The Role of Formers in Countering Violent Extremism

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This policy brief examines the role former extremists and former combatants have in countering violent extremism (CVE). 'The former' as a special category of actor in CVE activities, including in peacebuilding settings, has gained significant attention in recent years. Various organisations and governments have utilised formers in CVE activities yet it remains unclear if and when formers can make a positive contribution to these efforts. The following brief brings together research on the subject to provide contexts in which formers do and do not play a positive role in CVE activities. Formers can often contribute to CVE work due to individual characteristics, such as charisma. However, the purpose of this brief is to identify characteristics attributable to the *role* of former extremists and former combatant. In doing so, it is possible to discuss the different contexts in which formers may contribute to CVE in a more general sense. Thus, the aim is not to evaluate the effectiveness of programmes involving formers but to provide a conceptual tool for identifying which activities may be appropriate for formers in various CVE settings. We argue that former combatants can play an active and productive role in CVE in contexts where formers have relatively more influence in communities than states, although these contexts are rare and have negative consequences, particularly for victims. Where formers do not fill a gap left by the state, formers have limited capacity to contribute to CVE beyond providing an important but short-term contribution to intelligence and counter-narratives.

Key words: Former combatants; Countering Violent Extremism; Peacebuilding

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Introduction

As interventions that seek to counter violent extremism (CVE) have grown in number, so too has interest in the role of former extremists and former combatants in CVE initiatives. While their potential has been highlighted in public discourse,[1] particularly in the context of returning foreign fighters, 'formers' have tended to be understood as a problem rather than a solution for combatting violent extremism. Often those aiming to counter the perception of formers as a problem for CVE present them as an asset to be used in such efforts. In recent years, a series of publications have highlighted cases where formers have played an active role in peacebuilding.[2] Nevertheless, the topic still remains relatively unexplored, particularly regarding the extent to which formers are effective actors in peacebuilding contexts and whether this is applicable more generally in a CVE setting.

The objective of the policy brief is to draw together two strands of research on formers to understand how they operate in different contexts. Formers have been discussed predominantly in two research areas: the first is a post-conflict setting where former combatants engage in peacebuilding; the second area focuses on former extremists working in Western countries to counter terrorism and prevent radicalisation and violent extremism. The bringing together of these two areas of research is important given how extremism now predominantly shapes larger scale conflict such as the conflict with Boko Haram in Nigeria. Thus, reflecting the overlap between CVE and peacebuilding, the policy brief refers to the wide range of former combatant/extremist activities and interventions through the unifying theme of CVE.

The research on which this paper builds tends to refer to different types of formers: – former combatants; former (political) prisoners; and former extremists. This paper refers to all of these categories as 'formers'. There are clear differences between these types of formers and this is captured in the final part of the paper, which explores the impact of different factors and contexts on the effectiveness of formers in CVE efforts. We conceptualise formers as a role type that is independent of its individual occupier. In doing so, we can speak of the role of formers in CVE across a range of contexts. Therefore, when assessing the literature we seek to identify themes across contexts to identify the essential features of formers in CVE. While this analytical distinction does not consider individual qualities of formers, it is taken as a given that individual qualities do matter. Individual formers will naturally vary in quality and efficacy in CVE; the unique qualities that some formers do bring to CVE activities do not necessarily derive from being a former. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to emphasise the distinct role of formers and the contexts that enable them to contribute to CVE.

The role of former consists of a distinct identity of *being* a former (often one which formers wish to escape); the social position of former in relation to the state (i.e. continued state monitoring or suspicion even after time served in prison, difficulty accessing the job market); and experiences, narratives and networks associated with the extremist movement left behind. Formers are thought of as potential contributors to

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[1] Peter R. Neumann, "Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors," ICSR Report (2015), http://socialutveckling.goteborg.se/uploads/ICSR-Report-Victims-Perpertrators-Assets-The-Narratives-of-Islamic-State-Defectors.pdf.

[2] Javier Argomaniz and Orla Lynch, "Introduction to the Special Issue: The Complexity of Terrorism—Victims, Perpetrators and Radicalization," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 41, no.7 (2018): 491-506.; Gordon Clubb, "The Role of Former Combatants in Preventing Youth Involvement in Terrorism in Northern Ireland: A Famework for Assessing Former Islamic State Combatants," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 9 (2016): 842-861.

CVE because they are seen as more credible voices, because they are familiar with the movement and ideology, and because they signify redemption, as well as potentially contributing to a reinforcement of mainstream values by rejecting extremism and the use of illegal violence. Formers are not a panacea to violent extremism and as such cynicism towards the role of formers in CVE may be justified. However, as their efficacy is partly context dependent, we should not summarily dismiss the potential role of formers in CVE.

There has been little research evaluating the effectiveness of formers in CVE initiatives.[3] While this policy brief cannot address this gap, it seeks to provide an understanding of the role formers have played by drawing upon a broader set of examples beyond the traditional CVE sphere. The impact of formers clearly varies from one context to another – yet, thus far, there has been little research looking at the impact of formers across cases and contexts.

The literature on former combatants has been predominantly case-study based, drawing up interventions in Northern Ireland, Serbia, Spain, Lebanon, and Burundi, to mention the most notable studies. Yet thus far, there has been no attempt to approach the role of formers in a more general sense.[4] The literature on former extremists has in a sense been more intuitively generalizable as it focuses on Islamist and right-wing extremism across Europe, North America and Australia.[5] Thus, the purpose of this policy brief is to identify and distinguish those contexts where formers can flourish in a CVE role and where they are less helpful or even harmful.

