



# Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response (CHMR)

Pros, Cons, and Practical Options

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Protex



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## About the Protex Project

PROTEX is a multi-year research project based at CWS. It examines how the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and the African Union (AU) protect civilians from conflict-related violence. These international organizations (IOs) operate with distinct understandings of what protection means and how it should be practiced, reflecting the varied mandates and mission types they deploy. As a result, protection practices among IOs remain far from standardized, even when they draw on the same normative frameworks (PoC, Civilian Harm Mitigation, HRDDP, etc.). The project investigates these institutional differences to better understand what IOs actually do, and fail to do, when protecting civilians, individually and together. We focus in particular on mechanisms such as the Civilian Casualty Tracking, Analysis and Response Cell (CCTARC), developed through AU-EU-UN cooperation but marked by contestation and divergent organizational logics. Empirically, PROTEX studies three cases – Mali, the Central African Republic, and Somalia – where all three organizations are present and interact in protection-related activities, to assess whether and how such collaborations strengthen protection outcomes or produce inter-institutional friction. More information about project activities and publications is available at <https://protexproject.eu>

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# Executive Summary

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We treat Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response (CHMR) as a *governance system* that offers a powerful path to civilian protection in military operations by embedding elements of International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law, and Transitional Justice. In principle, CHMR can lower harm, improve operational outcomes, sustain the legitimacy of interventions, and uphold values increasingly under strain in global politics. Military leaders have highlighted the potential for CHMR to “responsibilise” warfighting if these competencies are socialised into the military profession. However, partial or inadequate implementation can devolve into box-ticking that obscures harm, stalls operations, and instrumentalises concerns about civilians. A further danger is that protection is reframed through policy to predominantly serve institutional risk management; focusing on probabilities, metrics, and reputational exposure rather than the lived experiences of civilians. Military organisations need to integrate CHMR into operational practice to fulfil the moral and political imperative to shield civilians from violence.

## Key takeaways:

**Calibrate CHMR Across Partners and Coalitions.** Modern military interventions rely heavily on partners, proxies, contractors, and host-nation forces. If CHMR covers only direct actions, there is a risk of displacing harm onto those actors. Effective CHMR therefore “travels with the enablers”, that is, with the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems as well as the AI enabled decision support systems that guide operations; with the artillery, munitions, Autonomous Weapons systems, and other forms of weapon systems that deliver effects; and with the logistics chains that move troops, supply equipment, and sustain operations. Examples such as conduct baseline assessments, mentoring or training packages on demand, international contact group meetings, and joint investigations offer ways to foster standardisation of harm mitigation practices across partners. Such practices emphasize the shared obligation of CHMR in partnered operations and may encourage partners, proxies, contractors, and other stakeholders to institutionalise them. At the same time, partners must monitor the risk that shared responsibilities become diffused or turned into externalisation conduits. Modern military interventions must adapt CHMR to the distinct features of every operational environment. There is no universal model: measures that are effective in one setting may fail in another. In urban operations, for example, protection challenges stem from the density of civilians and essential infrastructure. In remote rural areas, inaccessibility hinders harm assessments. In each case, CHMR should relay context, culture, and the lived realities of civilians to mission commanders.

**Change Mindsets.** CHMR as a Core Professional Competency. Legal briefs and formal Rules of Engagement (ROE) cannot shift behaviour on their own. Commanders with CHMR experience are catalysts for change by framing it as a professional standard, they drive adoption across the force. Embedding CHMR in training curricula, command intent, doctrine, performance evaluations, and award systems, makes restraint and civilian protection initiatives visible and valued within the military profession. Shaping the mindset of officers and strategic leadership, from neglecting the human environment to understanding civilians as a protected *centre of gravity*, determines whether CHMR remains an ideal or becomes an accepted practice.

