UNIDIR

MANAGING EXITS
FROM ARMED CONFLICT

Factors Influencing Community Receptivity of Former Fighters in Somalia

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November 2023

Background

About MEAC

UNIDIR's Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) is a multi-year collaboration that examines why and how individuals exit armed groups and sustainably reintegrate into civilian life. Employing multi-method longitudinal studies that follow the trajectories of former armed group affiliates and their non-associate peers across six countries, MEAC seeks to inform evidence-based prevention and reintegration programming. MEAC benefits from support from the German Federal Foreign Office; Global Affairs Canada; the Swiss FDFA; and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and is run in partnership with IOM; UNICEF; UNDP; DPO; the World Bank, the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR); and the Secretariat of the Regional Strategy for Stabilisation, Recovery and Resilience.

About this Series

MEAC produces a series of short publications aimed at policymakers and practitioners to highlight key findings but recognizes that there is relevant research on the subject that may remain inaccessible to them. In an effort to make these studies, which are often highly technical and/or sit behind academic journal paywalls, accessible to decision-makers and to connect them to the evidence base MEAC is creating, UNIDIR has introduced this interview series. In this series, MEAC takes the role of an interlocutor, bridging the gap between academic research and practical application by presenting brief interviews with scholars on pertinent topics. What follows is a short, digestible dialogue around the main findings of a recent study and their policy and practical implications for those working to prevent and respond to political violence and armed conflict.

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Overview

Our research[3] examines the factors influencing community support for the reintegration of former Al-Shabaab combatants in Somalia. Despite acknowledging the importance of host communities in reintegration, empirical evidence on how they respond to different ex-combatant profiles associated with militant extremist groups remains scarce.[4] Our research asserts that reintegration preferences in Somalia are influenced by three crucial factors: perceived potential threat level, social identity, and reintegration channels.

The study included a conjoint survey (more details below) involving Somali civilians from Mogadishu, Kismayo and Baidoa, three cities with disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) centers and a separate survey of former Al-Shabaab DDR graduates.

In Somalia, there are four distinct defection and reintegration pathways for former al-Shabaab combatants: a) the internationally- and UN-supported National Programme for Disengagement, which allows low-level defectors to go through DDR centres; b) the Somali government's amnesty deal for high-value defectors who leave with their followers, offering them protection and limited accountability; c) the government's prison programme designed for assessed high-risk defectors; and, d) the traditional authorities' channel, which accepts defectors through community dialogue and mediation including reconciliation ceremonies.

Low-level Shabaab members who accept government amnesty are sent to the UN-supported national DDR program if they are vetted as a low threat, while high-profile leaders who accept amnesty bypass DDR programming and return directly to their hometowns. Those who choose traditional channels, involving customary institutions, typically wait to return until they receive endorsement from clan elders. In such cases, collective 'ceremonies' bring former fighters before a committee of clan elders and religious leaders, during which they pledge their commitment to non-violence, demonstrating their allegiance to peaceful dispute resolutions.

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[3] Currently under review by for publication.

[4] MEAC studied how community receptivity and criminal justice preferences are informed by returnee profiles in Nigeria, see : Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Mohammed Bukar, and Zoe Marks, "Community Acceptance of Former Boko Haram Affiliates," *MEAC Findings Report 7* (New York: United Nations University, 2021) and Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Mohammed Bukar, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "Criminal and Transitional Justice Preferences for Former Boko Haram Associates," *MEAC Findings Report 12* (New York: United Nations University, 2021). For work in Iraq on how communities evaluate types of collaboration with the Islamic State (e.g., fighter, cook, married a fighter, janitor, paid taxes), see Kristen Kao and Mara Redlich Revkin, Retribution or Reconciliation? Post-Conflict Attitudes toward Enemy Collaborators, *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 67, No. 2, (April 2023).

The Somali public often relies on the particular exit pathway taken by an ex-combatant (which are based on perceived risk levels) and informal and unverified sources to assess the security risk an ex-combatant poses to the community. For instance, those participating in the UN-supported national DDR program are generally seen as "low risk," while individuals involved in the prison or amnesty programs are considered "high risk". However, the risk categorization of ex-combatants within the traditional authority channel, where some are occasionally accepted, remains unclear, although the presumption is that most are viewed as low risk, with some exceptions.

In studying reintegration in Somalia, we aimed to explore how host communities perceive and embrace former fighters, recognizing that poorly managed reintegration can impact community security and/or lead to conflict resurgence. It was our hope that robust research on the reintegration process can offer guidance for future conflict resolution and peacebuilding endeavours by highlighting both successful practices and potential pitfalls to avoid.

