

## COMMENTARY

# Demobilising and Disengaging Violent Extremists: Towards a New UN Framework

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First and second generation programmes of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR), are no longer 'fit for purpose' in contexts of violent extremism. Recognising this, voices from within the United Nations (UN) system have recently called for the development of a practice framework combining DDR and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). Drawing on examples from Nigeria and Somalia, this commentary outlines six issue areas where DDR and CVE overlap, and where further operational guidance is required. These issue areas are: safe passage; the handling of seized and captured weapons; risk assessment; the use of deradicalisation programmes; the reintegration of extremist offenders; and the links between DDR and rehabilitation programmes for extremist prisoners.

## Introduction

The Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants has been part of the global peacekeeping landscape since 1989, when the United Nations Observer Group in Central America (ONUCA) assisted in the voluntary disarmament and demobilisation of Nicaraguan and Honduran resistance fighters. Although DDR initially focused on former combatants and well-defined military units ('first generation DDR'), it soon evolved to incorporate community members and longer-term development ('second generation DDR') (Muggah and O'Donnell 2015). Peace agreements were a characteristic feature of these two generations of DDR, and typically preceded implementation. In more recent times, however, DDR practitioners have struggled to adapt to contexts of ongoing conflict, where

armed extremist groups fight for objectives that are unamenable to political negotiation. Recognising this, in 2015 the United Nations DDR Section (within the Department of Peacekeeping Operations), and the United Nations University Center for Policy Research (UNU-CPR), released a report stating that first and second generation approaches to DDR were no longer 'fit for purpose' in contexts of violent extremism (Cockayne and O'Neil 2015). This report called for the development of a new practice framework on the Demobilisation and Disengagement of Violent Extremists (DDVE).

## Demobilisation, Disengagement, and CVE

Demobilisation typically occurs when active combatants delink themselves from military command structures through a process of 'formal and controlled discharge' (UN 2006: Module 1.10). Disengagement is a related process, and occurs when individuals decide to no longer participate in violent

activity. In contexts where violent extremism is prevalent, it is important to note that disengagement does not automatically imply deradicalisation. The latter refers only to a shift in beliefs (from extremist to more moderate), and is not necessarily accompanied by changes of behaviour (Horgan 2008). Deradicalisation and Disengagement Programmes (DDPs) are mainstays of current attempts to Counter Violent Extremism (CVE), and are often implemented with violent extremist offenders in prisons and specialised detention centres. Over 40 DDPs are in operation across the globe, including the Danish 'Back on Track' programme, the Tafaquh Fiddin Strategy in Malaysia, and the 'Prevention, Rehabilitation and After-Care Programme' in Saudi Arabia (Koehler 2016: see chapter 10 for an overview). Given the overlap between CVE and the implementation of DDR in violent extremist settings, the DDVE framework envisaged by UNU-CPR and UN DDR recommends the careful integration of these previously separate fields of practice (Cockayne and O'Neil 2015: 144).

Programmes that integrate disengagement, deradicalisation and DDR are now underway in Somalia and Nigeria. The 'National Programme for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants in Somalia' engages with Al-Shabaab members who voluntarily surrender to the government. As part of this programme, officials from the Somali National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) assess the risk-level of these disengaged combatants (Felbab-Brown 2015). Individuals who are classified as 'high risk' are transferred to the criminal justice system. 'Low risk' individuals follow a different path, and are sent to rehabilitation centres for disengagement and deradicalisation prior to release into civilian life. A similar initiative, 'Operation Safe Corridor,' is underway in Nigeria, and is designed to provide safe passage to Boko Haram combatants who surrender to the Armed Forces of Nigeria. Since the launch of Operation Safe Corridor in April 2016, roughly 1000 Boko Haram ex-combatants have surrendered

and are awaiting DDR. As in Somalia, these ex-combatants will undergo deradicalisation and disengagement programming prior to release into the community.

### **Towards a Framework for Demobilising and Disengaging Violent Extremists**

The aforementioned experiences of disengagement, deradicalisation and DDR, suggest six possible pieces of a future DDVE framework:

*Safe passage:* In settings of ongoing extremist conflict, the DDR caseload is likely to consist of group members who are caught during military operations and deserters who voluntarily surrender. A DDVE framework should outline ways to provide safe passage to those who wish to leave their groups and should include strategies on how to encourage further desertion. These strategies should combine CVE expertise on counter-extremist messaging with DDR experience in the use of sensitisation to encourage desertion. The latter has been used in the Democratic Republic of Congo with the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR).

*Small arms control:* The assembly and disarmament of opposing armed groups, which is characteristic of first generation DDR, cannot take place in settings of ongoing extremist conflict. In these contexts Peace Support Operations (PSOs) will be required to disarm captives and voluntary surrendees on an ad hoc basis. PSOs may also capture enemy stockpiles during military operations. Many PSOs, such as the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the Lake Chad Basin, do not have Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for seized and captured weapons. A DDVE framework should therefore stipulate the need for these SOPs to be in place.