**Commit to a Baseline CHMR Approach.** It is possible to standardise a basic cycle of activities: plan → prevent → track → respond → adjust → learn, that should be present in every operation. These elements provide a common foundation, but they must be tailored to different operational realities and conflict types. The baseline guides large-scale combat operations, partnered military missions, NATO missions, AU peace support operations, UN peacekeeping, or unilateral counterterrorism campaigns alike. Once institutionalized, mission planners can scale up the baseline if the type of war or armed conflict at hand allows that. Importantly, the exact tools (e.g., target development, incident tracking methodology, harms assessment and reporting, when or how to make amends) must reflect the culture, mandate, and capabilities of each force. Standardisation cannot become a straitjacket: it should provide agreed basic foundation without erasing contextual specificities. Preparing and planning for a CHMR baseline is all the more important in the present context where military training and exercises are envisaging fast-paced battle rhythm of large-scale combat operations.

**Clarify Harm.** Conflict dynamics, types of terrain, local cultures, and community expectations all shape how civilian harm is perceived and experienced by those affected. Taking these perspectives into account ensures that CHMR mechanisms do not embed narrow or overly abstract categories of harm into incident reporting, intelligence, assessments, or remedial options. This requires sustained dialogue with affected populations, including survivors, and civil society actors, and demands flexibility to broaden mitigation and response efforts beyond civilian death or injury and destruction of civilian objects. A comprehensive understanding of harm must also encompass reverberating effects such as displacement, loss of essential services or livelihoods, social exclusion, or psychological trauma. Institutionalising such an adaptive, context-sensitive approach ensures CHMR remains a living practice across diverse contexts rather than a rigid template. Achieving this is challenging, however, given the legacy of civilian-centred doctrines from past counterinsurgency campaigns that treated populations as instruments, and the growing emphasis on preparedness for high-end interstate conflict, which risks narrowing protection to one's own civilians alone.

# Introduction

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Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response (CHMR) is a *governance system*, that is, an integrated set of policies, practices, and capabilities to *plan, prevent, track, respond to, adjust, and learn from* civilian harm caused by one's own forces or those of partners *before, during, and after* operations. Its processes are iterative, aimed at enhancing a military's ability to protect civilians throughout its operations.

## Core components – A CHMR Lifecycle view:

- **Plan:** operational planning integrates civilian environment analysis; pattern-of-life; collateral damage estimates; no-strike lists; risk-based design of ROE and Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs).
- **Prevent:** positive identification (PID); force graduation; timing/angle/weaponeering choices; civilian evacuation corridors; non-lethal options; tactical patience.
- **Track:** casualty recording; civilian incident tracking (CIT); secure whistle-blowing; community hotlines.
- **Respond:** assessments; joint investigations; acknowledgement/apology; amends or ex gratia payments; medical evacuation; community dialogue.
- **Adjust:** adapt both tactical and strategic aspects of operations in light of After Action Reviews with civilian-outcomes sections, post-strike assessments and dynamic civilian-harm patterns. Adjustments can range from revising commander's intent, reconsidering ROE, altering targeting practices, force posture, and operational tempo at the tactical level, to reconsidering partner conditionality and overall mission design at the strategic level.
- **Learn:** doctrine updates; training refreshers; policy developments; CHMR-based feedback into promotion/command selection or suspension, scenario development for future military operations.

# CHMR and available legal frameworks

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CHMR complements existing bodies of law but never replaces them. CHMR translates the obligations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Human Rights Law (IHRL) into daily operational practice. In doing so, practitioners may develop policies, procedures, and mechanisms that exceed legal minima, for example by requiring higher standards of positive identification, tactical patience, or non-monetary amends. On the one hand, there is substantial overlap: precautions in attack, proportionality assessments, investigations, and remedies required by IHL and IHRL are reinforced and operationalised through CHMR practices. On the other, key differences remain. IHL provides the foundational rules for the conduct of hostilities, legally permitting attacks deemed necessary within the constraints of distinction, proportionality and precaution. These obligations establish a legal *floor*. Integrating IHRL raises this floor by always emphasising the protection of life and dignity for all persons, and by providing pathways for remedies that emphasise individual rights. Incorporating practices from transitional justice pushes the floor even further, foregrounding acknowledgement, accountability, and repair for harms that extend beyond immediate civilian casualties. Taken together, these layers ensure that CHMR remains fully compliant with IHL and IHRL, cannot legitimise what is unlawful under either, and can nonetheless go further, being more preventive, more people-centred, and more capable of advising commanders on how to preserve mission legitimacy. Importantly, CHMR cannot substitute for formal criminal or administrative accountability when violations and abuses occur. A commander, guided by CHMR advice, may refrain from an action that, while lawful under IHL, could nonetheless cause avoidable civilian harm. Similarly, a state providing security assistance may withhold or adjust support to a partner known to violate IHRL, or act proactively by anticipating risks and alerting relevant authorities to their obligations. Law provides the floor; CHMR's potential lies in raising the ceiling.