Our findings reveal that security-related attributes, particularly knowing about an ex-combatant's participation in killings, defection, and unit association, influence the public's threat perception more than the ex-combatant's ideological beliefs. When the community views a returning ex-combatant as a threat, they categorize them as spoilers, reducing support for reintegration. Importantly, our results highlight a preference for the UN-supported national DDR programme graduates and those granted government amnesty over traditional channels for reintegration. In essence, our research underscores that managing community perceptions of threat and risk is more likely to be achieved through formal reintegration programming than informal, traditional alternatives.

Interview

Firstly, Dr. Khadka, you used to live in Mogadishu when you worked for the UN. Was this study motivated by a practical problem you identified during your time in Somalia?

We have both been carrying out research in Somalia for several years. Our experience in Somalia revealed unique challenges to conducting field research with ex-combatants, including issues related to security, access to remote areas, and the fluidity of conflict dynamics. These challenges in Somalia drew our attention to the broader global interest in

addressing similar issues faced in Iraq and Syria, where repatriation and reintegration efforts are equally complex and demanding.

Beyond academic interest, our research has been significantly influenced by our direct involvement in programmatic and policy efforts in Somalia. We have both visited the three cities of Mogadishu, Kismayo, and Baidoa, where formal DDR centers are located.

[Dr. Khadka] For instance, during my tenure with the United Nations Support Office in Somalia (UNSOS) and UNDP from 2017 to 2021, I had the opportunity to engage with several practitioners, including both the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) and Somali officials responsible for DDR. These interactions provided me with valuable insights into the practical needs of practitioners in Somalia and underscored the urgency of addressing reintegration challenges. The practitioners not only highlighted the challenges faced by former fighters in transitioning back to their communities but also shed light on the difficulties experienced by community members during the reintegration process. It became evident that the success of reintegration efforts is intrinsically linked to the well-being and security of both the ex-combatants and the communities they return to.

Your efforts to isolate the impact of DDR programming are timely, given the focus at the UN on robust assessment of interventions to help transition individual ex-combatants from conflict to civilian life, which is also one of the aims of UNIDIR's MEAC project. Your methodology to do so may strike some practitioners as hard to follow. How could you explain the approach you and Dr. Gelot took in simple terms?

Conjoint survey experiments have long been used in market research to measure personal preferences by showing individuals different options that are similar to real-life choices. Think about choosing smartphones with different brands, prices, sizes, and colours. This method helps researchers understand how people make decisions when faced with a variety of choices. In politics, this methodology is beginning to be used to understand preferences for things like political candidates.

Recognizing that communities are unlikely to view all returnees as the same, we thought this method would work well to understand how host communities differentiate between ex-combatants and what their "preferred" returnee profile would look like. This approach allows Somalis to analyze different options that mirror the real returnee scenarios facing their communities. By doing this, we can find out what things are most important to community members and what types of interventions are likely to influence their reception of Al-Shabaab ex-combatants.

Could practitioners apply something like this themselves, or would they need to bring in outside expertise to replicate a similar approach?

Running a conjoint survey requires certain technical skills at the design and analysis stages (e.g., crafting a representative sample, and conducting and interpreting regression analysis). As such, partnerships between researchers and IOs, NGOs, and government agencies can help bring together these necessary skillsets with practitioners' insights and access to affected populations. For example, practitioners have the substantive experience to contribute significantly to designing realistic scenarios and trade-offs, interpreting results, and ensuring the findings align with practical and policy needs. Strong collaboration between researchers and practitioners will enhance the relevance, accuracy, and impact of conjoint survey experiments in informing policy decisions.

You ultimately conclude that it is an ex-combatant's actions (e.g., whether they engaged in conflict-related violence or were known to take the risky action of defecting) rather than their ideological beliefs that drive the community's perception of the threat they pose when they return home. What are the implications of this finding?

