabilities. Throughout the past eight years, Lebanese CIMIC staff and CIMIC personnel from MNCG's MTTs have worked tirelessly to make the Lebanese CIMIC Directorate a flagship of LAF's effort to contribute to operations planning and a key element in making the Lebanese society more resilient. The coming sections will provide the historical background of the Italian-Lebanese interface within the context of MIBIL to show how the FET practice concept was generated inside the CIMIC concept and how they revised it to match their needs.

#### **Paving the path for a promising bilateral cooperation: the revision of the Western CIMIC concept and the development of Domestic CIMIC approach (2009-2018)**

To understand how the LAF came out with the advancement of a Domestic CIMIC approach it is necessary to retrace the chain of events that caused the Italian and Lebanese Armed Forces to cooperate bilaterally on the CIMIC capacity.

In 2009, the first LAF approach with the CIMIC concept took place within the multinational setting of the UNIFIL Mission. Over the years, UNIFIL has in fact emerged as a key player in backing the LAF in maintaining peace and stability in southern Lebanon, as well as enhancing cooperation in securing humanitarian access to civilian populations. When the hostilities that had erupted in southern Lebanon began to ease the Italian former UNIFIL Commander, Maj. General Claudio Graziano, discussed the idea of establishing a Lebanese CIMIC Center within the UNIFIL operation area with the LAF, in the person of the LAF Commander, General Jean Kahwaji. The plan of equipping itself with a CIMIC capacity was appreciated and welcomed by the LAF, which, in 2010, established a modest CIMIC section in the South Litani Sector (SLS). Military interaction among Italian and Lebanese troops at UNIFIL therefore played an important role in providing the LAF with early guidance on how to set up a comprehensive CIMIC capacity since the beginning. However, the vast, international, and articulated system of UNIFIL was not the perfect context for the transmission and absorption of a practice as complicated both theoretically and practically. Rather, a more confined, intimate dimension was required, with an exclusive focus on knowledge distribution and accompanying practice development. With this in mind, the Center was assigned to a Lebanese officer who was dispatched to Italy to receive training at the MNCG. The goal was to increase LAF training in the area of CIMIC.

Following the two-side training, the LAF created a limited CIMIC plan between 2011 and 2012, and in 2012, they opened a second unit under the LAF HQ's Operational Staff, within the Information Directorate. The LAF founded a CIMIC Directorate in Beirut in 2015, and the doctrinal formulation cycle began. The two sections of the SLS and the Information Directorate were deleted, while the CIMIC Directorate in Beirut and the three Regional CIMIC Sectors remained.

Thus, in 2010, the LAF acquired NATO's current CIMIC doctrine from its Italian equivalent, which had been significantly influenced by recent missions in Iraq and Afghanistan and was largely focused on a population-centric approach. As a result, LAF CIMIC personnel began to operate using CIMIC in the Western fashion. However, the LAF swiftly understood that they could not employ CIMIC in the same style that the rest of the world had. Accordingly, the 2002 NATO CIMIC doctrine (CM 411/1) was created to support NATO members in the planning and execution of military outreach overseas. And yet, during bilateral interfaces, the current NATO definition proved incompatible with LAF criteria for at least two reasons. First, Lebanon, as a non-NATO member, did not share the duties and obligations of membership, nor the tiers of command at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels, with the allies. Second, unlike NATO member states, which project their CIMIC efforts entirely abroad, the LAF only use their CIMIC capabilities within their boundaries. The self-explanatory choice to adapt the previously existing NATO's CIMIC model for within-nation employment followed. According to the members of the Lebanese CIMIC Directorate, the NATO CIMIC concept needed to be revised and "Lebanized". To address this challenge, the LAF began formalizing a cooperation of the Italians to develop a varied CIMIC capacity with the at the end of 2014.

### **Steppingstones towards bilateral cooperation: the development of the FET (CIMIC) program within the LAF (2018-2022)**

As observed, the conceptual advancement of a doctrinal approach was insufficient for the LAF efficient deployment of the CIMIC capability on the ground. To execute a functional Domestic CIMIC, the LAF are also required to incorporate practical instruction into the training.