# Lessons from Practice: The CCTARC Experience

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A useful illustration comes from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), where international pressure and AU initiative led to the establishment of the Civilian Casualty Tracking, Analysis, and Response Cell (CCTARC). Conceived in 2012 and operationalised in 2015, the CCTARC was the first dedicated mechanism to track and assess civilian harm in an African-led peace support operation. It combined tracking, reporting, and community engagement functions, though its assessment authority remained contested among troop-contributing countries. It gathered data from several (open) sources and tracked harms by its own troops but also by other actors. Despite limitations, including restricted access to information and alleged victims, uneven political support, and lack of a dedicated fund for paying amends, the CCTARC helped institutionalise harm tracking which remained in place in the follow-on missions in Somalia (ATMIS and AUSSOM). Drawing on CCTARC reporting, the mission leadership publicly acknowledged that AU-led operations had caused civilian harm. Also, the mission revised and harmonised the board of inquiries (BOI) and amends standard operating procedures to improve its work on incident investigations and compensation measures. The experience shows the promise of CHMR as a learning and accountability tool, but also the challenges that arise when partners, such as the AU, UN, and EU in this case, seek to institutionalise CHMR from the top down and within a pre-existent mission set up.

Furthermore, the CCTARC experience showcases the important role that non-western militaries play in the diffusion of CHMR and broader diplomatic and operational work taking place to strengthen adherence to IHL and IHRL. For example, the AU peace support operation division developed its African Union Compliance and Accountability Framework (AUCAF) (in partnership with the EU and OHCHR) based on lesson learning from the CCTARC experience. AMISOM developed an IHL and IHRL training of trainers programme for the Somali National Army (SNA) and Somali Ministry of Defence staff, with support from the UN, EU, ICRC, and donors. As part of the same political process, the UN, EU, and several donors and international non-governmental organisations, have linked security assistance to the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and its security forces with support for the development of a national civilian protection policy. Moreover, since 2022, the major African Standby Force and regional peacekeeping training centres have been trained on provisions of AUCAF, including compliance with IHL, IHRL, regional human rights instruments, and applicable standards of



conduct and discipline. In this context, it is also worth mentioning that the Nigerian Airforce has recently institutionalised its own CHMR Action Plan, with support from the US. If more African militaries follow, CHMR could become integral to future military missions on the continent, whether ad hoc format or regional-led, combining civilian protection with peace enforcement expectations.



Chiara De Franco and Linnéa Gelot with Jones Sarfo (Head of the CCTARC) and Dr Omar Alasow (Head, Ag. Protection, Human Rights and Gender (PHRG) Division), April 2024, Mogadishu

# The Pros: Raising the Bar of Civilian Protection

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## 1 Reduction of civilian harm

The foremost benefit of CHMR is the actual reduction of harm experienced by civilians in conflict zones. CHMR professionals advise mission command on operational choices based on civilian environment analysis. This has the potential to not only lower the number of civilian deaths and injuries, but also limit displacement, loss of livelihood, and the destruction of infrastructure and cultural heritage. By deliberately anticipating civilian patterns of life, adjusting tactics, and providing avenues for remedy, CHMR offers a tangible protective effect that should be recognised as its central accomplishment.

## 2 Military professional ethos

Integrating CHMR into training, staff processes, evaluation, and promotion systems reinforces the idea that civilian protection is not an optional extra but a core value of professional soldiering and a *centre of gravity* of operations. This is especially significant at a time when norms of restraint and humanitarian values are increasingly challenged, and armed forces worldwide are preparing for a potential resurgence of large-scale inter-state warfare. CHMR can strengthen the normative commitments of forces, mitigate the risk of dehumanisation of civilians, and help reduce the incidence of moral injury of troops by providing them with clear frameworks for acknowledging harm and taking remedial action.

