CREATIVE

Photo by: Dean Piedmont

Towards a Comprehensive Framework for the Management of Armed Actors & Groups — An Experts Consultation

A Summary Report

July 2020

Photo by: Dean Piedmont

INTRODUCTION

Rethinking armed group and actor reintegration in a new era of geopolitics

Late in 2019 just before the COVID-19 outbreak, Creative Associates International and the Stimson Center co-hosted a consultation contributing new thinking to the practice and implementation of armed conflict reduction and stabilization efforts positioned at the nexus of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) "type" initiatives. The consultation met under the assumption that DDR-type tools remain relevant, with prosecution, rehabilitation, and civil-military coordination increasingly salient as an emerging area of interest for the international community and the U.S. Government (USG).

This roundtable of experts — comprised of policymakers, international officials, multilaterals, scholars and civil society leaders — engaged in an intensive analysis of actual cases on the ground and formulated ideas to help rethink approaches to individual combatant and armed group reintegration in a new era of geopolitics. Addressing several key issues in the DDR field, this summary outlines seven major themes that are shaping how future policy and programs can rise to meet the challenges of today's geopolitical landscape.

The origins of DDR are so far removed from today's reality as to be almost unrecognizable. A Taliban foot soldier is not going to the barracks or giving up his weapon and may never have left home. A Tunisian ISIS recruit in Syria may no longer have citizenship anywhere and is unlikely to be eligible for a U.N. or USG employment training program. In an era where the international community is rethinking security issues around pandemics and rapidly responding to COVID-19's 2nd and 3rd Order Effects, these issues are increasingly salient with the need to find avenues for armed combatants to transition from the battlefield to productive civilian life.

There are some 40 armed conflicts in the world today. In some form, most will require demobilization and reintegration as a means to de-escalate conflict, reduce violence, make a fragile peace viable, or even, during an active conflict, to achieve victory. The rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape and the changing nature of conflict worldwide mean policymakers and experts working on these issues must deal with new actors, new legal challenges, and changing attitudes toward multilateral cooperation. To support their efforts, they have the benefit of examining and learning from the last few decades of policies and programs on DDR, often in the very same environments.

Photo by: Jim Huylebroek

1. Geo-political shifts and the typology of conflictchange the conversation in fundamental ways.

Conditions and context continue to evolve. Armed actors and groups are fluid, their aims multi-purposed, and the territory they hold not limited by sovereign boundaries. The existence of transnational groups like ISIS and Boko Haram, the inter-weaving of criminal syndicates and armed groups (pro- and anti-government), and the de facto existence of ungoverned territory controlled by insurgent groups all challenge basic ideas of how and when to implement DDR.

How organizations respond to these changes is not only a question of policy and practice, but of mandates and legal frameworks. For example, elements of global counter-terrorism legislation have made it virtually impossible to engage with individuals and groups that exist in the shadows between law and policy. This produces very real challenges for managing the reduction and end of conflicts. Attempts to treat armed groups and actors through so-called DDR processes during conflicts have become the norm but also have complicated the operating environments. Major power interests have also made multilateral forums a more challenging place to address some of these issues, especially in cases where these groups serve as proxies in regional and transborder conflicts.

One of the consultation's most important conclusions is that DDR is no longer solely confined to post-conflict situations. Rather, DDR should be about the full life cycle of conflict, including prevention. Part of the reason for this is that the length of many conflicts and the increased interest in prevention and disruption of violent extremism and criminality means that DDR efforts need to address the full life cycle of armed groups.

2. DDR is not the end of conflict, it is transformational.

This key shift in the conversation sees DDR as a transformational "toolbox" for the entire life cycle of conflict. Conflicts no longer have a beginning, a middle and an end. With fluid armed actors an groups, conflicts no longer have a beginning, a middle and an end. Policymakers and practitioners are confronting the fallacy that we are intervening at the end of the life of the armed group. There are many stages of the life of an armed group, and several roles actors play in its iterations. DDR during conflict can change the nature of the conflict, as well as the composition, aims and tactics of armed groups and actors.

Treating armed actors and groups in conflict requires knowing — based on the context — which tools to use and how to leverage them. Moreover, this entails understanding how DDR tools can alter the nature of the conflict and the flexibility to respond to those shifts.

For example, some armed groups function like micro-governance systems — that when disbanded, this creates a power vacuum and uncontrollably transforms the conflict. DDR efforts may support voluntary defections to weaken an armed group, but that diminished capacity could result in a shift to terroristic tactics or the transformation into political parties. As a conflict unfolds, armed groups may dissolve into mercenaries, and terrorist organizations may mutate into criminal entities. Arguably, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) chart these paths in tandem.

Currently, we see armed groups undertaking governance issues in response to the COVID-19 pandemic with varying motivations from self-preservation to enlightened self-interest, e.g., garner legitimacy, increase territory, and control over economic and natural resources, preserve their numbers, and advance political objectives. The responses by the international community, governments and stakeholders on issues related to DDR will vary considerably as some armed groups vie for legitimate political authority, while others represent nonviable political options.

