

The Political Dynamics of DDR: Key Research Findings

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JOINT BRIEF SERIES: THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF DDR

This research brief series has been initiated through a collaboration between the Politics After War (PAW) research network, the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA), and the United Nations Department of Peace Operations, Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions: DDR Section (UNDPO/ OROLSI/DDR) with the aim to provide research perspectives and scientific evidence on the intersection of DDR and politics with a particular emphasis on the transformative dynamics of armed groups and combatants.

The editorial board has consisted of Johanna Malm and Ashi Al-Kahwati from FBA, Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs, Gyda Sindre, Devon Curtis, Véronique Dudouet, and Jacqui Cho from PAW, and Thomas Kontogeorgos, Ntagahoraho Burihabwa, Kwame Poku and Barbra Lukunka from UNDPO/ OROLSI/DDR. The views and opinions expressed in the brief series are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the collaborating partners.

Introduction

The United Nations' Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) declaration, and more recently the A4P + priorities, express a broad, shared commitment to advancing political solutions to armed conflicts.² In line with this, the revised Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), and its new module 2.20 on the 'Politics of DDR', recognizes DDR processes as inherently political.³ While DDR programmes and efforts have previously been seen as technical endeavors, experience shows that DDR is highly political and can contribute to political solutions to conflict. Not only do DDR processes influence political dynamics on the ground; they are also strongly affected by the constraints and opportunities provided by the political context in which they are implemented. For this reason, DDR processes need to be firmly anchored in politics in order to effectively contribute to long-term security and stability at the regional, national and local levels. The new IDDRS module 2.20 contributes to this aim by providing new policy and guidance for the United Nations at the intersection of DDR



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and politics, including how DDR can contribute to broader peace processes. At the same time, knowledge on how to move from policy to practice in conflict settings, as well as the type of support required, still requires dissemination to the broader community of practice.

The A4P+ priorities offer concrete avenues to accelerate progress in terms of the A4P commitments related to politics, for example the need to promote collective coherence behind political strategies. While the A4P declaration commits to finding political solutions to conflicts and to pursuing complementary and integrated strategies,⁴ current global developments render such efforts more difficult. We are currently witnessing a global stagnation in democratization, increased reliance on military counterinsurgency campaigns at the expense of political settlements and a growing tendency to designate armed groups as terrorist organizations. All these trends pose serious challenges to the political integration of armed groups through the political settlement of conflict.

The body of empirical research on the political dynamics of non-state armed groups has grown in parallel with the above-mentioned policy commitments

and guidelines. In particular, academic studies exist on so-called ‘rebel-to-party’ transformations, former armed groups’ electoral participation, ex-combatants’ and veterans’ political engagement and other post-war trajectories. Furthermore, a grown number of studies has analysed the long-term impacts of the political integration of armed groups on democratic governance and sustainable peace. Taken together, this research has greatly improved our understanding of how and when armed groups transition from armed warfare to post-war politics and society. It has also identified important trends across time and space, both between and within different armed groups.

Against this backdrop, the Politics after War (PAW) research network,⁵ the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) and the United Nations Department of Peace Operations (DPO)/Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions (OROLSI)/Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Section (DDRS) launched a joint initiative in 2020 with the aim of providing research-informed perspectives and empirical evidence on the political transformation of armed groups into political parties, highlighting this central aspect of IDDRS 2.20. The initiative aims at strengthening and sustaining linkages between the research community and DDR policymakers and practitioners, with a view to enhancing the evidence base for UN engagement with the politics of DDR and providing concrete evidence-based reflections on how DDR can contribute to broader peace processes. One of the outputs of this joint initiative is a series of eight Research Briefs, published jointly in 2022 by PAW, FBA and UNDPO/OROLSI/DDRS. This joint Research Brief series presents key findings from peer-review published research pertaining to the topic at hand.⁶

The present brief summarizes the research findings presented in the joint Research Brief series and lays out its implications and recommendations for policymakers and practitioners. While the research points to important trends and identifies certain recurring themes, it is important to emphasise that

there are no magic bullets and no clear, consistent paths to sustainable peace. In fact, the research often points to dilemmas, tensions and contradictions. In identifying these challenges, research can help clarify assumptions and options for policymakers and practitioners. Ultimately, the findings published in this Research Brief series collectively supports the view that DDR is a political endeavour that requires political choices to be made and political consequences to be considered.