One of our research objectives was to assess whether Somali civilians hold more favourable attitudes towards ex-combatants who had gone through formal reintegration programmes that included a counter-narrative curriculum against radical ideologies. In Somalia, these programmes frequently collaborate with religious and clan leaders, as well as family members, to develop and implement counter-extremist campaigns that aim to promote disengagement from Al-Shabaab. Through our conjoint survey, we were able to experimentally compare host communities exposed to former fighters who received counter-narratives related to extremist ideologies with those who did not receive any such counter-narratives. However, our findings indicate that exposure to counter-narratives addressing ideological or religious beliefs does not significantly influence community acceptance of former Al-Shabaab fighters. Instead, community responses are strongly influenced by the perceived threat of returning ex-combatants which is based on security-related attributes like a known violent past, the manner in which an individual came to enter and exit Al-Shabaab, and the particular unit they were associated with. When returning ex-combatants are seen as presenting a greater threat,

receptivity to return declines. Notably, our results align with recent experimental work that suggests counter-narratives targeting Islamist extremist ideologies have inconclusive results.[5]

Interestingly, in a separate survey, we ran with former Al-Shabaab associates who underwent the UN-supported national DDR program, our results indicate that these DDR graduates are less likely to support political violence and violence against those who insult Islam than those who did not participate in UN-supported DDR programs. Two potential implications are:

- While our findings show that counter-narratives did not appear to directly influence community acceptance there may be an indirect ripple effect on host communities. As these communities recognize that former fighters who went through national DDR programmes are no longer ideologically aligned with extremism, the significance of ideology in shaping attitudes towards them appears to diminish. This transition from initial hesitation to acceptance is an internalization process, as communities gradually learn that these newcomers do not pose any threats over time.

- Given the potential for communities to write returning ex-combatants off as "spoilers" if they have certain security-related traits, and thus undermine reintegration efforts, more needs to be done to address community concerns about the threat posed by returnees.

There is so much attention on making reintegration programming community-based – which can mean different things to different people – but the term is often used to suggest that interventions are grounded in local practices and led by the community. Your findings suggest that, at least in Somalia, formal reintegration channels, such as UN-supported DDR programs or government amnesty, are preferred by the receiving community over traditional authority channels. Could you explain why this is the case and discuss the implications for crafting policy and interventions?

One surprising result from our research was that the traditional authority mechanism was least favoured by host community members for dealing with all three categories of ex-combatants—"low, medium, and high" risk. We observe a preference for graduates from UN-supported national DDR programs and those receiving government amnesty over individuals reintegrated through traditional channels in Somalia. This finding contradicts prior literature that generally

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[5] For example, see the recent randomized controlled trial described in Bélanger, Jocelyn J., Daniel W. Snook, Domnica Dzitac, and Abdelhak Cheppih. "Challenging extremism: A randomized control trial examining the impact of counternarratives in the Middle East and North Africa." *Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology* 4 (2023): 100097.

highlights the constructive roles local and traditional actors play in peace-building within rural African communities.[6] One reason for this finding might be particular to the Somali context, where the traditional authority mechanisms are clan-based and occasionally act as impediments to government security efforts to apprehend Al-Shabaab suspects.[7] Our finding implies that in Somalia, the process of reintegration triggers complex ethno-political fears among host community members, largely due to their lived experiences where some traditional authorities have been co-opted by Al-Shabaab.

While we find that the community distrusts them with the function of reintegration in this case, we do not assert that community members universally delegitimize the role of these customary institutions in managing inter-group relations in conflict. However, it does raise a concern that customary institutions may not always be the most suitable entities for accepting former fighters into communities because they might not have the expertise or resources to adequately address the concerns and anxieties of community members who may harbour distrust or fear towards former fighters. So, while it may be important to ground reintegration in community institutions, which institutions are chosen matter a lot when it comes to community receptivity.

Your work focuses on community acceptance – something that MEAC does a lot of work on across the six countries where it runs studies. Your study examined community preferences about accepting back one of two ex-combatant profiles. This approach allows for helpful insights into programming preferences and the ways in which the public views different returnee profiles. We know reintegration is a two-way street, and community acceptance is essential to successful transitions, but how do you think researchers, M&E experts, and practitioners should think about accurately capturing it? How can we get the most accurate measure of community receptivity to returning ex-combatants in Somalia and beyond?

Recognizing that successful reintegration hinges on community acceptance, it is important for researchers, monitoring and evaluation experts, and practitioners to consider key factors for accurately capturing acceptance. Firstly, involving local stakeholders and community representatives in the research process can ensure that relevant attributes and dynamics are

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[6] For example, see: Blattman, Christopher, Alexandra C. Hartman, and Robert A. Blair. "How to promote order and property rights under weak rule of law? An experiment in changing dispute resolution behaviour through community education." *American Political Science Review* 108, no. 1 (2014): 100-120.