New practices encourage "defections," others place a premium on "rehabilitation" or on controversial "de-radicalization." Some require increased engagement with the criminal justice system, while still others may require "political reintegration." There are a plethora of options DDR practitioners use – "off-ramping," "voluntary exits," "disengagement" to "dissociation" and beyond.

3. DDR Succeeds where Reintegration Fails.

Reintegration still lacks a uniform definition. However, this is not true for "DDR" which was demarcated by a peace agreement with several preconditions. Disarmament and demobilization

Photo by: Dean Piedmont

were defined, though reintegration had livelihoods, jobs, social, legal, political, personal-cultural identity, language, human rights, and even experiential and perceptual references in its definitions. The unifying threads were "an open time frame," being "part of a country's development process" and "often requiring outside assistance." So, what do we mean by reintegration? When does DDR end and reintegration begin? What we do know is people around the world are self-demobilizing and self-reintegrating. That is important!

Participants in the consultation debated — what can reasonably be expected of a DDR effort? — what complementary efforts are required for DDR? and especially — what is needed for reintegration to succeed? In the context of Afghanistan, several participants noted that officials, often at senior levels, said that DDR failed because former fighters did not have jobs, or because the armed groups did not surrender all their weapons — despite the fact that all DDR candidates did surrender a gun and were trained and reinserted into communities.

Even so, participants acknowledged shortcomings. Many cited examples relevant to Afghanistan. Among successes liberally offered was El Salvador. This Central American nation successfully disarmed and demobilized combatant more than 30 years ago, but the shortcomings of reintegration can still be seen in the ranks of armed gangs. In El Salvador, DDR succeeded, while reintegration failed.

4. "All Roads Lead to Reintegration."

Consistent with the trends discussed above, the continuing shift in focus for DDR efforts is towards reintegration. This includes the reintegration of individuals from armed groups into social and economic life, as well as from other groups such as internally displaced people and returnees. Participants emphasized the importance of the community with an eye on increasing reintegration "absorption capacity" in areas of return.

In today's conflicts, reintegration requires an understanding of the legal implications of an armed combatant (government, militia, cross-border insurgent, terrorist) re-entering society. It requires attention to the psychological impact of conflict on the individual as well as on the community. Issues of post-traumatic stress disorder, estrangement, drug abuse, inability to function in "normal" environments, to handle conflict non-violently are profound for returning soldiers, fighters, and affiliates worldwide. The higher than average turn to criminality among combatants is not only due to joblessness or lack of marketable skills, but to the abrupt disruptions that can come with losing the discipline marked by command-and-control, the comradeship of unit cohesion, and elevated excitement that can come with such endeavors.

Preparation for engagement in economic life is also a critical element of reintegration. However, in the past livelihoods and vocational training was the primary element of such programs, and these often did not correspond to market-driven demands. Experience has shown that such training needs to be part of broader efforts to integrate ex-combatants into the economy. These should ensure that work is available, that employers are able (and willing) to deal with the challenges that can come with such efforts, and that these efforts don't simply come at the cost of economic opportunity to others, creating potential resentments. To this end, participants acknowledged the private sector as a necessary actor in the reintegration process, and an actor that has been historically absent in these efforts.

There is also need for careful consideration of "do-no-harm" approaches that foment aggressive efforts at getting soldiers to demobilize, or defect when the conditions to do so are not ready. While recognizing trust and security as key conditions for readiness, participants noted time and time again that reintegration is the lynchpin for DDR efforts under the banner — "all roads lead to reintegration."

5. Legal status can further complicate DDR efforts.

Navigating the legal issues around DDR has become more complex in recent years. In addition to the usual complications that come with working with non-state actors, counter-terrorism legislation has made even minimal engagement with some groups a gray area at best, and a serious criminal offense at worst. The increased number of groups of insurgents that have been classified by the USG as Designated Terrorist Organizations (DTOs) has led not only to uncertainty about whom it is safe to work with (both directly and by association) as well as what sorts of engagement may constitute "material" support in violation of the law.

Although the law has not changed much since the FARC and the Maoists in Nepal were DTOs, the caseload, context and process have. One example given involves the designation of Mexican drug cartels under anti-terror legislation. Since these cartels are also involved in the avocado trade, is it possible that purchasing guacamole through distributors who buy from cartels could be considered material support? In El Salvador, it was a crime to deal with the MS-13 gang, making it impossible to work with members coming out of gangs despite the provision of Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) licenses. The bewildering array of evolving groups in Libya is hard to track, let alone determine all the interconnections that could lead to undesirable legal implications.