## 3 Learning culture

Incident tracking, civilian incident reporting mechanisms, and after-action reviews that include civilian outcomes enable organisations to learn from mistakes. For state militaries, it is important that the different units and branches share information and strive to use standardised methodology. Internationally, the community-building of the international contact group on CHMR can help foster shared understanding of concepts, tools, and best practices. This work across a CHMR governance system can prevent the repetition of harmful practices across different rotations or theatres and embeds a culture of reflection and improvement.

## 4 Future-proofing technology

As militaries adopt more advanced technologies, including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms, and artificial intelligence-enabled decision support systems that, for example, assist in the making of targeting decisions, CHMR provides essential guardrails. Requirements

for audit trails, human oversight, and escalation checks help prevent automation bias and misidentification when new capabilities are put to use. CHMR professionals can complement the IHL community by acting in support of initiatives to oversee the compliance of military technology innovations with IHL requirements.

## **5 Legitimacy and consent**

Demonstrating a serious commitment to CHMR strengthens both domestic and international legitimacy. At home, parliamentary oversight and public opinion are more favourable when forces are seen to take civilian protection seriously. Internationally, coalition cohesion is easier to maintain when partners know that their harm-mitigation practices are similar. In host states, visible CHMR efforts sustain political consent for a foreign or multinational military presence. Better care and preservation of the human environment during military operations will logically mean that a potential post-conflict stabilisation effort is better placed to restore that same human environment.

## **6 Operational effectiveness**

Effective CHMR can enhance the performance of military operations. By minimizing civilian casualties and damage to civilian property, forces reduce the likelihood of reprisals, avoid triggering cycles of violence, and preserve their own freedom of movement. Communities that witness genuine efforts to minimise harm, receive acknowledgements, or benefit from amends are more likely to share information with security forces and tolerate their presence. This access to human intelligence can be critical in counterinsurgency and stabilisation operations, where situational awareness depends heavily on civilian cooperation. Incorporating structured harm assessments, collateral damage estimates, and disciplined targeting processes supports improved command decision-making. It reduces the risk of costly strategic setbacks and is believed to enhance troop protection. Rapid assessments support the ability of the mission to provide public communication which may help counter mis/disinformation intended to erode mission legitimacy.

## **7 Chances of effective peacebuilding**

There is a growing recognition that the way civilians are treated during military operations has long-term consequences for peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery. When harm is minimised, acknowledged and remedied where it occurs, communities are more likely to view both local and international forces as legitimate actors. This can lay the foundation for trust in subsequent peace processes, reconciliation efforts, and state-building initiatives. In partnered operations, effective CHMR can improve the credibility of host-nation forces, strengthen the social contract between security institutions and civilians, and enhance the willingness of populations to cooperate with international peacebuilding and humanitarian actors. Conversely, a record of civilian harm without acknowledgement or remedy fuels grievances, undermines confidence in external support, and hampers the acceptance of foreign aid or international cooperation in the aftermath of conflict.

# The Cons: Challenges and Potential Pitfalls

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## 1 Risk management framing

A significant risk is that CHMR becomes a technocratic form of risk management. When protection is translated into managing probabilities and minimizing reputational exposure, the moral and political imperative to protect civilians risks being diluted. This framing shifts attention from the lived experiences of affected populations to abstract risk matrices, undermining the normative purpose of civilian protection and turning it into an exercise in institutional self-protection.

## 2 Moral injury and institutional strain

When CHMR is inadequately implemented, soldiers may still witness or participate in incidents of civilian harm without meaningful frameworks for improved conduct, acknowledgement, or remedy. This gap can exacerbate moral injury among troops and foster moral disillusionment within the ranks. Over the longer term, it may damage institutional credibility through veteran-driven testimony and critique. Such public advocacy is often motivated by ethical commitment and can place enduring strain on the military's moral credibility and its trust relationship with society.