The mode of transition: Negotiating the political integration of armed groups

As section 7 of IDDRS module 2.20 notes, DDR processes are often preceded by peace negotiations and the signing of a peace agreement among the parties involved in the conflict. Some armed groups integrate politically either following military victories and violent takeovers of the state apparatus (such as the Taliban in Afghanistan) or as the result of elections (such as Hamas in Palestine). However, most armed groups that integrate politically do so after armed conflicts have been drawn to a close through negotiated peace settlements. The research brief by Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Luís Martínez Lorenzo, ‘Peace Agreements and the Political Integration of Armed Groups’, shows that over one-third of all non-state armed groups who signed peace agreements during the 1975–2018 period became political parties or continued to operate as political parties in the post-war period. These parties include groups as diverse as Renamo in Mozambique, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation (FMNL) in El Salvador and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines.

Internationally supervised peace processes offer opportunities for external actors to play a vital role in assisting and supporting the political integration of armed groups. As such, this context warrants greater examination. Based on the rebel-to-party dataset,⁷ Söderberg Kovacs and Martínez Lorenzo show that armed group signatories that become political

parties have more often signed peace agreements that include specific rebel-to-party provisions than those groups that do not integrate politically. These types of provisions can play an instrumental role in several ways: for instance, by stating the rights of the non-state armed group to engage in politics, or by establishing obligations for other actors, including the government, to provide critical support, make reforms or enact legislation towards this end. Söderberg Kovacs and Martínez Lorenzo also show that armed groups that later become political parties have more often than other armed groups signed peace agreements with provisions regarding elections, power-sharing, DDR, military integration and amnesty. Thus, the content of the peace agreement seems to be a key factor, although it is far from the only one at work in explaining the political integration of former combatant groups.

Pathways to integration: Party politics and other options for political engagement

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development.⁸ Former warring parties and individual ex-combatants can play a role in achieving these objectives in the aftermath of war. IDDRS module 2.20 specifically notes that in cases where the armed groups “have political aspirations”, the chances of a successful implementation of a peace agreement can be improved if DDR processes are “sensitively designed to support the transformation of these groups into political entities”.⁹

Research findings to date show that there are sometimes tensions and contradictions among the realization of these different objectives. For example, in their research brief ‘Political Integration and Post-war Elections’, Ozlem Tuncel, Carrie Manning and Ian Smith show that when former armed groups form political parties, they almost always participate in the first round of post-war general elections. Once these parties have survived their first electoral contest, they tend to remain in the electoral system. In contrast, for-

mer rebel parties that do not vie for office in the first elections are unlikely to do so later. Early electoral participation thus appears to be an effective component of long-term political integration. But this usually requires that armed groups are allowed to retain some form of organisational structure in order to select candidates and mobilise voters on a joint platform – something that may run counter to the objectives of most DDR programmes, where the aim is to dismantle the organisational capacity of former armed groups as quickly as possible for security reasons.

Tuncel, Manning and Smith also point out that the quality of elections in post-conflict countries varies considerably: more than 40 per cent of all legislative elections in which former rebel parties participated were not considered free and fair. Electoral participation can be valuable, regardless of elections quality, but holding elections does not necessarily lead to a more democratic future. Furthermore, while elections are critical markers of political transition, they do not guarantee enduring peace. Some former rebel parties continue to mobilize around the same social cleavages that were mobilized in wartime, and in so doing contribute to consolidating wartime cleavages and inequalities. In some rare cases, this has also created an environment conducive to the return of armed conflict, for example in Mozambique.