With this goal in mind, the policy brief is divided into two parts. The first draws upon a review of the most relevant secondary literature on formers in both areas of studies mentioned above. We group the literature into types of activities to illustrate a general role of formers in CVE. The second section identifies how formers are influential in CVE activities in terms of the role type and how structural factors create opportunities for formers to contribute to CVE.

Formers as Intelligence Assets

One common role formers have played in CVE is the provision of intelligence to security services. This is relevant for both former combatants and former extremists, albeit with the quality and necessity of intelligence clearly varying between different types of formers and also an individual's role within a movement. The framing of formers as intelligence assets is the most common CVE role ascribed to formers, partly because it is

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[3] Daniel Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).; Ian Chalmers, "Countering Violent Extremism in Indonesia: Bringing Back the Jihadists," *Asian Studies Review* 41, no. 3 (2017): 331-351.

[4] Makram Ouaiss and Marwan Rowayheb, "Ex-combatants Working for Peace and the Lebanese Civil Society: A Case Study in Non-communal Reintegration," *Civil Wars* 19, no. 4 (2017): 448-469.; Guðrún Sif Friðriksdóttir, "Ex-combatants as Social Activists: War, Peace and Ideology in Burundi," *Conflict, Security & Development* 18, no. 1 (2018): 1-16.; Rogelio Alonso and Javier Díaz Bada, "What Role Have Former ETA Terrorists Played in Counterterrorism and Counterradicalization Initiatives in Spain?," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 11 (2016): 982-1006.; Lesley Emerson, "Conflict, Transition and Education for 'Political Generosity': Learning from the Experience of Ex-combatants in Northern Ireland," *Journal of Peace Education* 9, no. 3 (2012): 277-295.; Olivera Simić and Ivana Milojević, "Dialogues Between Ex-combatants and Youth in Serbia: A Constructive Use of War Experience," *Peacebuilding* 2, no. 3(2014): 322-335.

[5] Shandon Harris-Hogan, Kate Barrelle, and Andrew Zammit, "What is Countering Violent Extremism? Exploring CVE Policy and Practice in Australia," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 8, no. 1 (2016): 6-24.; Mubin Shaikh, "Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Online: An Anecdotal Case Study Related to Engaging ISIS Members and Sympathizers (from North America, Western Europe, and Australia) on Twitter," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 98, no. 4 (2015): 478-487.; Jonathan Githens-Mazer and Robert Lambert, "Why Conventional Wisdom on Radicalization Fails: The Persistence of a Failed Discourse," *International Affairs* 86, no. 4 (2010): 889-901.

'low-risk' and unlikely to generate a public backlash. While it is important to consider the role of formers in this capacity, it should not prevent recognising other capacities that may be missed by solely framing formers as intelligence assets.

Within CVE, intelligence about a group's structure, motivations and tactics can be key to creating a strategy to counter them.[6] It is clear formers are not the only means for gathering information and in many cases their current distance from a group means they are unlikely to provide the most up-to-date logistical intelligence to counter immediate attacks.[7] However, formers' experience with a group generally gives them knowledge that could be gathered to help CVE efforts. Even if structures and tactics have changed since their involvement, any information on this could still prove useful for understanding them generally and perhaps also for tracking their evolution. Furthermore, learning from formers what led to their involvement and subsequent departure from extremist groups can inform countermeasures and may be especially relevant for counter-narratives.[8] The function of formers in developing an understanding of these motivations and ideologies may also reveal more about the groups' attacks operationally.[9]

Western countries may be especially keen to improve their human-intelligence gathering capabilities by relying on formers, as these states often have difficulty in gathering inside intelligence from violent jihadist groups in particular.[10] Difficulties surrounding the recruiting of suitable agents to embed within such groups may be a result of a lack of trust among the Muslim diaspora and a shortage of relevant language skills.[11] With such a gap in their capabilities, formers may be able to provide inside information, even if they may lack current connections with the group.

However, gathering intelligence from detained or former members of extremist groups can be very challenging. Koehler highlights that although there are already many valuable studies based on data provided by formers,[12] it is important to consider that retrospective accounts "are always biased and subject to conscious and unconscious distortion", even in the short term.[13] It is important to understand how changing priorities, guilt, remorse or self-interest – such as avoiding increasing punishment – may impact the way formers portray any information they provide.[14] Furthermore, there are reports of formers being pressured by security services to share information, sometimes with the use of intimidation and torture, which is unlikely to provide credible information.[15] Apart from the in certain cases unlawful harm inflicted on formers, such actions may also result in a further alienation from their communities and would not be conducive to their re-integration.[16]

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[6] Norman Loayza, "How to Defeat Terrorism: Intelligence, Integration, and Development ", *Brookings*, July 25, 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2016/07/25/how-to-defeat-terrorism-intelligence-integration-and-development/.

[7] Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Berkley Books, 2003), 223.

