

Formerly Armed Actor Reintegration: A Crucial Pillar of International Security

Dr Erin McFee and Connor Christensen

The challenges and opportunities posed by formerly armed actor (FAA) reintegration extend far beyond the mere cessation of hostilities, implicating economic rejuvenation, [psychological healing](#), and [sociopolitical stability](#). The scars of conflict etched deep into the collective consciousness of individuals, families, and entire communities, [require a holistic approach](#) that addresses a diverse spectrum of physical, psychological, and social needs. The capacity to comprehend and navigate these complexities is paramount, not just for the sake of humanitarian principles, but as an indispensable tool in mitigating international security risks and securing lasting peace. Integrating a [strengths-based approach to FAA reintegration](#), this Research Brief addresses both the challenges presented by inadequate programming as well as the potential contributions to national security that FAAs are uniquely positioned to make in a given context.

Both FAAs and armed actors of groups who never disarmed in the first place can [reproduce and expand violence](#) and instability in the immediate term. This can result in [fragmentation, emergent forms of violence, and new domains of competition over illicit economic resources](#), significantly complicating the efforts of policymakers and practitioners. Reasons behind [continued patterns of violence and illegal activity](#) are a lack of personal and family protection, limited alternative economic opportunities, and [non-existent psychosocial treatment and positive community socialisation](#), among others. In some contexts, this neglect leads to [explicit frustrations against the state](#), which delegitimises government authorities in the eyes of (formerly) armed actors and motivates long-term insurgency.

However, the security consequences of integrating formerly armed actors extend well beyond the immediate post-conflict setting. Neglecting FAA reintegration has significant ramifications for long-term global security, with potential consequences ranging from local instability to the [resurgence of extremist groups](#) on a transnational scale. Poorly reintegrated FAAs represent a pool of potential hires feeding the growing marketplace for [foreign fighter recruitment](#). Furthermore, the persistence of unresolved FAA integration fosters [clandestine networks and shadow economies](#), contributing to arms trafficking, drug trade, and organised crime, further perpetuating insecurity and instability.

Failed reintegration sits at the core of the current clashes between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan, even if the root structural causes are historically tied to [political autonomy, unequal distribution of wealth, issues of governance, and geopolitical disputes](#) (glossed as 'ethnic and tribal conflict'). Following cooperation to topple the al-Bashir regime in 2019 and a subsequent coup in

October 2021, the SAF and RSF leaders quickly reached a stalemate over control of the country's military and governance institutions as well as the approach to integrating the RSF into the military. What began as [clashes in the nation's capital](#) quickly escalated into [civil war, resurgence of genocide, and humanitarian disaster](#).

Generative approaches to reintegration, however, do more than just reduce the risks associated with disenfranchised former fighters - they produce gains in the (inter)national security landscape. In terms of embodied, experiential knowledge, no individuals are better suited to supporting security-building than those who were previously part of the production of insecurity and who are now committed to stabilisation and society-building. For example, formerly antagonistic FAAs from the Lebanese Civil War (1975) established the Fighters for Peace (FFP) association to [contribute to peacebuilding and peaceful coexistence](#). Former FARC-EP guerrilla fighters in Colombia have worked since the 2016 signing of the Peace Accord on the *Humanicémonos* [demining initiative](#) in Colombia. [The Honor Foundation](#), a United States-based career transition program for Special Operations Forces military veterans, has built its entire curriculum upon translating skills gained in elite military service (leadership, critical thinking, team-oriented collaboration, and shared values) into legible advantages for professional development. Thus, the idea of drawing from FAA experiential strengths is not new. It is, however, underdeveloped at the global level, where prevention and risk-mitigation mindsets tend to dominate policy and program development.¹

Thus, FAA integration is not confined to local concerns - it is a global imperative. The interconnectedness of security threats in our modern world necessitates international cooperation and national prioritisation as a fundamental requirement for a well-executed reintegration process. Examples from the African continent, with United Nations peacekeeping missions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, highlight the effectiveness of close partnerships in disarming and reintegrating former combatants, [especially when there was room for local-level innovations in the process](#). The African Union's (AU) regional efforts, including the [Nouakchott Process](#), demonstrate the potential of cooperation among African nations to enhance security. Cross-border collaboration, as witnessed in the Sahel region involving Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Chad, underscores the imperative of collective action in addressing shared security challenges while promoting FAA integration. Prioritising holistic and generative (re)integration programs for formerly armed actors is an indispensable cornerstone of both national and international security as neglecting it poses risks of instability, extremist resurgence, and transnational security threats. International cooperation, as exemplified by successful partnerships and initiatives, is fundamental in strengthening FAA integration efforts. Elevating our collective commitment to FAA reintegration is a fundamental strategic necessity for a safer, more harmonious global landscape.

¹ This strategy can be categorised as a 'strengths-based approach', which we elaborate on in our [December 2022 Research Brief](#).

