Implications of Armed Group Hierarchies for Formerly Armed Actor Reintegration

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The rank or experience of a formerly armed actor (FAA) upon departure from an armed group can significantly influence the trajectory of their reintegration pathways. Namely, ranks impact key factors such as transferable skill sets, financial security, traumatic exposure, and access to formal or informal networks post-demobilisation – an issue often underappreciated in reintegration programming. This research brief delves into the implications of hierarchies for reintegration, comparing such dynamics within state-sponsored militaries and across centralised and decentralised non-state armed groups (NSAGs). Based on this, it offers recommendations on designing reintegration programmes that mitigate the risk of unequal outcomes for FAAs.

Hierarchical structures manifest in varied and sometimes evolving forms within armed groups, which are shaped, among other factors, by their degree of centralisation and traditional sociopolitical power hierarchies. The impact of armed group hierarchies on subsequent reintegration trajectories is a mix of deliberately reinforced factors, i.e. through differential provisions tied to assistance programmes, and non-deliberate factors, i.e. resulting from the experiential and occupational differences inherent in hierarchies.

Command structures in (NATO) militaries are clear, uniformly enforced across branches that typically determine differential provisions of reintegration support, notably distinguishing between officers and enlisted personnel or the time served. While the degree of differentiation varies, findings across most contexts are similar in that enlisted or lower-ranking personnel report greater challenges reintegrating. For example, a 2016 study on support to transitioning service members from the UK armed forces shows that enlisted personnel report a lower perception of support than their officer counterparts. At the same time, lower ranking military veterans embody less cultural capital, fewer transferable skill sets and, as research on combat exposure has shown, experience higher levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and poorer physical health. Differential reintegration provisions thus tend to deepen the experiential asymmetries faced by reintegrating military personnel: Trust After Betrayal data collected on former Afghan National Army Special Operations Command (ANASOC) soldiers, for instance, reveals consistent disparities between officers and enlisted personnel through unequal educational attainment, employment outcomes and access to information and networks post-demobilisation. Furthermore, data from the U.S. indicates that suicide rates, adjusted for age, are 1.58 times higher among the lowest-ranking junior enlisted personnel when compared to senior enlisted personnel, and 2.41 times higher compared to officers.

NSAGs occupy a broad spectrum between centralised command structures similar to state militaries, and being largely decentralised. Centralised NSAGs have hierarchical power structures embedded in their processes that influence reintegration outcomes. While NSAGs, unlike state militaries, do not directly offer reintegration support for their FAAs themselves, hierarchies influence the provisions and benefits devised by third parties. For example, in the case of ethnic insurgent groups in Myanmar, initial negotiations for a peace agreement in 2015 left out what would happen to middle and lower-ranking soldiers. Often such agreements prioritise satisfying the demands of higher-ranking actors that give the necessary orders for their combatants to demobilise. While the network structure of centralised non-state armed groups yields prospects for higher compliance and thus more stable and successful reintegration programmes, underprovisioning mid-ranking commanders and rank-and-file fighters can overlook distinct risks that increase the threat of recidivism. The post-demobilisation phase often perpetuates conflict-time hierarchical orders of social and political capital that determine an FAA's access to information and resources, economic opportunities, decision-making

power, and legal security. While each reintegration programme would need to be evaluated in its own context, this suggests that in-group ranks play an important role in post-demobilisation trajectories.

Decentralised non-state armed groups, conversely, have rather ambiguous hierarchies and more informal power structures than centralised NSAGs and state militaries. These groups comprise many sub-groups whose chains of command are unclear and thus require even greater specificity in reintegration programming based on distinct identities and local circumstances. Simultaneously, it proves most challenging for reintegration programmes to incentivise higher-ranking members of such groups to demobilise and to provide a coherent collective pathway for FAAs. The absence of adequate reintegration provision coupled with the typically informal and fragmented nature of these groups often leaves rank-and-file FAAs with limited cohesive support networks post-demobilisation while being dependent on the continued patronage of their former superiors, frequently leading to a return to violence. Of note, less robust research has been conducted on the relationship between in-group rank and access to social and informational capital post-demobilisation among these groups, suggesting a need for a more critical examination of these dynamics.

After the fall of Gaddafi, Libya saw the rise of hundreds of decentralised NSAGs. The lack of a clear plan for reintegrating these diverse NSAGs resulted in their fighters regrouping in new militias. These new militias, led by individuals aiming to increase their regional power, further contributed to the instability in Libya. In some cases, the very lack of structures, representative hierarchies, and cohesive, meaningful networks in decentralised armed groups that would help institutionalise the reintegration trajectory, leads to rank-and-file FAAs being more exposed to societal power dynamics that may undermine their reintegration pathways. For former Al-Shabaab militants, for instance, the possibility of reintegration depends on the sponsorship of local clan elders – an uncertain and trust-intensive process that is inherently inaccessible to some.