[8] Thomas K. Samuel, "Countering the Terrorist Narrative: Issues and Challenges in Contesting Such Spaces," in *Countering Violent Extremism: Developing an Evidence-Base for Policy and Practice,* ed. Sara Zeiger and Anne Aly (Perth, Western Australia: Curtin University, 2015), 91-98.; see example of use in Iran – Ariane Tabatai, "Other Side of the Iranian Coin: Iran's Counterterrorism Apparatus," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 1-2 (2018): 181-207.

[9] Loayza, "How to Defeat Terrorism."

[10] Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror.*

[11] Blaise Cronin, "Intelligence, Terrorism, and National Security," *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* 39, no. 1 (2005): 395-432.

[12] Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization.*

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Mathew Alexander and John Bruning, *How to Break a Terrorist: The U.S. Interrogators Who Used Brains, Not Brutality, to Take Down the Deadliest Man in Iraq* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008).; Daniel Byman, "The Intelligence War on Terrorism," *Intelligence and National Security* 29, no. 6 (2014): 837-863.

[16] Shobna Sonpar, "A Potential Resource? Ex-Militants in Jammu and Kashmir," *Intervention* 6, no. 2 (2008): 147-153.

Overall, formers' experience and knowledge of a movement means that there is a clear potential for their use in intelligence gathering settings. However, focusing too heavily on their potential as intelligence assets is problematic as, in addition to the aforementioned limitations, this could jeopardise the other potential benefits of formers' involvement in broader CVE activities and even cause difficulties in the de-radicalisation and reintegration of the individual formers.[17] Thus, consideration of whether to use formers as an intelligence asset should be made in the context of whether they can contribute in other, potentially more unique ways to CVE, and whether an intelligence role would undermine this.

Formers and Counter-narratives

One element of CVE that has clear potential for the involvement of formers concerns initiatives to prevent and counter radicalisation through the use of counter narratives that undermine the messaging of terrorist groups. In this area, the role of formers is often highlighted in terms of how their experiences give them credibility when speaking out against violence or extremism, which may then increase the impact of the counter messaging.[18] This credibility, which is often assumed to be inherent in formers,[19] is dependent on the target audience. For example, they are likely to be viewed as credible with those outside the movement that the former has left, since they are 'authentic' representations of the movement.[20] On the other hand, they may cause suspicion with those still in the movement or those with a closer (ideological) affinity with the movement. This is particularly likely where formers are viewed as betraying the movement, posing a threat to it, or when their disengagement is seen as cowardly.

Another point to consider is that the source of formers' credibility may vary and that what can make formers credible in one context may not work in another. At the local level, credibility is often important in preventing involvement in violence, whereas at a national level values of tolerance and acceptance are of greater concern.[21] There can be tensions between audiences, where the expectations of what constitutes a credible practitioner for a wider audience makes them less credible in the eyes of the movement. For example, in the UK counter-terrorism policy context, formers involved in CVE activities are expected to reflect mainstream British values whereas in Northern Ireland there was little expectation of formers to support the status quo or a Northern Irish identity.[22]

In other words, it is important to consider how formers are respected or viewed within a specific community, especially within the radical milieu they left. Respect within 'hard

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[17] Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization.*

[18] Quilliam Foundation, "Why Former Radicals Are Important for Counter Extremist Measures," *Quilliam Foundation,* July 29, 2016,
https://www.quilliaminternational.com/why-former-radicals-are-important-for-counter-extremist-measures/. Patrick Belanger and Susan Szmania, "The Paradox of Source Credibility in Canadian and U.S. Domestic Counterterrorism Communications," *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 1464 – 1465.

[19] Moli Dow and Ross Frenett, *One to One Online Interventions: A Pilot CVE Methodology* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015),
https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/One2One_Web_v9.pdf.

[20] Rachel Briggs and Sebastien Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2013), https://www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/444/review-of-programs-to-counter-narratives-of-violent-extremism-what-works-and-what-are-the-implications-for-government.

[21] Jamie Bartlett, Jonathan Birdwell, and Michael King, *The Edge of Violence: A Radical Approach to Extremism* (London: Demos, 2010), https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/lbrr/archives/cn79051148-eng.pdf.

[22] Gordon Clubb, *Social Movement De-Radicalisation and the Decline of Terrorism: The Morphogenesis of the Irish Republican Movement* (London: Routledge, 2016).; Anthony Richards, "From terrorism to 'Radicalization' to 'Extremism': Counterterrorism Imperative or Loss of Focus?" *International Affairs* 91, no. 2 (2015): 371-380.

to reach' communities is often a key reason for their use and it has been argued that former combatants in Northern Ireland have been successful because they can speak to youths without having to make appeals to mainstream state-centric identity. [23] Ex-prisoners have a broadly respected (or tolerated) place within sections of society in Northern Ireland which provides them greater capacity than ex-prisoners or former combatants in other contexts. An absence of such status presents a challenge to their effectiveness. For example, former combatants are viewed with little respect in the case of Burundi, where they are seen to shift regularly between being a former combatant and combatant for personal gain. [24]

There are certain messages formers can help spread through discussing their experiences and ideas, which could include explaining the realities of what they have been through to de-glamorise violence or to challenge the ideology that encourages violence and to highlight contradictions in terrorist groups' narratives and actions. Formers are often considered well-placed to challenge such ideologies given their experience of being drawn in by these ideas and living within the extremist group, giving them a better understanding and authority to speak on these issues. [25] They may also use their experiences to highlight the contradictions in terrorist groups' supposed aims and the reality of their actions. Drawing attention to these contradictions may especially help those who are drawn to extremism by 'secondary trauma' of the plight of a community they associate themselves with and want to defend, as many groups' actions in fact inflict much more harm on the people they claim to represent. [26]

