

RESEARCH BRIEF

YOUTH ASSOCIATED WITH NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS

BUILDING AN EVIDENCE BASE ON DISENGAGEMENT PATHWAYS AND REINTEGRATION CHALLENGES¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Within the broader youth demographic, disengaged militants and ex-combatants are a sub-group that has been simultaneously excluded and overlooked. Although they account for the largest contingent within violent extremist and non-state armed groups (NSAG), little is known about how their entry pathways vary from older adults, who differ markedly in terms of brain maturation, perspective and reasoning skills, and connectedness within social networks. There has likewise been insufficient inquiry into how their experiences (particularly exposure to violence) impact youth socio-cognitive development, and the specific challenges they face disengaging and reentering their communities.

In an effort to close this gap, this paper sets out findings from 120 semi-structured interviews with former youth combatants in Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan and Colombia, including on engagement drivers, attitudes towards disengagement, factors (dis)incentivizing disengagement, and inhibitors to community reintegration. While there is no accepted definition of youth ex-combatants, this paper uses the term Youth Associated with Non-State Armed Groups (YANSAG), defined as individuals aged 18-35 years, who are or who have been recruited or used by a violent extremist or NSAG in any capacity.

A focus on YANSAG should be integrated into all discussions on peacebuilding, stabilization and resilience. Apart from their disproportionate participation in extremist and NSAG, youth are characteristically vulnerable to recruitment, prone to exploitation while in a group, and difficult to successfully rehabilitate and reintegrate. Moreover, YANSAG's risk of recidivism, and the danger attached to this, is arguably higher relative to other disengaged individuals. Especially for youth re-entering contexts marked by mal-governance, lack of opportunity and stigmatization, reengagement can be the most straightforward pathway to find group connection and assert agency. To mitigate such challenges, YANSAG should be recognized as a group with age-specific vulnerabilities and potentiality. Moreover, policies specifically geared towards their protection, inclusion and empowerment should be seen as a sine qua non for preventing conflict in all its manifestations.

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SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. Age and duration of association:

The research data collected suggest a disproportionate participation of young people in violent extremist and NSAG at between 70-90 percent. The average age at which respondents joined their group varied between 20.7 years (Somalia), 26.6 years (Yemen), 24.6 years (South Sudan) and 18.3 years (Colombia). The average duration of participation varied between 2.78 years (Somalia), 2.41 years (Yemen), 4.91 years (South Sudan) and 17 years (Colombia).

2. Drivers of participation:

YANSAG were exposed to specific environmental and situational vulnerabilities that made certain pathways into a violent extremist or NSAG more likely. Persuasion was the most common explanation for group participation (around 40-45 percent). This was often associated with financial enticements such as income, rewards such as access to weapons, and/or narratives of religious altruism or nationalistic honor. Cases of forced recruitment were also significant (15-20 percent), both via anonymous 'agents' and directly through relatives (particularly fathers) who instructed their sons to protect their country or fulfil a religious obligation. Deception was the third most frequent explanation (10-15 percent); almost exclusively, this related to promises of employment that did not eventuate. For the YANSAG that joined their group voluntarily (85 percent in Colombia and 20-25 percent in the other states), respondents cited a variety of factors influencing their decision including insecurity, economic necessity, and a desire to leave a dysfunctional family/community environment.

3. Disengagement pathways:

The process of disengagement varied widely between respondents. Some left their group as part of an organized process attached to a peace agreement, others left spontaneously, and a third and fourth set of subjects were forced to leave their group, either because it was defeated or they were captured. Disengagement should not imply a withdrawal of allegiance; indeed some respondents had left their group but remained committed to its values and goals, while others withdrew ideologically months or years before their physical departure.

4. Scope for voluntary disengagement:

With the exception of respondents from Colombia, a large majority (85-90 percent) stated that they would have left or surrendered from their group had they been given the opportunity. When asked to contextualize these answers, most noted that their experience was not what they had anticipated/been led to believe, and/or hypocrisy in terms of the groups' religious ideals vis-à-vis the methods it employed.

5. Factors dis-incentivizing voluntary disengagement:

Across all groups, respondents cited the risk of reprisal attacks, the availability of practical disengagement support and (albeit to a lesser extent) legal amnesty. Respondents were less preoccupied with reintegration/reconciliation with their community, suggesting that the immediate security and logistical difficulties associated with defection/disengagement were most relevant to their disengagement decision-making.

6. Potential post-disengagement concerns:

YANSAG principally referenced physical attacks by their former group or police (particularly in Somalia and Yemen), followed by economic difficulties and discrimination/stigma at an equal weighting. Psychological difficulties were not prioritized by respondents as significant concerns, however during the data collection it was observed that many YANSAG exhibited indicators of mental health conditions but failed to recognize the signs, either in themselves or their peers.