[7] Publications Office of the European Union, *Somalia: Defection, desertion, and disengagement from Al-Shabaab: European Union Agency for Asylum*, February 2023.

captured. Secondly, utilizing mixed-method approaches, for example, combining experimental surveys with qualitative interviews or focus groups, can provide a comprehensive understanding of community sentiments. Additionally, exploring various contextual factors, such as local norms, socio-economic conditions, and historical dynamics, can enhance the accuracy of measuring community receptivity not only in Somalia but also in other contexts.

Based on your time in Somalia, and working on these issues around the world, what degree of community acceptance is necessary to build lasting peace? Can a minimal degree of acceptance (e.g., acknowledgement of their basic human rights, without a willingness to engage with them economically or socially) be sufficient - and maybe realistic – or is a more positive reception needed?

The degree of community acceptance required to establish lasting peace can vary based on context and objectives. Beginning with a foundational level of acceptance, such as recognizing and acknowledging the past actions of former combatants, can serve as an initial step and a feasible short-term objective. However, we recommend working towards a positive host community reception in order to build lasting peace. A better measure of successful reintegration could involve economic and social engagement, potentially reflecting deeper community integration and lowering the risk of recidivism.[8]

In a separate focus group discussion involving eight former Al-Shabaab leaders, it was unanimously reported that vocational training and financial support provided by the UN-supported national DDR centers not only improved their livelihoods but also bolstered their reception by host communities. Positive community acceptance creates an environment conducive to the success of reintegration efforts, benefiting not only the ex-combatants themselves but also potentially promoting broader social cohesion and reducing resentment. Promoting receptivity, and thus hopefully, positive integration between the community and returning ex-combatants, may help reduce the likelihood of conflict relapse and create the conditions for enduring peace. [9]

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[8] MEAC has previously looked at the *specific* types of engagement community members may be willing to have with ex-associates. For instance, in the Lake Chad Basin, the study measured the different facets of economic and social engagement, including gauging the willingness of community members to talk with ex-associates in the street, trade with them, invite them to a family wedding, marry a family member etc. See, Rebecca Littman, Siobhan O'Neil, Kato Van Broeckhoven, Zoe Marks, and Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, "Social, Economic, and Civic Reintegration of Former Boko Haram Affiliates," *MEAC Findings Report 10* (New York: United Nations University, 2021).

[9] See, for instance, how community preferences for the punishment of ex-associates in the Lake Chad Basin vary depending on their agency in association, role in the group, and gender, demonstrating the importance of justice

Based on your findings, what are the three big takeaways for DDR practitioners outside of Somalia, including in other places where MEAC works like Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon, Iraq, and Colombia?

While we offer several insights, three key takeaways for DDR practitioners in other locations are as follows:

1. **Identifying the attributes that influence community receptivity to return:** Understanding the factors that shape community support for the reintegration of former militants is essential. Our findings emphasize the significant influence of security-related attributes in the Somali context, such as past violence, manner of entry and exit from the group, and unit association, on community threat perception. Practitioners need to understand whether these – and other - attributes influence receptivity to return in the contexts where they work, and prioritize addressing these security concerns in their programs, as they heavily impact community acceptance of ex-combatants.

2. **Formal reintegration channels are preferred:** Our findings highlight a preference for graduates of UN-supported national DDR programmes in Somalia and those granted government amnesty over those reintegrated through traditional channels. DDR practitioners should focus on understanding how different interventions are perceived by the public and support the establishment of reintegration pathways that resonate with those communities who will receive their graduates.

3. **Holistic reintegration approach:** Effective community reintegration of former combatants, however, requires a comprehensive approach that engages both the community and the returning individuals. Reintegration programmes – especially those in contexts with sanctioned/listed terrorist groups or with groups deemed "violent extremist" – should be careful not to narrowcast programming. Rather, practitioners should work to foster community resilience and cohesion, and address local perceptions of risk and fairness by going beyond focusing on extremist ideologies to consider both security-related attributes as well as social dynamics.

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and accountability measures. See, Sophie Huvé, Dr Siobhan O'Neil, Dr Remadji Hoinathy, Kato Van Broeckhoven with Mohammed Bukar, Fatima Yetcha Ajimi Badu, Teniola Tayo, Jessica Caus, and Adja Faye, "[Preventing Recruitment and Ensuring Effective Reintegration Efforts: Evidence from Across the Lake Chad Basin to Inform Policy and Practice](#)," *MEAC Lake Chad Basin Case Study Report* (New York: United Nations University, 2022)., pp.72-73.

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