Formers may also be a useful resource for better understanding radicalisation and de-radicalisation processes and highlighting what may be the most important aspects to focus on to better tailor counter messages aimed at enticing others to leave terrorism behind. [27] Although it is important to note that formers will generally be a diverse group of individuals who may have varied reasons for joining and leaving these groups, they may help identify reoccurring themes. Plus, it should also be noted that the way formers frame their de-radicalisation or disengagement may be influenced by pressures from society or organisations they are involved with. Formers may feel a need to demonstrate that they have changed and so may highlight ideological change when reflecting on their exit processes, even if in reality more pragmatic costs and benefits were of influence. [28]

Formers generally present narratives focused on their own experiences, with an overarching argument critical of the use of violence. These narratives are frequently expressed in videos, articles and biographies that may then be disseminated by other organisations. [29] Formers have also been involved in spreading these messages through school and youth work. This includes roles with organisations like Extreme Dialogue, which provide resources for schools; including videos telling the stories of those affected by extremism that also feature formers, to facilitate students' discussion of extremism. [30]

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[23] Emerson, "Conflict, Transition and Education for 'Political Generosity," 277-295.; Gordon Clubb, "The Role of Former Combatants in Preventing Youth Involvement in Terrorism in Northern Ireland: A Framework for Assessing Former Islamic State Combatants," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 9 (2016): 842-861.

[24] Friðriksdóttir, "Ex-Combatants as Social Activists," 1-16.

[25] Belanger and Szmania, "The Paradox of Source Credibility in Canadian and Us Domestic Counterterrorism Communications," 1464-1465.

[26] Samuel, "Countering the Terrorist Narrative," 91-98.

[27] Ibid.

[28] David Stevens, "In Extremis: A Self-Defeating Element in the 'Preventing Violent Extremism' Strategy." *The Political Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (2009): 517-25.

[29] Examples include: Äbout the Method," The Redirect Method, https://redirectmethod.org/.; Hadra Dana, "What Tech Companies Can Do to Counter Violent Extremism," *Brookings,* June 13, 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/09/13/what-tech-companies-can-do-to-counter-violent-extremism/.; "Introduction to Extreme Dialogue," Extreme Dialogue, accessed June 20, 2018, https://extremedialogue.org/about-us.

[30] "Introduction to Extreme Dialogue".

Another example is found in Northern Ireland, where, through Prison to Peace school programs, formers have been involved in helping young people better understand the conflict and subsequent peace process, thereby helping increase respect for the police and providing understanding of the views of other parts of the community.[31]

Other projects tend to focus on online counter-narratives and generally try to compete with extremist propaganda by spreading content that challenges the groups' messages. Some projects have done this using tailored online ads, which redirect 'at risk' individuals to articles and videos, often using the stories of formers as a key way to get the counter-messaging across.[32] Online intervention may also involve formers by actively having them reach out to individuals for one-on-one intervention. Examples of such projects are provided by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), through their work with the Against Violent Extremism (AVE) network. Their projects use technology to recognise activity of at-risk individuals who are then contacted by intervention providers. One of these ISD projects consisted of analysing formers, survivors and counsellors in this role of intervention providers.[33] It found that formers were the most likely to get an initial response but completed the fewest number of conversations due to other commitments, and noted their knowledge and experience was often valuable.[34] Birdwell et al. argue that if formers' contribution to such projects were professionalised and they were provided with more training and support, both financial and pastoral, to carry out this work, they would have the potential to be effective intervention providers or could provide knowledge of their experiences to help advice counsellors who may provide the scalability of such projects.[35]

Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding

Formers have also made contributions in conflict transformation and peacebuilding. Conflict transformation attempts to address the underlying causes of conflict in order to create and maintain peace while peacebuilding aims to prevent violent conflict resumption. Both are important perspectives for work on preventing violent extremism. Sonpar draws attention to the 'activist identity' of formers and explains that the qualities that led them to violence – such as wanting to help their community and the skills they developed, like leadership, teamwork, discipline, and organisation – may be valuable for peacebuilding.[36] Friðriksdóttir also furthers this explanation of formers as valuable for peacebuilding efforts by highlighting the importance of ideology in violent extremism and social activism, as well as the similarities in motivations between the two.[37]

Within the realm of peacebuilding, formers may be involved in many ways and how they could best be utilised is likely to depend on the context, such as the causes of conflict as well as how a conflict is resolved. In the example of Northern Ireland, formers have been involved in many aspects of conflict transformation as political, military and communal

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[31] Lesley Emerson, Karen Orr, and Paul Connolly, *Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the 'Prison to Peace: Learning from the Experience of Political Ex-Prisoners' Educational Programme* (Belfast: Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University Belfast, 2014). http://www.paulconnolly.net/publications/P2P_Report_2014.pdf.
[32] Dana, "What Tech Companies Can Do to Counter Violent Extremism".
[33] Jonathan Birdwell, Jacob Davey, and Rebecca Skellett, *Counter Conversations a Model for Direct Engagement with Individuals Showing Signs of Radicalisation Online* (London, Washington DC, Beirut, Toronto: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2018). https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Counter-Conversations_FINAL.pdf
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Sonpar, "A Potential Resource? Ex-Militants in Jammu and Kashmir," 147-153.
[37] Friðriksdóttir, "Ex-Combatants as Social Activists," 1-16.