In 2015, MIBIL was established in support of the LAF and National Security Forces personnel, as part of the wider context of the initiatives carried out by the UN's "International Support Group for Lebanon" (ISG). The LAF specifically requested CIMIC training among the different training options offered by the mission. Since then, rotational Italian MTTs of the MNCG serving under the mission have released customized training to the LAF. These include, among other things, FET training, which was presented for the first time in 2017 and occurred every year from 2018 to 2023, with the exception of 2020 due to the pandemic.

After three FET courses in 2021, the Italian and Lebanese counterparts agreed to formulate a new training program for 2022, as the LAF announced a desire to begin training Lebanese CIMIC instructors to conduct future courses without relying on Western nations.



Between May and June 2022, an MTT composed of four MNCG educators assisted the LAF CIMIC Directorate by running five courses targeted at enhancing the skills of LAF personnel. The first two modules consisted of the CIMIC Tactical Operator and Staff Worker courses, with the goal of providing LAF CIMIC staff with the expertise required to develop Core Functions, including the development and assessment of Quick Impact Projects (QIP), at both tactical and staff levels. The third module, CIMIC Liaison, provided participants with the opportunity to practice advanced strategies of empathetic communication and negotiation. The fourth module, the program of the Trainers (ToT) method, was designed to allow participants to mature capabilities in quality of CIMIC trainers throughout the advanced phase of the program. The last module concluded with the FET training, which gave the LAF CIMIC Staff with the tools needed to incorporate a gender perspective across the various phases of a military operation.

During the first two weeks of April 2023, the CIMIC employees of the MNCG and of the LAF CIMIC Directorate undertook a Training Need Analysis, a brainstorming process to understand the LAF needs and build an appropriate FET course. The course, titled “Enhanced FET Course”, was conceived as a “puzzle” course by Italian and Lebanese CIMIC professionals and was scheduled from May 25 to 27, 2023 at the LAF CIMIC Directorate in Faiyadiyah. Due to the economic crisis, it was agreed to hold the first FET pilot course in three days, with the possibility of extending it to five days or two weeks in the future. This situation, however, presented a first, major test for the Italian instructors, who were compelled to evaluate the planned five-day curriculum and reduce it into three. Additionally, the training has been made available to a restricted number of Lebanese military personnel, all of whom are Army soldiers. On the contrary, CIMIC competence inside the LAF remains the sole domain of the Army.

This is a first indication that the Lebanese approach to CIMIC differs from the classic NATO CIMIC strategy where the CIMIC specialty is accessible to all military forces. The instructors for the MNCG squad were, in fact, all Army NC officers ranging from OR-6 to OR-9, while the team was led by an OF-5 from the Navy.

Since the first day of the training, the interaction between the Italian and Lebanese CIMIC experts was constant, although complex in some cases. We know that linguistic barriers have been frequently identified as a major practical hurdle in bilateral relationships.<sup>204</sup> The Italian-Lebanese interface in MIBIL is a confirmation of this. The FET course started to be delivered in English, with some limited interventions in Italian when needed, and was immediately translated into Arabic by a local interpreter. Because many attendees did not know English at all, the entire course was conducted in simultaneous translation, which extended learning times and complicated matters in an already constrained amount of time.

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<sup>204</sup> Storey I., ‘China’s Bilateral Defense Diplomacy in Southeast Asia’, *Asian Security*, 8/3 82012), 287–310, 287

The course also had a concentration of subjects, some of which were extremely distinct, but all were related, with the goal of providing an overall overview of what a team leader or FET member should know. The first day began with a course introduction, an outline of the LAF direction, and an emphasis on gender awareness. The second day includes lectures on FET engagement, mission planning, communication, mediation, and negotiation, as well as a role-playing exercise. The last day concluded with FET CIMIC activities (evaluation, reports, and projects) and an evaluation test.

