Research Brief: Deconstructing the Formerly Armed Actor Threat Stigma

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Assessing and containing security threats emanating from formerly armed actors (FAAs) is a vital function of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programs. While such risks need to be taken seriously, FAAs shouldn't be considered _naturally violent individuals that pose an intrinsic danger_ to their receiving communities. By conceptually limiting (re)integration to containing violence and aggression, many DDR programs reproduce a common stigma against FAAs and thereby undermine individual efforts to disassociate from this image. Namely, confining FAAs to preconceived and unfavourable "troublemaker" identities reduces their confidence in the ability to (re)integrate and perpetuates negative stereotypes within receiving communities. Problematic FAA behaviours are to be assessed and dealt with on a case-by-case basis; the totalising prejudice about FAAs being inherently violent, however, must be challenged to avoid severe complications for the (re)integration process. This Research Brief thus makes the case that **DDR initiatives should actively _deconstruct_ the threat stigma to increase the societal acceptance of FAAs and to prevent the psychosocial alienation of FAAs during (re)integration.**

FAA threat narratives tend to arise from policy discourses that frame DDR as providing security at the cost of justice. This view suggests that FAAs are given a chance to (re)integrate into a community of victims despite being the perpetrators – solely to neutralise the more significant threat they would pose remaining outside of the community. **The strict victim-perpetrator binary, however, may mischaracterise FAAs' complex motives for having joined an armed group and discount their personal traumas and grievances resulting from the conflict.** For instance, an FAA could have been forced into this situation to survive or may have been victimised by members of an armed group. An essential part of deconstructing the aggression stigma in receiving communities is emphasising the existence of these scenarios without framing all FAAs as helpless products of their circumstances.

Demonstrating that a propensity for violence is not the only rationale behind armed group membership helps question dominant societal images of FAAs and mitigate reservations against their renewed presence in society. To effectively deconstruct stigma, DDR programs must be accompanied by public awareness and dialogue-promoting campaigns in schools, religious groups, human rights organisations, and other public spaces to foster mutual understanding and community support for the (re)integration process. **Deconstructing stigma means opening up the opportunity for FAAs to influence their public reputation and engage as fellow citizens instead of just risk factors.**

To enable proper (re)integration, stigma does not only have to be deconstructed in receiving communities but also in the self-image of FAAs. If DDR programs and policies primarily classify FAAs as violent offenders and not as individuals with complex motives and intentions, FAAs may be less likely to believe that this association can ever be left behind. As a result, FAAs may become frustrated with the (re)integration process and continue searching for validation of their identity within their prior armed group networks. To prevent this isolation from the ultimate goal of (re)integration, programs must treat FAAs as proper _citizens_ capable of re-establishing their social reputation and societal function at this critical juncture in their lives. Socialising FAAs as agents who can shape their own future as opposed to offenders determined by their past promotes seeking opportunities over the passive acceptance of the status quo. The most essential step to realising this critical approach is sensitising (re)integration staff to the adverse effects of using stigmatising language and condemnatory labels when interacting with FAAs.

The threat stigma is one of the most prevalent obstacles to FAA (re)integration. Deconstructing it requires acknowledging the complex dynamic of motives, intentions and circumstances that led to joining an armed group and using violence in the first place. Dialogue, empathy and nuance can contribute to deconstructing stigma by promoting cooperation and understanding, reduce stereotypes and prejudices, and create the basis for identifying shared values. While deconstructing the threat stigma is necessary, violent and threatening behaviours among FAAs are still an issue for which DDR programs need to be prepared. However, if such security provision is based on general suspicion instead of evaluation and targeted intervention, stigma will continue to jeopardise the trajectories of those many FAAs who are able and eager to (re)integrate as citizens of their communities.

The following table lists possible stigmas that different types of FAAs may face and how they can be counteracted. There is considerable overlap between FAA categories in that assumptions about the **fragile or threatening nature of their inherent psychological condition** are the most common trigger for stigma.