## 3 Over-bureaucratisation

Poorly designed CHMR processes can draw units in administrative work and slow operations without delivering real improvements. If reporting or review processes are perceived as administrative burdens, they erode compliance and morale instead of fostering protection. Senior military leadership may stop requiring CHMR capabilities should they perceive them as slowing operations down. Over-bureaucratisation, more characteristic of non-intensive missions, also strips political meaning from civilian protection by transforming it into a matter of templates, forms, and checklists rather than a substantive commitment. This de-politicisation risks reducing CHMR to a technical exercise that demonstrates responsiveness on paper but leaves underlying grievances and structural drivers of harm unaddressed. Ensuring that evaluation and learning mechanisms capture the deeper political and social dimensions of harm is therefore essential.

## 4 Metrics satisfaction and tech solutionism

Related to the above, if CHMR becomes a box-ticking exercise focused on numerical targets, and if CHMR officers are few and working under severe time constraints, units may under-report, reclassify, or suppress information to meet metrics. In large-scale combat operations, resource constraints, high operational tempo, and dynamic targeting processes push precautionary decisions to lower levels, shorten analysis time, and



encourage heavier reliance on AI for risk judgments. Overconfidence in advanced technologies, such as sensors, precision munitions, or artificial intelligence, may displace human judgment and local knowledge. The resulting illusion of precision may encourage riskier targeting, normalise higher levels of force, and entrench harm patterns, ultimately undermining learning and creating a false sense of security.

## 5 Externalisation of risk

If CHMR policies apply only to the forces directly involved in operations, civilian harm by partners, proxies, contractors, or host-nation forces remains unaddressed. Law compliant harm mitigation requires providers of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support, weapon systems, training and advice, and logistics enablers to know their legal responsibilities. Despite recent CHMR developments, coalition or NATO members have shirked these responsibilities, leaving civilians exposed. In joint operations, overlapping chains of command blur responsibility for investigating and remedying incidents. Victims and communities face fragmented and opaque processes, with no clear path to justice or redress. This undermines international legitimacy of military operations and can deepen grievances.

## 6 Selective protection

Visibility bias means that civilian protection efforts often concentrates where international media and donors are watching, such as urban centres, while harm in remote or marginalised communities is overlooked. Broader limitations within the protection of civilians (PoC) agenda, such as insufficient gender and cultural responsive protection and problematic civil-military dynamics, continue to produce unequal protection across different civilian groups. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), for example, remains hidden and insufficiently addressed, either because survivors face stigma and retaliation, or because international mandates and resources are too limited. These long-standing blind spots reverberate into CHMR, where existing reporting mechanisms are ill-equipped to capture the indirect, cumulative, and psychological dimensions of harm. As a result, many reverberating and long-term effects of warfare remain unacknowledged. Moreover, civilian-centred approaches inherited from counterinsurgency doctrines have tended to instrumentalise populations for operational gain, neglecting the complex ways in which civilians cope with harm. Downplaying civilian agency and self-protection thus remains a persistent risk in CHMR implementation.

## 7 Evidence vulnerabilities

Civilian-harm data must be collected and stored securely. If mishandled, it can expose sources, retraumatise victims, or be exploited for propaganda, disinformation, or targeting by adversaries. This risk requires strict safeguards and data management protocols. Furthermore, commanders face communication challenges in today's information saturated battlespaces where some host governments, opposition groups, local media actors, or international rivals may frame apologies and amends as admissions of illegality. If not managed carefully, this dynamic erodes troop morale, strains diplomatic relations, and creates reluctance to acknowledge harm.