The course was designed by the Italian CIMIC staff in concert with the Lebanese to provide the LAF with a mechanism for double validation. On the one hand, throughout the three-day course, participants were given daily assessments in which they could voice their doubts, problems, ideas, and evaluate the lectures and trainees' work during the course. The assessment questionnaire was provided by MIBIL and focused on a number of key aspects, including a section devoted to confrontation on potential elements to be deleted, revisited, integrated or added from scratch. On the other hand, the course ended with a critical phase called "After Action Review" (AAR), meant to determine what went well, what did not, and what might be changed or improved to meet LAF CIMIC needs. According to the MNCG way of doing, the time necessary to conduct ARR requires one day, but can be shortened or lengthened according to some specific requirements. This procedure was also followed to assess the 2023 FET course. At the end of the activities, the MNCG team and the Head of the Evaluation and Studies Department of the LAF CIMIC Directorate gathered to assess the results of participants and the progress of the course. The fact that the course held was a pilot one, consented active and constructive discussion on the criticalities and challenges emerged. In this context, a broad spectrum of topics was addressed to identify points of convergence and divergence in order to create a beneficial Lebanese FET course in the future.

This section has explained how the FET idea was brought into the LAF domain and gradually changed to meet the demands of the LAF through constant interaction between the LAF and the MNCG CIMIC experts. The next section will discuss how the partnership of the Italian and Lebanese armed forces on CIMIC prompted them to consider the adaptation of the practice on a selection of facets so as to achieve the intended effect.

### **Outcomes of bilateral cooperation: the "Lebanization" of the NATO FET program (2023)**

The discussion phase between the CIMIC personnel of MNCG and the LAF CIMIC Directorate was really the most critical step of the 2023 FET course and the culmination of a four-year FET bilateral training program. Such a comprehensive and precise adjustment would have been difficult to implement outside of a bilateral framework, which allows for much flexibility.

The first remarks raised was the length of the course. The pilot course lasted three days due to the economic situation. Because of this condition, the MTT aggressively shortened the initial five-day program, sacrificing critical insights on the areas of FET CIMIC concept, FET media engagement,

communication, mediation, and negotiation, and role play exercises. However, the LAF CIMIC Director expressed his desire to spend additional time on this course and organize it on five working days, maybe expanding it to two weeks in the near future if situation allows.

The second point raised was the idea of developing an accurate explanation of what (LAF) FET stands for the purpose to encompass it in the LAF CIMIC Doctrine. This is particularly pertinent considering that, according to the LAF CIMIC Directorate, future FET will be made up of CIMIC female officers who are only going to serve in their own country. As a result, it is necessary to define what a FET is, how and from which profiles they should be built, what special talents FET members should have, and what it should accomplish on the ground. Thus, CIMIC experts from the MNCG and LAF also agreed on the need to properly determine which areas will especially require and benefit from FET, as well as which projects and activities will benefit the female component the most.

The third and fourth ideas were about revamping the course curriculum by putting greater emphasis on individual lectures. The third factor examined was the necessity to increase the time spent on communication training from the current four hours to a whole day. To properly develop such a critical ability, the LAF CIMIC Directorate will attempt to use a dual strategy. On the one hand, it is considering potentially supplementing the training provided by military instructors with the skills of certain communication experts from the Lebanese academic world. On the other hand, the one-day communication training will be divided into three hours of lectures followed by three hours of practical exercises.

The fourth proposal involved the need for broadening the lecture on mediation, which is a method for conflict resolution whose purpose is to urge disputing parties to explore and find a solution. This emerged as one of the most obvious differences between the Italian (NATO) FET program and the Lebanese one. The mediator is envisioned as a neutral third person who, after identifying the parties' interests, assists them in reaching an acceptable solution or formulates a plan for conciliation himself. Despite the fact that its Doctrine identifies impartiality as the essential standard for all Peace Support Operations (PSOs), NATO as an organization—and hence its members—cannot be viewed as a neutral actor (Donald, 2003, 431).<sup>205</sup> On the contrary, the LAF is seen as the ideal mediator since they intervene in their own nation and communicate with their own people. Both the Lebanese and Italian CIMIC staff agreed that the mediation module needed to be improved in order to train military personnel on how to properly deal with the civil domain in order to avoid replications and help civilian actors in assisting the populace.