However, forming a political party is not the only way that former armed group members may collectively engage in politics. Former combatants can pursue many pathways to political engagement besides political parties. This is the theme of the research brief by Véronique Dudouet and Claudia Cruz Almedia, “Political Engagement by Former Armed Groups Outside Party Politics”. It illustrates various ways that civil society activism and other forms of collective action have allowed former combatants to pursue broader socio-political objectives in different post-war contexts. In some cases, former combatants have formed veteran associations that perform advocacy functions or pursue other political claims. Creating

or joining a social movement is another pathway to political action. In some cases, these civil society organizations have been closely tied to their former militant organizations or their political objectives. In other cases, they have expressed antagonism towards former leaders.

In many conflict settings, these alternative options for political engagement are a more useful form of political integration. Dudouet and Cruz Almedia show that although there are many reasons why some former combatants choose to be involved in collective action outside of party politics, this pathway may be particularly appealing to demobilized women and marginalized groups, who often face difficulties when seeking to pursue political careers. Such involvement can strengthen the possibilities for longer-term peace by preventing the political marginalization of former combatants. However, careful contextualized analysis is important before promoting such forms of political engagement, because not all groups are committed to peaceful engagement.

The intra-party dimension of political integration: change vs. continuity

There is an enormous diversity among armed groups in terms of their organizational characteristics. Section 5.1 of IDDRS module 2.20 emphasizes the importance of contextual analysis for understanding the prospects and perils of transforming armed actors into non-violent political parties. The structures, motives and ideologies of armed groups vary across cases, as well as within groups and over time and across space. John Ishiyama's research brief, "Rebel party organization and durable peace after civil conflict" shows that the transformation of armed groups into political parties often activates internal divisions. When there is no longer a common enemy uniting rebels' various factions, tensions emerge between fighters who believed in the primary cause and those who participated for more opportunistic reasons. Such divisions may lead to a split in the rebel party and even lead some factions to take up

arms again. All armed groups that seek to succeed in transforming their organizations into functioning political parties therefore need a strategy to prevent and overcome the internal divisions that are likely to emerge during the transition. Ishiyama's research shows, inter alia, that former rebel parties who survive in the long run either have more charismatic leaders than the ones who do not survive or enter into governing coalitions with other parties. This can inform strategies to overcome the integral dilemma of post-war divisions when formerly armed groups transition into constitutional politics.

Yet despite important organizational changes and reforms, most armed groups also display elements of continuity. In their research brief "DDR and Post-War Politics: Lessons from Northern Ireland", Matthew Whiting and Sophie Whiting show that the organizational legacies of armed groups often endure when they join constitutional politics. Some former rebel parties engage in the dual strategy of constitutional engagement and the continued use of violence, either openly or clandestinely. Wider structures of power and influence, including informal networks, often endure over the long run and can either support or hinder peace.

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The ideas and ideologies motivating former fighters can also change in the peace implementation period. During the armed struggle, non-state armed groups articulate claims and objectives, such as the desire for a new independent state, a radically reformed state, greater inclusion, or justice. The research brief “Ideological Moderation in Armed Groups turned Political Parties”, by Jacqui Cho and Gyda Sindre, shows that some former rebel parties moderate their claims and endorse less-exclusionary policies and goals after war, while others become more radical. Party fragmentation can sometimes have a moderating effect, although this is not always the outcome. Likewise, electoral participation can result in more moderate positions, but not in all cases. According to Cho and Sindre, other factors – such as access to valuable political resources and networks – also influence the decision-making and ideological consistency of formerly armed groups that become political parties.

Hilary Matfess’s research brief, “Women and Rebel to Party Transitions”, discusses why and how the transition from wartime politics to post-war politics

changes the way in which former armed groups turned political parties continue or change their wartime approaches to women and women’s issues. When groups fail to live up to their previous wartime promises, female veterans of former rebel groups may feel frustrated and disillusioned. Matfess’s research also shows that high-ranking former rebel women who are selected for government or other leadership positions may press for pro-women reforms over the long term, but it is important not to make gender-essentialist assumptions that former rebel women, as political representatives, will necessarily represent all women’s interests. Ethnic, religious, gender and class identities all play a role in shaping longer-term opportunities and challenges after war.