# Practical Options and Recommendations

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## 1 Calibrate CHMR Across Partners and Coalitions

While CHMR focuses on the harm caused by ‘one’s own’ military and weaponry, in the context of multinational and partnership operations, it unavoidably encompasses also harm caused by partners, proxies, contractors, and host-nation forces. In these situations, it is counterproductive to displace responsibility for harm only onto actors directly involved in military operations. CHMR needs to be extended also to the “enablers”: the organizations and personnel involved in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems as well as AI enabled decision support systems that guide operations; with the artillery, munitions, Autonomous Weapons systems, and other forms of weapon systems that deliver effects; and with the logistics chains that move troops, supply equipment, and sustain operations. Linking international or bilateral security assistance to CHMR practices can incentivize partners to adopt higher protection standards, reinforcing civilian protection norms without having to rely on public shaming when things go wrong. Coalitions and multinational operations should implement clear, unified mechanisms for investigating incidents and providing remedy. Practical options such as baseline assessments, targeted mentoring or training, international contact group meetings, and joint investigations should be further elaborated. Command structures should communicate CHMR intent, designate responsibility, ensure accessible reporting channels, and harmonize remedial procedures to ensure consistent and accountable civilian protection across all contributing forces. Commanders and planners should maintain mechanisms to adjust approaches during implementation, and revise doctrine as lessons are accumulated. This continuous learning cycle ensures that CHMR evolves with operational experience and remains effective across diverse missions.

## 2 Change Mindset: Embed CHMR as a Core Professional Competency

Turning CHMR into a core professional competency requires institutionalising it across the chain of command and embedding it into the daily routines of armed forces. Several areas stand out as priorities:

*Leadership signals* are critical. Commanders clarify expectations through operational briefs that combine adversarial and civilian environment assessments. When directives include expectations of a functioning CHMR system, staff processes are arranged accordingly. Recognition systems must reward not only tactical strike success but also, when appropriate, targeting processes involving restraint and non-kinetic initiative protecting

civilians. Such signals reinforce the message that civilian protection is part of operational excellence, not a distraction. *Peer learning mechanisms* must also be strengthened. Cross-unit CHMR forums, red-team clinics, and structured exchanges with protection practitioners help forces learn from each other and external experts. *Training* is another key pillar. CHMR dilemmas should feature in experiential, scenario-based exercises using civilian role-players, tactical patience drills, and by-stander intervention training to prepare troops for field realities. CHMR should also be integrated into live-fire planning exercises and urban breaching drills, so that minimizing civilian harm becomes second nature under combat pressure. Training for large-scale combat operations should ensure all tactical leaders can apply concise proportionality, precaution, distinction decision tools that include systems for rapid legal and command reachback. Finally, a dedicated amends fund should be seeded at formation level, and data from civilian incident tracking systems must feed directly into assessment and reporting. These feedback loops ensure that lessons learned translate into training updates and operational adjustments, making CHMR a continuously improving practice rather than a static requirement.

### 3 Commit to a Baseline CHMR Approach

The standardisation of a baseline approach to CHMR offers a shared foundation for modern military interventions, whether NATO missions, AU peace operations, UN or EU missions, or ad hoc coalitions. The international contact group on CHMR can play a significant role in defining, standardizing and fostering agreement on shared best practices, but an effort should be made to value and integrate the experience of military organizations across the world, including from the Global South. Standardisation should not be rigid; it should ensure core elements are present while preserving contextual flexibility. The specific tools employed, such as incident tracking, harm assessment, reporting, and processes for making amends, must be shaped by each force's mandate, culture, and capacity. From such a baseline, planners can scale efforts up depending on the type of armed conflict faced and operational dynamics.

### 4 Clarify Harm: Towards a Comprehensive Definition

Defining what counts as harm in ways sensitive to local cultures and contexts is crucial. Recognizing that displacement, loss of essential services or livelihoods, or the destruction of cultural heritage can matter as much as fatalities is essential to the credibility of CHMR and the legitimacy of operations. *Community perspectives* must be integrated into CHMR planning and assessments of the civilian environment to ensure protection reflects local realities and addresses the full spectrum of harm, including reverberating effects. Mission planners must design CHMR processes to adapt to conflict dynamics, terrain, and cultural contexts, using ongoing interactions with civilian populations to keep measures such as incident reporting mechanisms, intelligence-gathering, assessments, and remedial options feasible, legitimate, and context-sensitive. They must also embed lessons learning from adaptive, community-informed approaches into doctrine, training, and guidance, preventing rigid, externally imposed CHMR methods and avoiding the instrumentalisation of populations of past counterinsurgency examples.

## About the authors

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