Oxford Research Group
Breaking the cycle of violence

About Us　　Research & analysis　　News & events　　Blog & podcasts　　Index　　　　Search 🔍

Can Former Combatants Assist in Preventing Violence?

Gordon Clubb

27 Jun 2017

Former combatants can play a powerful role in preventing violence, as the case of former combatants in Northern Ireland shows. Former Islamic State fighters could have a role to play in counter-terrorism, however there are potential limits to this.

The value in re-integrating former combatants in post-conflict environments has been widely recognised in terms of reducing the risk of recidivism and fostering stability in a peace process. While there are examples of former combatant in larger scale post-conflict environments following the path of a de-politicised re-integration into society, there are also examples of former combatants – or 'former terrorists' – taking a much more active role in preventing future violence. Former combatants in Northern Ireland, for example, have had some notable success in delivering restorative justice programmes, de-militarising communities, preventing inter-communal violence and articulating counter-narratives against the use of violence. If former combatants are having some success in preventing terrorism and political violence in Northern Ireland, what are the criteria for successfully utilising former combatants, and does this point to a potential role for former Islamic State combatants in the UK?

Utilising Former Islamic State Combatants

The question of utilising former Islamic State combatants is not entirely left-field as there has been a range of voices expression different potential ways of their utilisation to serve preventative ends. One emerging perspective has emphasised how former combatants can play a preventative role, with former

MI5 and MI6 chief, Richard Barrett, arguing that they can help explain "why going to fight abroad is a bad idea" and that ex-extremists are often the most successful at "undermining the terrorist narrative." The ability to use extremists who "renounce violence" and are "genuinely remorseful," according to this perspective, can provide a credible and persuasive message to stop the flow of people engaging in IS-related terrorism. Terrorism expert Peter Neumann argues that IS defector narratives can encourage others to leave the group and deter others from joining on the basis of their experience and credibility. Subsequently, he has recommended that the U.K. government needs to provide defectors the opportunity to speak out, assist them in their resettlement, and to remove legal disincentives that prevent them going public. An alternative would be to do nothing or continue with the current approach; however former Islamic State combatants are already returning and not all of them are prosecuted. In other words, these former combatant networks exist, they risk solidifying, and will be sharing their views and experiences, therefore it may be more effective in the long-run to co-opt and utilise them for positive ends.

There is clearly a potential role for former Islamic State combatants in preventing others engaging in such activities. The nature of utilisation could be minimalist (narrative-based), whereby third parties disseminate former combatant narratives. For example, one UK counter-terrorism official mentioned how they have distributed one specific article on Islamic State defector narratives to help people play a preventative role. A more controversial role would be a maximalist approach (narrative and network-based) like in Northern Ireland, whereby former combatants themselves engage in activities with the goal of prevention. Should the UK government consider enabling or facilitating former Islamic State combatants in a preventative capacity?

Former Combatants as a Conveyor-Belt to Terrorism?

Image by Day Donaldson via Flickr.

One of the potentially biggest arguments against a maximalist approach is that such activities could be counter-productive and could risk serving as a conveyor-belt to engaging in violence rather than act as a fire-wall. A common trend with former combatants is they often do not de-radicalise: while they may disengage from terrorism because of dissatisfaction, disillusionment or burnout, they tend to maintain their ideological views. From this perspective – and endorsed by the UK government's counter-terrorism policy – even non-violent extremist ideology can encourage others to engage in violence. While the conveyor-belt perspective has been heavily critiqued, the experiences of former combatants in Northern Ireland actually points to a middle-ground between these two perspectives. This consequently contributes to the debate on radicalisation but also on the potential role of former combatants in a preventative capacity.

The findings of my own research on former combatants in Northern Ireland placed emphasis, not on ideology or attitudes to violence, but the framing process – in other words, how is violence and non-violence represented by actors and how it resonates with an audience, and what structural factors facilitate this resonance. Former combatants in Northern Ireland interact on a regular basis with young people through a number of programmes. Interestingly, despite the former combatants having maintained an ideology similar to violent groups, and despite the former combatants not supporting violence in the current conditions, it was realised that the interaction between former combatants and young people led the latter to view the use of violence

positively. However, while this may seem to corroborate the conveyor-belt perspective, it actually showed that it was how former combatants framed violence that produced the conveyor-belt effect, not ideology on its own but also not simply that the former combatants were anti-violence.