The fifth factor underlined the necessity for organic educators with a strong female presence. Because the FET activities are aimed at women, the need for a female perspective throughout the course was expressed, as was the need to integrate lectures with additional practical examples and lessons learned

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<sup>205</sup> Donald, D., 'Neutral Is Not Impartial: The Confusing Legacy of Traditional Peace Operations Thinking', *Armed Forces & Society*, 29/3 (2003), 415-448, 431

in the past, acquired from experiences gained by foreign partners in the context of previous expeditionary missions.

This section delved into the issues that the LAF believed were essential for addressing with their Italian CIMIC counterpart when trying to build a Lebanised FET program that would meet their demands. The last part will describe the LAF CIMIC Directorate's strategy for the coming four years, including how they plan to progressively disengage from the Italians and pilot autonomously.

### **Future directions in bilateral cooperations: the LAF Domestic CIMIC vision: 2022-2026**

LAF vision and intended course of action for the coming years are clear and ambitious. Nowadays LAF CIMIC activities represent a consistent component of the LAF effort on the ground, which are expected to increase in the coming years. This will require the Lebanese staff to educate and train a large number of military personnel to enhance the LAF CIMIC capacity. By 2023, the LAF CIMIC Directorate has trained 350 CIMIC operators around the country and completed over 266 CIMIC projects benefiting the whole local community. All of this has been made possible by the 2019-2022 National Action Plan (NAP), which has paved the way for projects that are more sensitive to gender issues and more focused in providing the soldiers with an education that is imprinted on understanding the complex and various realities of the Lebanese society and realizing that women and men have different needs and points of view. In 2022, the LAF devised a new NAP for the years 2022-2026. Furthermore, there is a desire to move from a condition of limited capacity to one of seeking excellence status. The LAF CIMIC Directorate intends to serve as a reference point for Middle Eastern countries, as well as a CIMIC hub for all those countries interested in developing a Domestic CIMIC capacity.

To meet these two objectives, the LAF CIMIC Directorate proposes to implement a two a two-fold strategy that will allow it to expand its capability both locally and internationally.

First, the LAF CIMIC Directorate is searching for a broader area to relocate to have specific spaces to host CIMIC courses destined to the CIMIC professionals from around the country. In this sense, the LAF CIMIC Directorate is also assessing the possibility to extend future CIMIC courses to all LAF branches, as Italy and other NATO allies have done. CIMIC courses might also be attended by civilian and integrated with the point of view of experts in specific field and representatives of Governmental Organizations (GOs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), International Organizations (IOs) etc., taking part to the activities as participants, or eventually, experts/instructors. On this premise, during the FET pilot course, certain individuals from the local academic sector were requested to assist the lectures by taking notes with the aim to be in support of the LAF in future courses.

Second, the LAF CIMIC Directorate is planning to usher in a new era of CIMIC courses, with a strategic shift in their conduct. The Directorate is considering offering all its future courses in Arabic. At first sight, this may appear to be a minor issue. Nonetheless, after observing directly how the 2023 FET course was handled, it seems evident how much linguistic barriers among countries might slow and

complicate knowledge transmission among them. The idea of switching from English to Arabic will thus allow access to the courses not only to all LAF personnel who do not properly master the English language, but will also facilitate communication and sharing of know-how among Arab countries who, although speaking different dialects of Arabic, share a common linguistic root. This aspect is significant because it demonstrates a very important and innovative element of novelty introduced by the LAF, indicating that they have not been a passive, receiving actor, but rather an active one oriented towards progress and improvement of a practice such as CIMIC, which has to date remained available to a limited number of actors despite its dynamism.

In terms of the course calendar, the LAF plans to take the FET course first on their own, followed by the basic, intermediate, and advanced courses. The Lebanese CIMIC Directorate is considering using FETs to deal with multiple and divergent operational, geographical challenges, especially—though not exclusively—at the borders. According to the data collected, FET capabilities should turn especially relevant in those conservative cross-sections of the society. Following the footsteps of the American model, FET will be formed entirely of female troops. This has been extensively debated with the Italians, who instead use a form of FET with a female component, implanted in a Mixed Engaged Team (MET). Deploying women-only units confirms that military innovations tend to be amended according to the needs of their new adopters. However, to date, a proper definition of how the FET program should work has yet to be finalized and there is no operational FET on Lebanese ground.