Case Study: The Influx of Former Iraqi Security Personnel to the Islamic State (IS)

In April 2003, the U.S.-led Coalition invaded Iraq, leading to the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime. In the aftermath, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) initiated the so-called "[de-Ba'athification](#)" process, purging Ba'athist loyalists from the state bureaucracy and military. The dissolution of Iraqi military and intelligence organisations resulted in widespread layoffs, creating a disgruntled group of formerly armed actors, including senior military officials. Many unemployed military personnel led and joined [emerging Sunni insurgent groups](#) like the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI) and the Naqshbandi Order (JRTN).

The [lack of a structured reintegration pathway](#) for ex-Ba'athist security forces members contributed to the early stages of a prolonged insurgency, as they found purpose in the evolving landscape of armed actors. Initially aligned with Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the IAI sought to counter U.S. and Iranian influence. Internal conflicts, including clashes with CPA forces, arose due to diverging ideologies. Following the [Anbar Awakening](#) in 2006-08, the IAI collaborated with the CPA against AQI. After the U.S. withdrawal in 2011, the IAI briefly disbanded but resurfaced in 2013, aligning and then merging with AQI's successor, the Islamic State (IS). By mid-2014, IS controlled vast territories in Iraq and Syria. The JRTN extended AQI and later the Islamic State, playing a significant role in financing and mobilising supporting armed factions.

APRIL 2003

U.S.-led coalition forces invade Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein's regime.

SUMMER 2003

Formation of various emergent Sunni insurgent groups by unemployed military personnel, like the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI) and the Naqshbandi Order (JRTN) fighting against foreign influence in Iraq.

LATE 2011

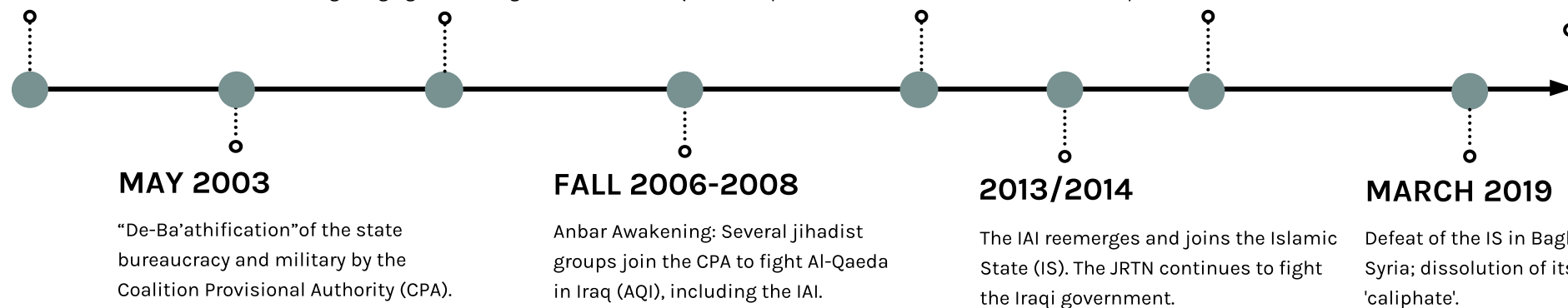
The U.S. completes withdrawal of its troops from Iraq. The IAI demobilizes and turns to Sunni political activism.

MID-2014

The IS controls vast parts of Northwestern Iraq and Eastern Syria. The Iraqi city of Mosul is captured.

SINCE 2019

Attempts By the IS to rebuild its influence. Defection and reintegration plays a central role in these efforts.



The IS employed [defection and reintegration strategies](#), effectively filling the vacuum resulting from an absence of these approaches by governments and international actors. It specifically recruited FAAs from the police and military to boost its own military, intelligence and law enforcement capabilities while eroding those of the state and other groups. To attract this group, the IS built on the resentments felt by the FAA masses "betrayed" by their authorities with its propaganda, even incorporating their narratives into public messaging. It also provided protection, socioeconomic opportunities, vocational training, and amnesty windows. Moreover, at the tribal and community level, the IS engaged in reconciliation and conflict resolution activities to become a vital player in their violence-affected social fabric, which was an important complementary component to these efforts.

The defection and reintegration campaigns of the IS became highly institutionalised: Before capturing major cities like Mosul in June 2014 they gathered intelligence on former government officials over years, to refine their recruitment efforts and target specific individuals, such as experts in military tactics and chemical weapons manufacturing. They also launched specialized rehabilitation and reintegration centers with training and indoctrination programs for government defectors in occupied territories. Since the collapse of its caliphate in 2019, defection and reintegration approaches have been central to the Islamic State's [rebuilding strategy](#). As long as large disgruntled and marginalised FAA masses, originating not only from the Ba'athist regime but also the various armed groups that have formed since 2003, receive insufficient attention, the IS and other armed groups will continue to exploit the potential of their manpower and technical skills, which have been weaponized to destabilise the newly formed state and the entire region since the inception of the war. The void left behind by the authorities needs to be filled with in a holistic and integrated reintegration policy approach providing the necessary opportunities and care for FAAs and their communities, which would benefit Iraq's state building process and is indispensable to the country's long-term stability.