leaders.[38] In their function as political leaders, restorative justice is highlighted (and will be examined in more detail below), while as military leaders their credibility is key for overseeing a transition to peace. Additionally, their role as communal leaders includes campaigning and providing services for their communities.[39] Former combatants in Northern Ireland have also contributed to preventing the re-occurrence of communal clashes and escalations in violence between (former) paramilitaries.[40]

Formers are often involved in peace agreements to help bring an end to conflict. In some contexts this may lead them to also play a part in the forming of new state government and security forces. Putting formers in such positions of power is often highlighted as negative, worsening the prospects for broader reforms.[41] Therefore, some have argued it is important to consider the need for institutional reform that promotes human-rights and accountability, only allowing formers in such position when necessary oversight and a clear mandate is in place, to create a stable peace and prevent future violence and extremism. For example, former combatants in El Salvador were included in a new civilian police force that was subject to oversight and human rights training. [42]

The role of formers may also need to be managed in cases where international administrators try to cooperate with formers to achieve peace, but do so in a way that entrenches the agenda and power of the former combatants to the detriment of other communities. An example of this can be seen in Kosovo, where international actors required the cooperation of former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) combatants and accepted some of their demands to do so.[43] The role of formers in such cooperation impacts other groups within society in a way that they may feel their position weakened if the power of formers is reinforced,[44] which could lead to future instability and violence. Similar arguments have been made regarding Northern Ireland, where former combatants' activities and support for these activities have been perceived to promote one political party's narrative of the peace process.[45] Practitioners should be aware of the tensions that may arise from including formers in the political process. However, political integration is important in ensuring certain groups move away from violence and the inclusion of formers will typically change the political landscape.

Conflict transformation & restorative justice

Regarding conflict transformation, or working towards peace, formers' potential contribution appears less clear. They often lack the power to address a conflict's root causes and to work towards peace in such a way. Issues underlying conflict may include a sense of injustice, which may be grounded in real social, political, and economic conditions beyond the control of individuals. It is likely to be difficult for formers to influence these problems, especially in contexts where formers are not as accepted by

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[38] Kieran McEvoy and Peter Shirlow, "Re-Imagining DDR: Ex-Combatants, Leadership and Moral Agency in Conflict Transformation," *Theoretical Criminology* 13, no. 1 (2009): 31-59.

[39] McEvoy and Shirlow, "Re-Imagining DDR: Ex-Combatants, Leadership and Moral Agency in Conflict Transformation," 31-59.

[40] Gordon Clubb, "From Terrorists to Peacekeepers: The IRA's Disengagement and the Role of Community Networks, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 37, no. 10 (2014): 842-861.

[41] Chandra Lekha Sriram and Johanna Herman, "DDR and Transitional Justice: Bridging the Divide?," *Conflict, Security & Development* 9, no. 4 (2009): 455-474.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Nathalie Duclos, "The DDR in Kosovo: Collision and Collusion among International Administrators and Combatants," *Peacebuilding* 4, no, 1 (2016): 41-53.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Aaron Edwards and Ciaran McGrattan, "Terroristic narratives: On the (Re) Invention of Peace in Northern Ireland," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 3 (2011): 357-376.; Ciaran McGrattan, "Community-based Restorative Justice in Northern Ireland: A neo-traditionalist paradigm?," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2010): 425-441.

the rest of society. However, there are examples of formers helping with the economic and social reintegration of others, such as through social entrepreneurship and the 'brotherhood economic model',[46] in the role as 'trusted and legitimate emancipators'.[47] Although this has generally been looked at on a small scale, it does show potential for helping improve the economic and social situation of formers at a local level which, in helping them re-integrate, aims to keep them away from re-entering violence. Another underlying potential cause of conflict is tension between communities and this is an area where the position of formers is clearer, especially in projects that involve restorative justice.

One of the key aspects of restorative justice is the meeting of stakeholders, victims and offenders, to work towards repairing the harm of the crime.[48] Therefore, this process is generally reliant on the involvement of the offender, in this case a former. There are many examples of formers being involved in restorative justice processes that aim to reconcile tensions in post-conflict contexts, one of the clearest examples being in Northern Ireland. In this case, formers were central to moving from a paramilitary system of informal justice within the conflict to community-based restorative justice, which often dealt with issues of anti-social behaviour and could offer mediation in cases of assault, intimidation and bullying.[49] Although there is significant debate about the role of formers in restorative justice in this context, such as whether these projects helped formers maintain too much control of communities[50] or helped them reassume "a 'normal' non-elevated role"[51] in society, they are often seen as key to the conflict transformation process.[52]

Restorative justice may potentially reduce the risk of recidivism among former combatants and may be seen to help address some drivers of conflict by diminishing polarised identities. However, there is also a point of contention in formers being used in a more public way in restorative justice initiatives, as there may be tension between the direct victims and 'vicarious victims'. 'Vicarious victims' refers to the wider public's feeling of entitlement to determining whether there should be a process of forgiveness rather than it being an issue solely of concern for the direct victims.[53] Restorative justice can be difficult when such vicarious forgiveness and private forgiveness of the direct victims do not match up.[54]

The pragmatism of involving formers in peace processes, re-integration initiatives or community activism to lower the risk of recidivism can come at the expense of direct victims. In Spain and Northern Ireland, formers who engage in restorative justice initiatives or conflict transformation initiatives have often been released from prison earlier as part of the peace process, but have not shown remorse to the victims nor

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[46] Yanto Chandra, "Social Entrepreneurship as Emancipatory Work," *Journal of Business Venturing* 32, no. 6 (2017): 657-673.