The Lebanese stance to FET differs from that of other countries accustomed to FET, such as Italy. Future FET activities carried out by the Lebanese CIMIC Directorate would be aimed specifically towards assisting native women. According to the LAF CIMIC Director, there is a consistent segment of the female population, whose voice and demands deserve to be listened to carefully. “Our society is not Afghan, nor European, but presents some pockets of population who are close in on themselves, where men cannot enter. Women, on the contrary, can”, he said.

The choice of right off focusing on women has its own strategic explanation. Lebanon is currently undergoing one the most severe global crises since the mid of the Nineteenth century, with a catastrophic and unprecedented impact on the Lebanese population. The overall situation, which has deteriorated since 2006 has deeply affected the psychological state of many young Lebanese women and children, more than ever in southern and eastern regions. This generation of people, like the ones before them, has been subjected to unimaginable traumatic experiences. These include, among other things, the loss of parents, relatives and friends, the devastation of homes, displacement, lack of education and professional opportunities. If not handled, these traumas can lead to additional severe mental repercussions for young people, particularly males, such as isolation, social exclusion, and violence, which can have a significant influence on Lebanese society. In this setting, women—as mothers, sisters, daughters, and so on—may have a significant “warming effect” on the younger generation, defining huge ramifications for key social sectors such as educational, cultural, and working areas, as well as the country’s future.

In the LAF mindset, it appears that a clear message has emerged: Lebanese youth will play a critical role in sustaining and rebuilding the country, and the LAF must be at the forefront of efforts to preserve Lebanese peace. To that aim, while CIMIC programs are broader in scope, FET projects should be designed to raise a specific segment of society: women, and thereby their children. There will still be a chance to discuss the role of women in the Lebanese FETs, as well as the advancement of the Domestic CIMIC concept, in the next years in the framework of the MIBIL, which is intended to continue to assist the LAFs for some time.

## **Conclusion**

Cooperation between military organizations is becoming more researched, although there are still many aspects to investigate. This study suggests that previous research has mostly focused on military cooperation within a wide international context. Smaller and more personal environments, on the other hand, have received less attention, to the point where the traits and benefits that bilateral circumstances may bring in the sharing and refinement of new practices are essentially unknown. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to demonstrate the factors that make the bilateral frameworks an excellent forum for sharing, growth, and improving existing military practices.

This paper concentrates on the CIMIC practice, which has advanced significantly in the recent decade. As it covers a wide variety of actions aimed at the local community, CIMIC has an essential role in military interventions, with a focus on foreign missions. The research has incorporated current literature on military cooperation by demonstrating that bilateral scenarios provide the military with a solid foundation in which to extend and progress the CIMIC practice.

Empirically, the article has made use of the MIBIL instance, which displays the close collaboration between the Italian and Lebanese CIMIC branches. The personal and private placement allowed both the supplier (the MNCG personnel) and the beneficiaries (Lebanese professionals from the CIMIC Directorate) to keep collaborating on the CIMIC concept and debate how to optimize it to adapt it to the needs of the Lebanese.

We see that good talks on the necessity for LAF have resulted in a severe revision of the practice, to the point where the CIMIC idea has been entirely redesigned to be employed not internationally, but rather domestically. Furthermore, it is worth noting that LAF, as the recipient, was not the only actor to adapt and adjust its style of operating. Following discussions with the LAF, MIBIL personnel, where the MNCG staff operates, has reassessed the importance of CIMIC in the region and is considering establishing a permanent CIMIC section to ensure that it is always available within the mission.

This study's goal is not to generalize its findings. It will be difficult since each country is going to amend existing procedures to meet their own needs. This is especially true if they modify processes to apply them on their own turf. However, we may be able to infer certain generic elements to indicate some future inquiry avenues.

The CIMIC concept, in particular, has shown to be viable yet remains largely on track. Much study is needed to determine what Domestic CIMIC is and how it may be implemented on the ground. This is particularly pertinent because, while the LAF is the well-recognized pioneer of the Domestic CIMIC idea, it is not the only armed force employing CIMIC in the homeland. Ukraine and Georgia are also reconsidering the CIMIC idea by creating specific CIMIC forces to act in their own countries. As a result, it will be important not only to observe how these countries are reshaping existing CIMIC doctrine (or developing their own) to understand their definition of Domestic CIMIC; it will also be critical to present a comparative study on those countries performing Domestic CIMIC to illuminate the nature of eventual convergent evidence or distinct use of this practice.