To effectively handle the complex nature of reintegrating FAAs from different types of organisations, two main strategies are proposed: First, begin with the acknowledgment that networks and perceptions of support differ by rank and position in state armed groups and NSAGs. Ensure reintegration programming leaves no provision-needs gaps due to hierarchical differences and implements assistance on a needs basis. For example, a hierarchically induced gap emerges when a low-ranking member has fewer transferable skills and receives less reintegration support. In decentralised NSAGs, there is also the risk that the diversity of local circumstances and identities created by the groups' heterogeneous nature could leave the support needs of most rank-and-file members unaddressed. Tailoring support to these circumstances can decrease the dependency on the patronage of local armed groups or civilian leaders. Ensuring no provision-needs gaps due to hierarchical differences can stabilise reintegration trajectories, provide more equitable opportunities, and build trust in reintegration programmes.

Second, it is recommended to integrate contextualised assessment, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation components that explicitly address the differential access that FAAs have to support networks, thereby leveraging pertinent forms of social capital crucial for their successful transition to civilian life. For instance, bolstering peer-to-peer support capacities for FAAs from decentralised armed groups, where such networks are typically weak post-demobilisation and when such supports do not amplify the risk of rearming. Additionally, efforts should be made to broaden access to hierarchically exclusive networks within centralised NSAGs and militaries. Under the appropriate conditions, encouraging the transformation of armed group social capital during reintegration, particularly in decision-making and participation, can better equalise outcomes. Likewise, increasing information sharing regarding available economic, educational, social, or other growth opportunities to all FAAs across hierarchies and armed group structures can alleviate social capital-induced asymmetries. To effectively address network disparities, a case-sensitive approach should consider how social capital is distributed and acquired within these groups, necessitating a nuanced understanding of network and hierarchy dynamics in each context.

Assessing Reintegration Landscapes: Centralisation Dynamics and Programme Strength

This quadrant graphic offers a simplified overview of different formerly armed actor (FAA) reintegration scenarios from the perspective of hierarchies, alongside two key variables: the level of armed group centralisation and the strength or adequacy of reintegration programming. It is worth recognising the inherent reductionism in these categories as real-life reintegration contexts and armed group dynamics are far more intricate, demanding case-sensitive analysis and adaptable programming. Rather than providing definitive solutions to highly context-dependent scenarios, the graphic serves as a starting point for assessing common challenges, identifying best practices, and sparking critical inquiries into the ramifications of various armed group internal organisation dynamics. It is worth emphasising that strategies mentioned in one quadrant, such as community-driven reintegration and needs-based provisions, are not limited to this setting but are pertinent across the board.

High Armed Group Centralisation

Weak/Inadequate Reintegration Programming

Strong Reintegration Programming

In instances where armed groups exhibit centralised hierarchies and FAAs experience significant disparities in reintegration outcomes, provisions may be markedly differentiated to align with these hierarchical structures. This stratification can exist whether the provision is directly offered by the armed group, such as in militaries, or facilitated by third parties, often as outcomes of peace agreements. Such unfavourable approaches typically concentrate resources, benefits, and decision-making power among higher-ranking individuals, leaving lower-ranking members with less support and fewer opportunities post-demobilisation, despite their often greater need for assistance. This reinforces rank-based disparities in social, economic, and political capital that persist from within the armed group into civilian life.

In armed groups characterised by high centralisation and robust reintegration programming, support provisions are implemented on a needs basis across all ranks. This approach ensures equitable distribution of resources and benefits, aiming to bridge the experiential gaps induced by armed group hierarchies during reintegration, spanning social, economic, psychological, and other pertinent aspects. Such programming recognises that each FAA, regardless of rank, requires adequate and tailored support for a stable pathway into civilian life. Strong reintegration programming also encourages the continuous transformation of armed group social capital post-demobilisation to render networks, access to information, and decision-making processes more inclusive and accessible to rank-and-file FAAs.

Low armed group centralisation and the resulting fragmentation of actors often obscure the landscape of target beneficiaries, significantly complicating adequate reintegration programming. The absence of hierarchical structures leads to lower compliance, transparency, and accountability in the reintegration process, particularly on the part of local commanders. This lack of structured and contextualised support may perpetuate a cycle of dependency on the patronage of armed group leaders unwilling to comply with set demobilisation trajectories and aiming to retain influence, leading to frequent recidivism among FAAs. Additionally, with minimal guidance, collective identity, and support networks, rank-and-file FAAs are often left vulnerable to existing societal power dynamics, rendering reintegration highly dependent on an FAA's existing connections, the benevolence of local civilian leaders, and the ability to navigate these intricate social structures.

In contexts characterised by decentralised armed group hierarchies and successful reintegration, the lack of organisational structure and top-down guidance is compensated by adaptive community-driven initiatives and support networks that fill the transition vacuum otherwise occupied by the patronage of local armed group leaders. The absence of hierarchical structures and institutionalisation is used as an advantage to design programming that embeds FAAs more strongly in their communities and distributes resources and benefits in an inclusive and equitable manner. Moreover, community-led initiatives may build resilience against the attempts of non-compliant local commanders to remobilise FAAs and continue exerting influence through illicit means.

Low Armed Group Centralisation