[47] Ibid, 658.

[48] Rianne Letschert, Ines Staiger, and Antony Pemberton, eds., *Assisting Victims of Terrorism: Towards a European Standard of Justice* (Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media, 2009).

[49] Fidelma Ashe, "From Paramilitaries to Peacemakers: The Gender Dynamics of Community-Based Restorative Justice in Northern Ireland," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2009): 298-314.

[50] Colin Knox, "'See No Evil, Hear No Evil'. Insidious Paramilitary Violence in Northern Ireland," *British Journal of Criminology* 42, no. 1 (2002): 164-185.

[51] Kieran McEvoy and Harry Mika, "Restorative Justice and the Critique of Informalism in Northern Ireland," 42, no. 3 (2002): 534-562.

[52] McEvoy and Shirlow, "Re-Imagining DDR: Ex-Combatants, Leadership and Moral Agency in Conflict Transofrmation," 31-59.

[53] Anthony Pemberton, "Terrorism, Forgiveness and Restorative Justice," *Oñati Socio-Legal Series* 4, no. 3 (2014): 369-389.

[54] Ibid.

denounced past violence, or in some cases they have not even been tried in court.[55] Consequently, the utilisation of formers, especially those involved in violence, invokes tensions between justice and pragmatism/rehabilitation when it does not sufficiently address the needs of direct victims. The arguments for prioritising the latter tend to be context-dependent – in other words, there are specific situations where the potential benefits of utilising formers may outweigh the risks of marginalising the rights of direct victims.

The Role of Formers in CVE

The previous sections outlined the different ways formers can play a role in CVE work. However, it is important to distinguish between the agency of formers as a role type and the agency of the actual individuals who are formers, to avoid conflation of the two. One charismatic individual who is a former and happens to be effective at CVE should obviously not be the basis for claiming that formers in general have a role in CVE. Neither should formers' potential CVE utility be seen as solely tied to the presence or absence of their individual charisma or abilities. The following section pulls together the existing literature to posit what makes a former potentially more effective in a CVE capacity in one context over another, and over other more conventional actors in the CVE field.

Specifically, it engages with one of the most common debates regarding whether formers ought to be utilised, namely, whether they need to be de-radicalised (i.e. a former extremist who has abandoned the group's ideology as opposed to a former combatant whose ideology has not changed). Basing the utilisation of formers primarily on whether they have de-radicalised may reduce risk for governments and practitioners insofar as there is less likely to be a public backlash and, in theory, the risk of recidivism may be lower. However, in certain situations, it may also miss out on significant opportunities to utilise formers in CVE, even if they cannot be characterised as having de-radicalised. The following section identifies appropriate activities for different archetypes of formers but specifically highlights how structural factors are also important in shaping the role of formers rather than just ideological abandonment/commitment.

Former Type: De-Radicalisation or Disengagement?

First of all 'the former' as a role-type has a number of unique qualities with regard to CVE activities. Formers are clearly distinguished from other practitioners due to their experience within a movement, whether as a combatant or as an activist, bringing them familiarity with the networks and the practice of ideology (i.e. the lived reality of an ideology and the potential discrepancies therein). Participation in the movement can lead formers to develop unique skills, specifically speaking the 'same language' which may provide them greater credibility when engaging with individuals at risk of radicalization or those who may wish to leave extremism behind. Additionally, their insider knowledge can make them useful assets for police and intelligence agencies.

Yet the desirability of expanding formers' contributions to CVE work beyond these quite specific roles will need to be carefully weighed. All the more so if they are former combatants who have disengaged from violence behaviourally but who have not abandoned their radical or extremist worldviews, i.e. if they have not de-radicalised.

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[55] Alonso and Bada, "What Role Have Former ETA Terrorists Played in Counterterrorism and Counterradicalization Initiatives in Spain?," 982-1006.; Argomaniz and Lynch, "Introduction to the Special Issue," 491-506.

The role of formers in CVE and the type of activities in which they could be effective differs according to what the former is leaving behind and what the former is maintaining. By bringing together the peacebuilding and terrorism literature there are two noticeable and polarised ideal types of formers worth discussing, which relate to the aforementioned concepts of disengagement and de-radicalisation.[56] The first type of formers have disengaged but also withdrawn from extremist social networks and made, to varying degrees, a break from the ideology. The second type involves formers who disengage from violence behaviourally but maintain relations with the network and ideological consistency (given perhaps some ideological moderation).[57] To be clear, we do not mean to deny other configurations however these two ideal types appear to be the most common and they capture both ends of a spectrum on what appears to be a desirable and undesirable type of former working in CVE, at least from the state's perspective

The first archetype, that is formers who have both disengaged and gone through a de-radicalisation process – at least to the point where their remaining commitment to the movement is very low – can generally have a limited but more immediately impactful role in CVE activities. As detailed above, this type of former engages extensively in producing and disseminating counter-narratives, often leveraging their own experiences within an extremist or terrorist movement and their ultimate disillusionment. Such de-radicalised formers may also be employed in activities aimed at trying to talk people out of (joining) extremist groups, for instance by challenging their extremist ideology. De-radicalised formers are also more likely to acknowledge the suffering caused to victims in restorative justice and emphasise that their former cause was misguided. Moreover, the fact that they are de-radicalised (at least to some degree) means these formers can be employed in CVE at relatively low risk of recidivism or other blowback effects.