On the other hand, it did become possible because of the complexities to

Photo by: Dean Piedmont

get OFAC licenses for Syria and Iraq to work with ISIS and Al-Qaeda groups or their affiliates. While important, understanding such arrangements can be challenging to those on Capitol Hill and potentially misused for political ends, especially where loose definitions persist. It is still a major political liability to be "soft" on terrorism, and in a highly divisive political environment, sensible efforts to reform might become political footballs. There is currently no process by which terrorists or members of those groups or their affiliates can be declared as "former," and no promise from the U.S. Department of Justice not to prosecute employees of the State Department, USAID or their implementing partners if someone gets the legal interpretation wrong. There is a strong need for open dialogue on these issues as the politics of internecine factions continue to get more complicated across the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia.

6. Afghanistan presents major lessons, challenges, and opportunities for the future of DDR.

Afghanistan remains a prominent case study, having undergone at least four DDR efforts since 9/11. In many ways, Afghanistan typifies DDR's transformational nature through changing conflict dynamics. The first DDR efforts took place following the Bonn Agreement in the early 2000s, where supposed pre-conditions existed, a peace agreement, a legal framework, minimal security guarantees and a process that was voluntary. Today, with a peace agreement in sight, these issues are complicated as a mixture of non-state armed groups, designated terrorist organizations, foreign terrorist fighters, and anti-government elements exist in the same space. The Taliban's response to COVID-19 that includes sensitisations on "social distancing" and handing out hand sanitizer may enable a long-awaited peace agreement. Notwithstanding, an Afghan peace process will have to consider incorporating the Taliban and potentially other armed groups while probably shrinking the (very costly) overall envelope of security forces, addressing entrenched criminality on all sides (opium, smuggling, kidnapping, etc.), an economy that lacks jobs, and power-sharing that will remain wobbly for some years.

Often criticized for subpar results, DDR in Afghanistan did have strategic and tactical successes and many lessons learned. For example, some previous DDR efforts were marred by coalition and Afghanistan forces' inability to provide security for ex-combatants who faced risk of retaliatory actions. DDR conceived and implemented in an environment of mistrust was not able to develop a realistic expectation of what it could deliver or address community grievances and trauma.

Perhaps the biggest lesson learned from Afghanistan is that, as stated above, reintegration can fail where disarmament and demobilization succeed. Many experts agree that moving forward with any further DDR type effort in Afghanistan is not an ideological issue, but an economic one and that all roads lead to reintegration. The fact that the Taliban conducted human capital surveys in Kandahar and Helmand is telling. The private sector will be key to navigating a post-peace agreement DDR process.

7. There is a need for a robust community of practitioners and joint analysis.

Developing, implementing, and assessing approaches needed for our new reality requires us to bring together experts, academics, practitioners, and policymakers in creative and iterative forums. One important aspect of this effort would be to unlock the sunk costs of analysis and share findings more widely, avoid groupthink, and enable the development of common approaches. It is widely accepted that all stakeholders will benefit from joint analysis. At a minimum, there is an increasing interest in working on so-called DDR efforts and if not DDR, then certainly on issues "engaging armed groups and actors."

Over the past two years, the DDR quotient has gone up considerably in D.C. circles. Basic concepts have elevated to substantive and complex conversations on policy, advocacy, programs, and operations. Currently,

there is no dedicated or ad hoc forum in D.C. to study these issues. Our participants welcome such an opportunity!

There is a call to create a new community of practice, or knowledge network, that brings together people at all levels addressing the challenges working and engaging with armed groups and actors. A forum could be an important nexus for cooperation as the USG operationalizes its stabilization policy — the SAR. This knowledge network can be a place to break down silos that separate people, departments, and mandates — sometimes within the same organization. DDR is also a critical area for civil-military partnership and one that needs constant rejuvenation as leaders and processes adapt over time. Bringing together leadership of security forces and civilians, government entities, think tanks, and implementers in areas of conflict is an important bridge building exercise which requires cooperation on the international side of the equation.

Taken together, the consultation led by Creative Associates International and hosted by the Stimson Center was a necessary step in the right direction.

About the Author

Photo by: Skip Brown

Dean Piedmont

Dean Piedmont is a Senior Advisor on security sector engagement for Creative Associates specializing DDR-Reintegration, DTO and foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) issues. He is an expert in security governance for 20-years working for the United Nations, World Bank, USAID and pre-eminent think tanks and policy institutes. Having mission experience in Africa, Central A sis and the Middle East, Dean is widely published, he designs and teaches graduate courses as Lecturer and Adjunct Professor in US universities, and designs curricula for peacekeepers oriented towards counterterrorism.

About Creative

Creative Associates International works with underserved communities by sharing expertise and experience in education, elections, economic growth, citizen security, governance and transitions from conflict to peace.

Based in Washington, D.C., Creative has active projects in nearly 30 countries. Since 1977, it has worked in nearly 90 countries and on almost every continent. Recognized for its ability to work rapidly, flexibly and effectively in conflict-affected environments, Creative is committed to generating long-term sustainable solutions to complex development problems.

Creative Associates International
5301 Wisconsin Avenue NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20015
+ 202.966.5804

Connect with us!
Communications@CreativeDC.com
CreativeAssociatesInternational.com