Re-Framing Violence

In the past, former combatants explained their transition away from violence by framing violence it as conditionally acceptable during the 1960s civil rights protest period and that since these grievances were addressed in today's conditions that violence was no longer legitimate. There are many reasons why the former combatants re-framed violence in this particular way, and it was particularly effective at ensuring the majority of the Provisional IRA disengaged; however this particular framing of violence to a younger audience without such experiences interpreted the framing as glamourising violence. Reflecting upon this, former combatants actively reframed violence when in dialogue with young people by emphasising the less glamorous aspects of violence more. One study showed that the former combatant reframing of violence in this manner has discouraged young people in engaging in violence. Former combatants were persuasive because they had credibility in the 'hard to reach' areas and they maintained narrative fidelity with audiences on ideology and identity.

The point here is that there is some truth to the conveyor-belt perspective – that former combatants opposed to violence can encourage young people to engage in violence – but it has little to do with the ideology more broadly and much more to do with the framing process between the former combatants and the audience. Those who advocate the conveyor-belt perspective underplay the organisational interests in *not* having potential members becoming violent. In the Northern Irish case, former combatants had the time to reflect upon the

effects of interacting with the younger generation and to engage in a re-framing process. Their reflexivity was encouraged by organisational interest as well as network structures which ensured they would be in regular interaction with young people and an environment in which funding was available to engage in projects.

Empowering Reflexive Networks

Thus, ideology is a crude means of determining the success of former combatants in a preventative role. Former combatants can be utilised in this capacity – or at the very least not discouraged – and the enablement of reflexive networks which resonate with young people can act as a firewall to participation in violence. However, there are a number of potential constraints and objections when this is applied to former Islamic State combatants. Working on the assumption that the purpose of counter-terrorism is to 'counter terrorism' and not to counter ideologies which a state does not like, and leaving aside the normative dimension of the rights of victims which Alonso excellently covers, the article focuses on two main points on the pragmatism and efficacy of using former combatants to prevent violence.

Firstly, the UK government's wholesale adoption of the conveyor-belt perspective makes the provision of funding much more rigid than in Northern Ireland. Interestingly, Northern Ireland's very own prevent policy in the 1980s curtailed which organisations could receive funding on the basis of their ideology, but this was gradually dropped in recognition that the development of the community route could help to facilitate disengagement. The funding former combatants receive in Northern Ireland is detached from the government, thus increasing buy-in across communities, and the conditions of the funding are pragmatically based (often turning a blind eye to paramilitary

behaviour in anticipation that funding and accreditation would incentivise moving away from such behaviour). Ideology is not factored in – alternative identities are strengthened and shown they can be non-violent rather than trying to encourage the 'centrefication' of political identities. In the current UK context, similar changes would be required before former combatants and former extremists could be fully utilised.

A second objection is that the network and community structure – while a crucial factor in determining the efficacy of former combatants in a preventative role – is completely different in the Islamic State context. Former Islamic State combatants are smaller in numbers, they are set apart from their returning communities, and they may be politically disengaged (so why not just leave them like that). However, the size of networks is not important – a network of about a dozen former combatants in Belfast has been sufficient in preventing interface violence. Indeed, following the conveyor-belt logic limits the number of potential partners for the government to work with, in addition to its policies eroding trust through creating the perception of 'suspect communities'. While the utilisation of former combatants (and extremists) can challenge and disrupt moderate communities, the target audience of these initiatives are individuals this moderate community struggle to meet. Finally, while we don't know what former Islamic State combatants are doing upon their return, political passivism should not be viewed as a boat not to be rocked. In the case of Northern Ireland, it was the lack of active framing in combination with stories of the Troubles (often told in a social environment) in the context of parents and teachers *not* actively speaking about the Troubles, which led young people to view violence as attractive.

Minimalist and Maximalist Roles for Forrmer Combatants

In conclusion, former combatants can play a powerful role in preventing violence. The factors which determine whether this will be successful is not based on ideology but neither is it solely on whether they are non-violent. The network structure and incentivising environment can enable former combatants to be reflexive of the narratives they impart and how to best re-frame anti-violence narratives to ensure these resonate with young people in 'hard to reach areas'. Former Islamic State combatants also have a potential role to play, however the lack of an enabling environment would limit this to minimalist interventions in the short term until the infrastructure for maximalist interventions are developed. Maximalist interventions are more effective at resonating with 'hard to reach' audiences as they decrease the likelihood of a conveyor belt effect, an effect which is likely to occur without interventions.

Gordon Clubb is Lecturer in International Security at the University of Leeds and is co-leading the interdisciplinary Radicalisation and Violent Extremism Network. His recent book focuses on Social Movement De-Radicalisation and he has also written on the role of former combatants in preventing violence, how militant groups frame disengagement, and on whether non-violent radical ideology acts as a conveyor-belt to terrorism.

Share this page

✉   **f**   🐦

Contact

Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

Follow us

Registered with
FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR

Useful links

Login
Contact us
Sitemap
Accessibility
Terms & Conditions
Privacy policy