Furthermore, de-radicalised formers will generally be more effective in producing counter-narratives that would appeal to the population more widely and in primary interventions, as well as in reaching out to those within extremist groups who are already considering disengaging. This type of former poses a lower risk politically, as well as in terms of recidivism reduction. However, they may be perceived as less authoritative and as traitors among those more firmly entrenched within a respective movement. Therefore, this type of former may be less effective in interventions targeting the 'hard to reach' constituencies (i.e. people more deeply entrenched within a violent extremist movement).

The second archetype, the disengaged but not de-radicalised individual, may seem less suitable to CVE work. However, there are several examples where such individuals have taken on such roles, usually in post-conflict settings. Former combatants who do participate in CVE-like activities, such as in Northern Ireland, will find that the advantages derived from deeper involvement (e.g. greater authority) in the movement also comes with restraints in the shape of needing to maintain a degree of narrative fidelity to the network. Narrative fidelity refers to when a frame 'rings true with the extant beliefs' of an audience.[58] In other words, to remain to be seen by their former comrades as disengaged behaviourally but still (more or less) committed in terms of ideology, these formers cannot stray too far into criticism of the movement and its beliefs.

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[56] John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, "Rehabilitating the Terrorists?: Challenges in Assessing the Effectiveness of De-Radicalization Programs," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 2 (2010): 267-291; Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism*.

[57] Ashour, Omar, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[58] David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, "Master Frames and Cycles of Protest," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, eds. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven Yale University Press, 1992).

Pressure on former combatants to maintain such narrative fidelity has been highlighted as a factor that had a potentially negative effect on the efficacy of such disengaged but not de-radicalised individuals in CVE-work in Northern Ireland and the Basque country. Among the counterproductive effects noted were the 'marginalisation of victims' experiences and the justification or (inadvertent) glorification of (past) violence. Thus, in most situations, former combatants with a higher commitment to the network and/or the ideology are largely ineffective or counterproductive to CVE because the means by which they derive credibility places them in tensions with developing consistent counter-narratives and the need to respect the experiences of victims

Structural Factors in Enabling Formers: the Northern Irish case

The extent to which a former has de-radicalised certainly limits the type of activities he or she can engage in. Formers who have not (sufficiently) de-radicalised may be too risky to use in public-facing CVE work and only utilised for intelligence or (disengagement) narratives deployed by a third party or via a medium communicated to a target audience. However, there are certain rare conditions where this type of former can actually play an important and unique role in CVE. A higher commitment to the movement, in terms of networks and (to varying degrees) ideology, can make formers who have not de-radicalised more effective in CVE where the movement enjoys greater support among significant sections of society. Furthermore if they are embedded within the movement's networks this can be important for facilitating group disengagement. Many cases of collective disengagement and de-radicalisation derive from an interplay between the core of a group and its radical milieu.[59] In some cases the resources of the group can be mobilised by (former) combatants to provide leadership within the wider movement with the goal of achieving disengagement. Therefore formers who maintain network connections and their ideology can play a transformative role across a wide range of areas in CVE in a deeper sense than formers who have de-radicalized and disconnected from the group, although this capacity for CVE work derives from not only their role as a former but also from (rare) structural factors.

Formers who have not de-radicalised can have an effective role in CVE due to advantages derived from the structural positioning of being a former. The case of Northern Ireland highlights how the structural advantage of formers incentivised and enabled their role in CVE-like activities. Paramilitaries, especially on the Republican side, exploited and encouraged a vacuum within so-called interface communities. Interface communities are geographical spaces where Catholic and Protestant areas are situated together but are usually separated by 'peace walls' and limited road access.[60] During the Troubles, interface communities became sites of escalations in violence, where security forces had little legitimacy, and where paramilitaries developed a presence through vigilantism.[61] Annual traditions such as controversial marches created regular and predictable flashpoints that provided an opportunity for formers to either seek to stoke or prevent violence (and exert further control and influence). Following the peace process, the ongoing instances of eruption of violence at interface areas and the limited effectiveness

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[59] Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements.*; Clubb, *Social Movement De-Radicalisation and the Decline of Terrorism: The Morphogenis of the Irish Republican Movement.*

[60] Peter Shirlow and Brendan Murtagh, *Belfast: Segregation, Violence and the City* (London: Pluto Press, 2006).