FAA Category	Examples of common forms of stigma and consequences	Strategies for deconstructing stigma
Military Veterans	Presumptions of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are the most commonly experienced stigma among military veterans, which negatively impact, for instance, their employability. Their families, however, are equally affected by the adverse effects of PTSD on behavioural patterns, relationships and emotional proximity. The pressure this exerts on intrafamilial bonds can provoke the development of mental health conditions in family members. Yet, the stigma on PTSD and shame about being a "broken household" often prevent them from openly addressing these struggles.	Spreading information about the identification of PTSD among service members and the ramifications it has for their daily lives is essential. Publicly demonstrating that many others share this condition and that strained family relationships are a common consequence should destigmatise seeking help both in veterans and family members. At the same time, misconceptions about the condition in the labour market should be counteracted and employers informed of the strengths that military veterans can bring to the work force.
Case Example	Military veterans in the United Kingdom have historically had higher unemployment rates than the rest of the population. The Hire a Hero campaign, launched in the United Kingdom in 2011 by the Royal British Legion, used a variety of messaging media to train employers on how to increase veteran recruitment into small- and medium-sized businesses and to support them better in the workplace. This campaign shifted the discourse around these individuals from "broken soldiers" to being valuable workforce members. In addition, the charity Combat Stress raises public awareness and conducts psychological research on PTSD, depression, anxiety and substance abuse among ex-service personnel. It also offers 24-hour helpline to veterans and their families for confidential mental health advice and support.	
Ex-gang members	Ex-gang members' past associations can cause employment problems, leading to (often ongoing) poverty and instability. Especially in places where visible self-presentation (i.e., tattoos) is a part of gang membership and gang registries exist, these individuals face repeated encounters with law enforcement and particular difficulties securing sustainable livelihood options.	Multi-pronged approaches addressing employers, law enforcement, and general social stigma can be helpful in overcoming these challenges. Additionally, strategies to support ex-gang members with emotional and behavioural regulation, to engage them in contributing to community well-being, and to improve the academic performance of those still in school can positively impact how these individuals view themselves and how the community receives them.
Case Example	Stigma against ex-gang members in Chicago has made it difficult for these FAAs to find employment, housing and other opportunities, thus increasing the likelihood that they will return to violence. As recidivists, they are exposed to harsher sentences and even greater barriers to integrating into society. The Chicago-based Cure Violence project aims to reduce violence in communities by using public health strategies. It uses a community-based programme that employs former gang members as mentors and mediators of community conflict. It uses what has become known as the "violence interrupters" model, placing FAAs back into the communities they once controlled as gangs to prevent violence instead.	
Ex-guerrillas	FAAs from guerrilla groups may face stigma based on assumptions about their involvement with violence committed by the group, exposure to traumatic events, a lack of understanding about their motives for joining in the first place, legal issues they may face, or difficulties transferring skill sets to civilian employment opportunities.	Contextually nuanced approaches to deconstructing stigma will consider relevant sociohistorical factors as they influence sustainable integration into society - e.g., difficulties for women in owning and accessing land, gendered roles in civilian life that may feel like a step backwards from more agentic roles they had in the armed group, and gender-based violence.
Case Example	Female FAAs from the leftist guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), have frequently experienced stigma and discrimination after their transition to civilian life. They are often assumed to have experienced sexual violence and may struggle to find employment due to the exclusion they face as a result. Agencies within the United Nations System have been actively promoting the rights of women and girls in the context of the Colombian peace process, with a specific focus on the integration of female ex-FARC members into society. They have been promoting their rights to participate in the public sphere, to access education and training, healthcare and economic opportunities.	
Former cartel members	Former cartel members are often received with high levels of suspicion and mistrust when they try to integrate into society. Employers may not hire them due to their past affiliations, law enforcement officials may harass them, and communities and families may ostracize and reject them as criminals. Possible physical violence in the form of retaliation from other cartels Is also common.	Providing education and awareness campaigns that highlight the reasons why people may become involved in cartels, such as poverty, lack of education and job opportunities, and lack of access to basic services, can promote empathy and understanding. Support and integration services such as job training and placement, counselling and other forms of assistance can help to reduce the likelihood of recidivism and demonstrate their capabilities to make positive contributions to society.
Case Example	Former members of the Mexican Sinaloa cartel with drug and alcohol addictions struggle not only with the attendant stigma of their past affiliations but also the severed ties with friends and family that often accompany substance abuse issues. Along with this, negative self-perceptions and low senses of self-efficacy can demotivate them and create negatively reinforcing cycles of attitudes and behaviours that undermine integration. The Comunidad de Sinaí program is a residential three-month program that combines the Minnesota Model of addiction treatment with family-centred approaches that facilitate recovery, the re-establishment of relationships, forgiveness, and reconciliation.	
Ex-extremists	Perceptions of continued aggression and radicalism can lead to discrimination in employment and housing and generalised suspicion by receiving communities and families. Trust may be difficult to build under these circumstances, and FAAs may be the targets of hate speech and vigilantes. Former extremists may also face legal problems or recurring problems with law enforcement bodies as a result of their past affiliations.	Education and vocational training can provide these FAAs with the skills necessary to be successful in the workforce and give them a sense of purpose and belonging despite the present stigma. Simultaneously, increasing public outreach on the matter in coordination with non-governmental organizations can address some of the social complexities of integrating these FAAs. Finally, in tribal and clan-based societies, engaging elders and community leaders can be critical for fostering acceptance.
Case Example	Since the al-Shabaab militia in Somalia actively searches and kills defectors, community members associate the presence of FAAs with a constant security risk. Moreover, FAAs are the first to be suspected as informants and perpetrators in the aftermath of terrorist operations. Their religious positions are also called into question and many fear that they still adhere to radicalised interpretations of the Quran. The Government of Somalia, with support from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and community-based organizations, has developed an integration program for former al-Shabaab members with psychosocial and religious counselling to address extremist beliefs. The programme includes a mentoring component in which FAAs who have experienced a positive transition facilitate those who are newer to the process. This helps them with identifying the kinds of behaviours and practices that establish trusting and transparent relationships with the public. The programme also hosts social integration activities to promote broader participation in community and clan affairs, critical for acceptance and employment.	