To summarize, a thorough understanding of the actions of CIMIC operators, particularly those engaging in their own nation and dealing with their own populace, is strongly advised. This is especially poignant at a time when several of the countries indicated above are participating in sensitive operations that include the full participation of their own population. Much study is required to identify the full potential of domestic CIMIC, as well as its challenges and ramifications.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** List of conducted interviews<sup>206</sup>

<b>Interviewee code</b>	<b>Position and organization of the interviewee</b>	<b>Place and date</b>
Interview 1	OF-1, US Army	Online, February 2021
Interview 2	OR-4, USMC	Online, February 2021
Interview 3	OR-3, USMC	Online, March 2021
Interview 4	OR-5, US Army	Online, March 2021
Interview 5	OF-5, Italian Army	Treviso, March 2021
Interview 6	OF-4, Italian Army	Treviso, March 2021
Interview 7	OF-3, Italian Army	Online, March 2021
Interview 8	OF-1, Italian Army	Treviso, March 2021
Interview 9	OR-9, Italian Army	Treviso, March 2021
Interview 10	OR-4, Italian Army	Treviso, March 2021
Interview 11	OF-3, Spanish Army	Online, May 2021
Interview 12	OF-3, German Army	Online, May 2021
Interview 13	OF-3, British Army	Online, June 2021
Interview 14	OF-2, British Army	Online, July 2021
Interview 15	OR-5, US Army	Online, July 2021
Interview 16	OF-5, Italian Army	Rome, August 2021
Interview 17	OF-2, USMC	Online, September 2021
Interview 18	OF-3, Netherlands Army	Online, September 2021
Interview 19	OF-1, Italian Army	Online, September 2021
Interview 20	OR-9, Italian Army	Online, September 2021
Interview 21	OF-3, German Army	Online, October 2021
Interview 22	OF-2, Italian Army	Online, October 2021
Interview 23	OF-3, Italian Army	Online, October 2021
Interview 24	OF-5, Italian Army	Online, October 2021
Interview 25	OR-3, Italian Army	Online, October 2021
Interview 26	Academic, University of Pavia	Online, November 2021
Interview 27	Academic, Swedish Defence University	Stockholm, November 2021
Interview 28	OF-3, Swedish Army	Stockholm, November 2021
Interview 29	OF-5, Italian Army	Rome, November 2021
Interview 30	OF-3, Italian Army	Online, November 2021
Interview 31	OF-6, Italian Army	Online, November 2021
Interview 32	OF-3, British Air Force	Online, December 2021
Interview 33	OF-2, Ghanaian Army	Online, February 2021
Interview 34	OF-2, Zambian Army	Online, February 2021
Interview 35	Academic, American Army University	Online, February 2021
Interview 36	OF-2, French Army	Paris, February 2021
Interview 37	OF-2, British Army	Online, March 2022
Interview 38	Official, the UN	Online, March 2022
Interview 39	OF-2, Italian Army	Online, March 2022
Interview 40	OF-6, Italian Army	Online, March 2022

<sup>206</sup> Military officer and warrant officer ranks and insignia are standardized in accordance with the NATO rank scale.