[61] Andrew Silke, "Rebel's Dilemma: The Changing Relationship between the IRA, Sinn Féin and Paramilitary Vigilantism in Northern Ireland," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 11, no. 1 (1999): 55-93.

of the security services in these areas provided a space for formers to prevent escalations at interface areas.[62]

Rarely do formers occupy a structural position where they can, if they desire, exercise agency as in Northern Ireland, which may account for why it has been seen as a success story by some.[63] However, the lessons learned in that particular setting have not been applied to other contexts. In order to understand what role formers can play in CVE, it is important to assess the structural factors in place, which can include systems of funding. The availability of European Union funding for peace projects, contingent on inter-communal co-operation without any ideological conditions, helped to facilitate these activities in Northern Ireland. Funding can be deleterious to CVE efforts where it entrenches formers who derive agency predominantly from movement knowledge and experience (given their efficacy is short term and/or limited), who then compete with and discredit other formers in order to achieve funding. One of the apparent differences in the Northern Ireland case was, while it encouraged intra-community competition, it also created a common narrative between communities by requiring them to work together.

Formers can derive agency in CVE in contexts where formers hold a positive and/or valued position within a community. We speculate that formers who maintain their ideology and/or have experience in active combat are more likely to resonate normatively in the radical milieu whereas formers who abandon an ideology and/or were not involved in active combat are less likely to resonate with the values of the radical milieu and may overlap more with values expressed by the state.[64] Once again, in Northern Ireland formers were able to draw upon the credibility and prestige of being a former prisoner within the Republican tradition. The positive perception of formers *as formers,* or the cultural acceptance and glorification of combatants provides opportunities to engage in CVE activities if acted upon. Whereas in contexts where formers lack this elevated respect and may even have a particularly low status within society, such as in Burundi, this presents an obstacle to their potential role in CVE.[65] CVE itself is in part a normative endeavour and consequently formers can be more effective in the prevention of violence where their ideological adherence does not overly challenge the dominant norms within the state.

Conclusion

Formers can contribute to CVE by providing intelligence, developing and delivering counter-narratives, and engaging in peacebuilding activities, including restorative justice. The activities in which formers may participate span a wide spectrum of CVE work, from primary prevention of those 'at risk' of engaging in violent extremism to helping to disengage those who are heavily involved in violent extremist activities. As such, formers have a unique role to play in CVE, however their effectiveness in interventions varies and the variation cannot solely be attributed to their individual characteristics, such as how charismatic a particular former is. Overall, we argue that it is important to recognise that formers can contribute to CVE in a unique way and that the type of activities they are best suited to engage in are not only shaped by ideological abandonment/maintenance but also by structural factors that can override the lack of

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[62] Clubb, "From Terrorists to Peacekeepers: The IRA's Disengagement and the Role of Community Networks."
[63] Peter Shirlow, Jonathan Tonge, James McAuley, and Catherine McGlynn, *Abandoning Historical Conflict?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
[64] Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann, "The Radical Milieu: Conceptualizing the Supportive Social Environment of Terrorist Groups," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 12 (2014): 979-998.
[65] Friðriksdóttir, "Ex-Combatants as Social Activists: War, Peace and Ideology in Burundi," 1-16.

de-radicalisation. Even without these unique conditions present, formers who have not de-radicalised may be utilised for CVE activities although this role may be limited in terms of what they can do, such as providing intelligence and counter-narratives disseminated by third parties.

Formers derive their unique role from their own experiences in extremist or terrorist movements, but their effectiveness is also strongly tied to structural factors. Formers in settings of ongoing conflict, for instance, tend to play a more diverse role and, as argued in the Northern Irish case, can be effective in preventing violence because the environment presents a gap they can fill that the state temporarily could not. Formers can take a more expansive role in CVE where they act as a gatekeeper to communities or are able to mobilise resources – material and ideational - within a community, especially where the state has a weak influence in the community. The maintenance of an (radical) ideology – often seen as a reason for formers to *not* be given a role in CVE – in this context can actually be important for preventing violence because it can provide the basis for formers having a strong connection within a specific community. While it is rare to have these factors in place and there are negative consequences, formers ought to be encouraged to take a more active role in CVE and should be provided support regardless of whether they have abandoned their ideology.

However, it is very rare for formers who have not (substantially) de-radicalised and distanced themselves from their violent compatriots to find themselves in such conditions. Outside of conflict settings such as Northern Ireland, formers who disengaged but not de-radicalised have little influence in a community and the maintenance of their ideology faces normative constraints at the state level. Thus, the incentive for the state and practitioners will be invariably to favour formers who more clearly renounce an ideology and the occasions where non-de-radicalised formers may be best used, while effective, will be rare and restricted to post-conflict contexts where formers have a greater pre-existing presence in communities. We argue that in most cases formers involved in CVE would be expected to have de-radicalised and their contribution would be predominantly defined by short-term gains, firstly in reducing the risk of their own recidivism and secondly in contributing to CVE through intelligence gathering and counter-narratives, specifically extracted counter-narratives.

Taken together, this means that special consideration should be given to the sources from which formers derive agency prior to establishing and entrenching funding systems which may perpetuate ineffective or counter-productive activities, especially where one older cohort of formers adopts a privileged position to discredit other (more recent and more credible cohorts of) formers. The contribution of this policy brief has been to draw together two sets of literature to develop a framework for identifying how formers can productively contribute to CVE activities. In terms of policy, its main aim has been to highlight the importance of formers as a role type with unique attributes. The default position on formers in CVE has been caution and scepticism, and while this policy brief does not necessarily contradict this, it provides a foundation for understanding the contexts and types of activities where formers in CVE would be more effective.

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The Role of Formers in Countering Violent Extremism

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