*Risk assessment:* In violent extremist settings, some ex-combatants will be more strongly radicalised, and more likely to reoffend, than others. Tools to assess the risk of recidivism among ex-combatants have not

previously been used by DDR practitioners. They are, however, utilised in similar fields of practice. For example, clinical and forensic psychologists regularly conduct risk assessments to gauge whether violent offenders will reoffend. CVE experts also recommend the use of risk assessments in at least three areas: 1) to help in the design of personalised DDPs, 2) to separate extremist prisoners from non-extremist prisoners, and 3) to contribute to decisions concerning the release of extremist offenders from prisons and DDR centres (Koehler 2016; UNODC 2016; Rome Memorandum 2012). For these reasons, a future DDVE framework should consider how risk assessments may be designed and used in violent extremist contexts.

*Deradicalisation:* DDR and CVE programmes often provide participants with access to vocational training, education, and psychological counselling. However, CVE practitioners may also try to encourage deradicalisation through the use of theological dialogue between extremist offenders and religious clerics. The necessity of deradicalisation in CVE is contested (Koehler 2016; UNODC 2016: 71; Neumann 2013: 876–7). Some experts argue that deradicalisation programmes impinge on the right to freedom of religious thought and note that disengagement (without deradicalisation) is sufficient. Others argue that without deradicalisation, recidivism is more likely. A future DDVE framework will need to set out the UN's position on these issues outlining if, and under what circumstances, deradicalisation efforts may take place.

*Reintegration:* First and second generation DDR programmes have typically assumed that ex-combatants will be reintegrated back into their communities of origin. However, in settings of ongoing extremist conflict, these areas may be occupied by active armed groups that are inclined to retaliate against deserters and other ex-combatants. To address this, a future DDVE framework should highlight the need to assess the risks faced by ex-combatants prior to their return to civilian life, ideally as part of a risk assessment process

(see above). This framework should also recognise that ex-combatants may need to be resettled in areas cleared of armed groups, and, if this is not possible, in safe houses or residential DDR centres.

*Links to prison programmes:* Contingent on amnesty provisions and local laws, some former members of extremist groups may be eligible for DDR, while others may be sent to prison for terrorist offenses. CVE experts often implement prison-based DDPs, while DDR practitioners currently provide DDPs in DDR centres or camps (see for example, Barkindo and Bryans 2016). A future DDVE framework should outline how these two separate, but inter-related activities interact. This should include guidance on whether the same reintegration support should be provided to DDR participants and extremist offenders released from prison. This is sometimes the case in Somalia, where convicted Al-Shabaab prisoners may be transferred to DDR upon completion of their sentences. A future DDVE framework should also provide guidance on the extent to which DDR participants and former inmates can be monitored post-release, and whether or not DDVE programmes should render both types of release subject to the fulfilment of certain conditions. For example, in Nigeria, it is planned that parole officers will follow-up with Boko Haram defectors released from the Gombe DDR camp. If these individuals go on to commit a crime of any type, they will then be held for offences against the state.

## Conclusion

The recent call for a DDVE practice framework by UNU-CPR and UN DDR acknowledges the need for new operational guidance in settings of violent extremism. In response, this commentary outlines six specific areas where the development of new guidance can begin. To get this process started, it would be useful to initiate a dialogue between relevant experts in DDR, CVE, small arms control, counter-terrorism and international law. These experts could work on the six topics outlined above, but could also map out other

pertinent issue areas. Importantly, each set of new guidelines should take into account the constraints on UN action in settings of ongoing extremist conflict. For example, due to national security priorities and counter-terrorist operations, national actors may deny the UN access to risk assessment processes that determine whether ex-combatants are sent to trial or to DDR (Felbab-Brown 2015). National actors may also insist on deradicalisation programmes designed to change religious views, regardless of the UN's stance on the right to freedom of religious thought. UN missions will therefore have to carefully assess how much they are prepared to 'bend' on optimal standards for the sake of continued engagement.

At present, no UN mission has a dedicated counter-terrorism or CVE programming capability (Fink 2015: 75). In contexts of violent extremism, where DDR is no longer fit for purpose, it is therefore imperative for UN missions to include DDVE experts, or, at a minimum, for DDR and CVE mission personnel to be operationally linked. The development of a DDVE practice framework would be a beneficial first step in this regard, and could be used as a platform for the development of new training courses connecting DDR and CVE.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** Richards, J 2017 Demobilising and Disengaging Violent Extremists: Towards a New UN Framework. *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 6(1): 14, pp. 1–5, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.543>

**Submitted:** 25 April 2017 **Accepted:** 17 July 2017 **Published:** 23 October 2017

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