The ambiguous long-term effects of political integration

As noted in IDDRS module 2.20, the promise of political integration can help secure the consent of non-state armed groups to join the peace process and lay down their arms. However, it can also undermine the stability of political institutions in the medium and long term. In his above-mentioned research brief, Ishiyama shows that while the political integration of armed groups as political parties increases the likelihood of durable peace after war, it does not necessarily contribute to democratic politics and inclusive governance further down the road[A6]. This potential failure, in turn, may negatively affect the long-term prospects of sustainable peace.

Some of these potentially counterproductive effects may surface already during the early phase of peace agreement implementation. Whiting and Whiting draw on the Northern Irish case of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) and its associated political party, Sinn Féin, to highlight dilemmas regarding the sequencing of decommissioning, as well as challenges arising from tensions between the objectives of DDR processes and transitional justice mechanisms. For example, the release and reintegration of prisoners can be used as incentives to en-

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courage groups to disarm and demobilize, but over the longer term this can potentially undermine trust in post-war institutions and justice mechanisms.

There are also other potentially negative long-term effects of political integration. For example, research shows that youth in post-war settings often experience exclusion and marginalization. In the research brief “Former Armed Groups in Power and Post-war Youth Policies”, Lovise Aalen explains that there are particular challenges for youth when formerly armed groups become the ruling party. Leaders emerging from such groups often legitimize their rule with reference to the wartime struggle, whereas the younger generations often have little experience with or memories of the war. Aalen shows how the waning war narrative can lead post-war regimes to implement youth-specific strategies such as employment schemes in order to maintain youth support. However, if these schemes are used as patronage resources that exclude youth with opposing political views, these strategies may further entrench wartime divisions instead of promoting peace.

Seven recommendations for policy and practice

Research on the political integration of armed groups makes it clear that there is no single recipe for peaceful political transition. It is not possible to say that a particular sequencing will inevitably lead to sustainable peace, or that formerly armed groups will moderate their claims if certain sets of conditions are obtained. Instead, this body of research supports the view that such transitions involve a multitude of factors and that fine-grained, context-specific analysis is always necessary. Nonetheless, drawing on the findings presented in the joint Research Brief series, as well as the larger body of research on the political integration of armed groups, we present seven recommendations that could help open pathways and clarify options for international engagement on DDR.

Be sensitive to the unique features of armed groups and political contexts

Because there is great variation among armed groups across space and time, careful analysis of the unique features of each group is needed in order to effectively support its transformation from armed group to political party. This includes analysis of its leadership, political ideas, organisational features, internal decision-making processes and its formal and informal support structures. For instance, a clear and actionable typology of armed groups could greatly improve practitioners’, including the UN’s, ability to design political strategies and support political processes in settings where armed groups harbour political aspirations. Context-specific analysis of the broader political economy as it evolves are also important to understand the structures of patronage and clientelism in each society. Likewise, an understanding of gender dynamics is important. Taken together, these factors condition the prospects for change and continuity in the transition from bullets to ballots.

Support the political integration of armed groups starting in the peace negotiation phase

In the context of negotiated political settlements, external actors – mediators, facilitators and other signatories and guarantors – can play a decisive role in assisting and supporting the political integration of armed groups already during the peace talks. They can, for example, offer suggestions regarding the specific formulation of peace agreement provisions, paying attention to rights and obligations, as well as support structures and enforcement mechanisms. They can also help propose various options for political engagement, including those that fall outside of formal party politics. These transition periods are uncharted waters for many armed groups and can be perceived as daunting and risky. Therefore, early and sustained engagement in the form of accompaniment, coaching, funding and opportunities for cross-case learning can be critical for anchoring peaceful political competition within and

between armed groups. Several international NGOs have specialized in providing strategic advice and support to armed groups during peace negotiations. These organizations are often better placed than governments and inter-governmental organizations to prepare these groups psychologically, strategically, and technically for the transformation to non-violent, democratic politics.¹⁰