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Interview 41	OF-3, Danish Army	Online, March 2022
Interview 42	OF-2, Danish Army	Online, March 2022
Interview 43	OF-3, Canadian Army	Online, April 2022
Interview 44	OF-2, Canadian Army	Online, April 2022
Interview 45	OF-2, Italian Army	Online, April 2022
Interview 46	OF-5, Zambian Army	Online, April 2022
Interview 47	OF-2, Zambian Army	Online, April 2022
Interview 48	OF-3, British Army	Online, April 2022
Interview 49	Academic, Royal Mil. Acad. Sandhurst	Online, April 2022
Interview 50	OR-8, Italian Army	Online, April 2022
Interview 51	OF-3, Romanian Army	Online, May 2022
Interview 52	Official, the UN	Rome, May 2022
Interview 53	OR-9, Italian Army	Rome, May 2022
Interview 54	OF- 2, Italian Army	Online, May 2022
Interview 55	OF-3, Romanian Army	Online, May 2022
Interview 56	UN Official, UNITAR	E-mail,
Interview 57	OF-3, Malawian Army	Online, June 2022
Interview 58	UN Official, UNDPKO	Online, June 2022
Interview 59	UN Official, UNDPKO	Online, June 2022
Interview 60	OF-1, British Army	Online, July 2022
Interview 61	OR-9, Italian Army	Online, August 2022
Interview 62	OF-5, Lebanese Army	Faiyadiyah, September 2022
Interview 63	OF-3, Lebanese Army	Faiyadiyah, September 2022
Interview 64	OR, Lebanese Army	Faiyadiyah, September 2022
Interview 65	Official, Lebanese Embassy	Online, September 2022
Interview 66	Official, Lebanese Embassy	Online, September 2022
Interview 67	UN Official, MINUSCA	Online, September 2022
Interview 68	OF-2, Italian Army	Online, September 2022
Interview 69	Journalist, RAI	Online, September 2022
Interview 70	Journalist, RAI	Online, September 2022
Interview 71	Official, BPST	Online, October 2022
Interview 72	OF-1, British Royal Navy	Online, October 2022
Interview 73	Academic, University of St. Andrews	Online, October 2022
Interview 74	OF-5, Italian Army	Online, October 2022
Interview 75	OF-3, Afghan Army	Online, October 2022
Interview 76	NATO Official	Online, October 2022
Interview 77	OR-4, Malawian Army	Online, October 2022
Interview 78	OR-4, USMC	Online, October 2022
Interview 79	Official, BPST	Online, October 2022
Interview 80	OR-4, Italian Army	Rome, October 2022
Interview 81	OR-2, USMC	Online, October 2022
Interview 82	OR 2, USMC	Online, October 2022
Interview 83	OF-3, Italian Army	Online, October 2022
Interview 84	OF-1, Zambia Army	Online, October 2022
Interview 85	NATO Official	Online, October 2022
Interview 86	OR-2, Italian Army	Online, October 2022
Interview 87	Journalist, RAI	Online, October 2022
Interview 88	OF-2, British Royal Navy	Online, October 2022
Interview 89	UN Official, Gender Advisory Unit	Naqoura, November 2022
Interview 90	UN Official, Gender Advisory Unit	Naqoura, November 2022

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Interview 91	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 92	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 93	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 94	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 95	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 96	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 97	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 98	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 99	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 100	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 101	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 102	OF-1, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 103	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 104	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 105	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 106	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 107	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 108	OR-9, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 109	OF-5, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 110	OF-2, Italian Army	Shama, November 2022
Interview 111	Civil Afghan	Online, January 2023
Interview 112	interpreter OF-2,	Online, March 2023
Interview 113	British Army	Online, March 2023
Interview 114	OF-2, British Army	Online, March 2023
Interview 115	OF-2, British Army	Online, March 2023
Interview 116	OF-2, British Army	Online, March 2023
Interview 117	OF-2, British Army	Online, March 2023
Interview 118	OF-3, British Army	Online, March 2023
Interview 119	OF-3, Zambia Army	Online, March 2023
Interview 120	Zambia Army	Faiyadiyah, April 2023
Interview 121	OF-1, Lebanese Army	Faiyadiyah, April 2023
Interview 122	Lebanese Army	Faiyadiyah, April 2023
Interview 123	Lebanese Army	Faiyadiyah, April 2023
Interview 124	Lebanese Army	Faiyadiyah, April 2023
Interview 125	OR-9, Italian Army	Faiyadiyah, April 2023
Interview 126	OF-5, Italian Army	Faiyadiyah, April 2023
Interview 127	OR-6, Italian Army	Faiyadiyah, April 2023
Interview 128	Lebanese Army	Faiyadiyah, May 2023
Interview 129	OR-8, Italian Army	Faiyadiyah, May 2023
Interview 130	Lebanese Army	Faiyadiyah, May 2023
	Lebanese Army	