Reconsider the designation of armed groups as terrorist organizations

Our research underscores the need to rethink today's tendency to designate armed groups as terrorist organizations without transparent and objective criteria for either listing or delisting such groups. The practice of designation has expanded significantly since 9/11, alongside global and domestic counterinsurgency campaigns. Proscription regimes pose significant obstacles to the political integration of armed groups through political settlements. The labelling dehumanizes the listed groups, with long-term consequences for confidence building and trust between conflict parties as well as between members of the armed groups and their communities. It also drastically limits the space for domestic and international peace actors to engage with proscribed groups and provide timely accompaniment, a critical component of effective dialogue and successful transition to non-violent politics.

Invest in the first post-war election

The research findings in this series and in the wider scholarly literature underscore the critical role of the first post-war elections for short-term and long-term political integration. It is therefore important to support a secure and fair electoral environment in order to encourage all parties to accept electoral politics as an alternative form of political competition, no matter the outcome. The findings suggest that DDR practitioners need to be cognizant of electoral dynamics, including identifying potential programmatic entry points through which the political transformation of armed groups could be considered. The

timing of post-war elections also matters. Research supports the notion that elections should not happen too quickly following the signing of peace accords, to give new parties a chance to prepare themselves to compete against established political parties. Additional compensatory measures can be considered, such as time-bound reserved seats in political bodies or transitional governments. These can serve as important incentives and prevent disillusionment in cases of electoral defeat. Such arrangements can also provide an important opportunity to gain valuable experience in governance and build alliances and coalitions – another important route to political survival. Electoral participation can be used as leverage to accelerate the implementation of other peace agreement provisions that support the transition to civilian politics: for example, by stipulating that only unarmed parties can participate in elections or that only individuals who meet certain criteria can serve as candidates (such as having provided evidence in a truth commission). Research also suggests that political integration via party politics and competitive elections is not a realistic or relevant option for all armed groups. In those circumstances, other options for engagement should be considered and supported prior to the holding of elections, in order to avoid the risk of political marginalization.

Engage in long-term support for intra-party organizational change

Armed groups that transform into political parties often face internal divisions over competing ideas regarding the future direction of the movement. These divisions may not surface immediately, but often emerge in connection with junctures of critical backlash in the implementation of peace agreements, in situations of electoral defeat, or when important strategic decisions about ideological orientation, political alliances or post-war policy reforms must be made. In addition, most former armed groups underestimate the logistical, financial, and administrative challenges of party building and the internal disagreements that often accompany decisions regarding candidate

selection and party platforms. Domestic and international peacebuilding actors should therefore consider options for party development and intra-party democratization to be an integral part of supporting peace processes. External actors could also provide valuable support to processes of intra-organizational mediation or community forums for political dialogue between the new party leadership and the community base of the movement. In addition, research shows that the route to non-violent politics is not necessarily linear, and the distinction between armed groups and political parties is not always clear cut. Some armed groups existed as political parties before the war. Such prior experiences, existing political platforms and goals may mean that they face comparatively lower barriers in the move from bullets to ballots. In other cases, former rebel parties may continue to use violence in some form, even after DDR processes and electoral participation. There are many grey zones, but if a relapse into violence occurs, the international community should remain united in their refusal to accept violence as an alternative or as a complement to non-violent politics.

Provide tailored support for the political integration of combatants

DDR practitioners should consider supporting more holistic approaches to combatant reintegration, dedicating as much attention to options for political engagement and activism as to security-sector integration and socioeconomic support. Political and ideological considerations were often important reasons for an individual to join an armed movement, yet many externally driven DDR programs do not take this into account when designing options for reintegration. While some former armed group members may pursue their political engagement through a new political party or already existing parties, others may opt for different forms of political engagement: for example, through membership in civil society organizations; community initiatives; or veterans' associations. Women former combatants may be particularly inclined to participate in non-politi-

cal party mobilizations given that, as shown by research, there may be elements of gender backlash when armed organizations transition to traditional party politics in patriarchal societies. Identifying and providing tailored support for suitable extra-institutional forms of political engagement can help minimize the violent remobilization of former fighters who feel dissatisfied with electoral outcomes or the distribution of peace dividends.

Acknowledge conflicting objectives and identify red lines for political integration

The research findings point to several important trade-offs and conflicting objectives in supporting the transformation of armed groups into political parties. For instance, we know that addressing the political aspirations of former armed actors through electoral inclusion can contribute to the establishment of durable peace, defined as the termination and non-recurrence of violent conflict. But research also shows that the inclusion of former armed groups in post-war politics does not necessarily lead to a more democratic political system or to democratic governance. In addition, a former armed group is more likely to survive as a unified political party if it opts for a charismatic and personalistic leader, but such a leader may have a track record of human rights abuses and war crimes. Likewise, there are often conflicting objectives built into the transition process, such as the conflict between the need for transitional justice and accountability on the one hand, and the need for strategic incentives for disarmament and demobilization on the other. These trade-offs for democracy and justice should be acknowledged before drafting provisions to facilitate the political integration of armed groups – for example, through the careful considerations of the sequencing of reforms and peace agreement provisions. External actors can also partner with domestic civil society actors to develop locally grounded monitoring and evaluation systems to follow-up on the democratic trajectories of former armed groups that transform into political parties.

Endnotes

¹ The authors are listed in alphabetical order.

² United Nations Peacekeeping. Actions for Peacekeeping (A4P) <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/a4p-declaration-en.pdf>

³ See more about IDDRS: <https://www.unddr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/IDDRS-2.20-The-Politics-of-DDR.pdf>

⁴ A4P, pt 4.

⁵ For more information, please refer to the Politics After War Research Network homepage: <https://politicsafterwar.com/>

⁶ The joint Research Brief series is available on www.fba.se

⁷ The Rebel-to-Party (RtP) dataset builds on the Peace Agreement dataset version 19.0 at the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP). See Therese Pettersson and Magnus Öberg. 2020. 'Organized violence, 1989–2019.' *Journal of Peace Research* 57(4): 597–613. In some rare cases, the coding for 'rebel-to-party provisions' differs between the

Peace Agreement dataset and the RTP dataset. The latter also includes information on rebel-to-party transformations during the same time period. For more information, see Söderberg Kovacs and Hatz 2016.

⁸ Incl ref to A4P: United Nations Peacekeeping. Actions for Peacekeeping (A4P) <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/a4p-declaration-en.pdf>

⁹ See more about IDDRS: <https://www.unddr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/IDDRS-2.20-The-Politics-of-DDR.pdf>

¹⁰ Berghof Foundation, 'Mediating the political transformation of non-state armed groups: Workshop report'. April, 2022. URL: <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/mediating-political-transformation-of-nsags>

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Author biography

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Dr Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs is a senior researcher with the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University. She has also worked at FBA and at the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI). Her research and publications focus on rebel-to-party transformations, armed groups, conflict resolution, post-war democratization and electoral violence. She has authored the edited volume Violence in African Elections: Between Big Man Politics and Democracy (Zed Books: London, 2018).

The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. FBA has since 2005 supported research primarily through its international Research Working Groups.

These are composed of well-merited scholars from universities and research institutes worldwide who conduct scientific research on issues related to FBA's areas of expertise.

The Politics After War (PAW) is a research network for collaborative activities and knowledge sharing among researchers interested in dynamics of party politics, political mobilisation, state-society relations and the state in post-civil war contexts.

The United Nations Department of Peace Operations, Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions: DDR Section (UNDP/OROLSI/DDR) established in 2007, deploys peacekeepers who, as early peacebuilders, assist conflict-affected countries in re-establishing the rule of law and security institutions necessary to build and sustain peace. It includes five components: Police Division; Justice and Corrections Service; Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Section; Security Sector Reform Unit; and UN Mine Action Service.