7. YANSAG messages:

Across all groups, respondents were consistent and unequivocal in their messaging that engaged youth should extricate themselves without hesitation. Many criticized their former group for adhering to un-Islamic methods, norms and doctrine. Messages to governments and the international community were more varied, but mainly spoke to additional and targeted support to assist more young people to disengage, and practical assistance (especially around livelihoods) for those already disengaged.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strategic, 'value for money' prevention:

The complex pathways leading YANSAG into violent extremism or a NSAG need to be unpacked and integrated into prevention strategies. Key drivers seem to include insecurity, marginalization, lack of employment opportunities and rights abuses. Practitioners and policy makers should avoid 'siloing' these as development or governance issues, and thus falling outside of peace and security mandates. Instead, new ways of working with these groups in an economically pragmatic manner and at scale should be prioritized. Attention should focus on opportunities for youth to reroute their dissatisfaction in non-violent or constructive ways, such as through volunteerism, sport, civic engagement and entrepreneurial endeavors. In evaluating such possibilities, Value-for-Money should be considered against the costs associated with conflict and recidivism. Indeed, engaging youth in safe and socially productive activities, even in the absence of a financially self-sustaining end, may be worthwhile if they provide a bridge over the stage where they are most vulnerable to extremist or militant (re-)recruitment.

2. Concrete assistance for safe disengagement:

This research found that significant numbers of YANSAG wished to disengage from their group, but were fearful of re-appraisal attacks and lacked the necessary information and logistical support. This suggests a need for policies and procedures that illustrate, clearly and convincingly, the steps that YANSAG need to follow to disengage successfully. One under-tapped option may be toll-free, untraceable disengagement hotlines where YANSAG can receive age-appropriate information at moments when they are receptive. Strategies must also take into account that youth are highly vulnerable to false narratives peddled by a group to dissuade against defection, such as families having been killed/resettled, community leaders refusing the reintegration of ex-combatants, or mandatory 'deradicalization' with exposure to torture and sexual assault. Counter-messaging should incorporate the voices of sources trusted by YANSAG such as family members, community leaders, religious figures and especially already disengaged YANSAG. Stories of how they were misled or coerced, or that their expectations of group life were not made out, may have particular resonance.

3. Extending juvenile justice norms to YANSAG:

In the country contexts examined, most disengaged YANSAG are processed under counter-terrorism and national security frameworks where they are dealt with punitively, and with little scope for judges to take into account mitigating factors such as age or duress. Detention conditions are extremely poor with youth particularly vulnerable to violence and sexual exploitation. There is a need for greater advocacy around extending juvenile justice principles to YANSAG (especially for the significant number who entered their group as children), or another framework that takes into account their special needs, vulnerabilities and status. At the forefront of such advocacy should be the evidence on the non-utility of punishment (and the efficacy of diversion and rehabilitation) in reducing recidivism in adolescents. Moreover, that juvenile justice approaches are arguably more urgently needed for this group of YANSAG given their exposure to violence, the atypically high rates of youth criminal recidivism in the Middle East and North Africa regions, and the fact that the drivers that led them into extremism are likely to remain unchanged.

4. Access to restorative justice:

Where a judicial process is either inappropriate or not possible, YANSAG should be provided opportunity to participate in restorative justice processes, such as reconciliation meetings, apologies, community service, volunteer work, civic education, awareness raising, street theatre etc. Restorative justice correlates with reduced exposure to stigmati-

zation and may be particularly constructive for youth, who often acted with an element of agency, for altruistic reasons, or to assert control over their circumstances. Indeed, according such individuals victim or no status has the potential to further entrench their sense of disenfranchisement, whereas (even a non-judicial) accountability process can both acknowledge YANSAG agency and provide a vehicle through which to re-establish social interest.

5. From de-radicalization to desistance:

The de-radicalization programs offered to YANSAG tend to be narrow in scope with a steep focus on religious re-indoctrination. Such approaches are particularly unsuited to YANSAG, as their motivation for joining an extremist or NSAG was rarely ideological, but more likely related to marginalization, insecurity and/or lack of opportunity. Attention should shift towards cognition-supported desistance approaches that (as opposed to delegitimizing or punishing malign behaviors) seek to build the skills, relationships and opportunities that better deliver upon YANSAG needs than membership with the group. Such approaches may prove particularly effective with YANSAG, as desistance does not involve a relinquishment of power and may offer some protection against future stigmatization and/or targeting.

6. Psychosocial Support:

Rehabilitation strategies should address YANSAG's exposure to learned violence, violence desensitization and outgroup prejudice/dehumanization. This especially concerns youth who witnessed atrocity crimes, suffered torture or were forced to kill — events that strongly correlate with post-traumatic stress and other mental health conditions. One challenge is how to roll out psycho-social risk assessment and care cost-effectively and at scale, in highly securitized contexts, and with few trained professionals. Opportunities might include methodologies such as Community Violence Reduction and Functional Family Therapy, both of which have positive outcomes (long and short-term) in reducing serious behavioral recidivism.

7. Safe and sustainable reintegration:

Successful community reintegration is the principal predictor of non-recidivism and thus needs to be approached strategically and methodically. The most important action is to set in place community-based support structures that limit discrimination and stigmatization. While the common approach is instructions/appeals/negotiations led by authority figures, narratives that focus on the disengaged individual's victim's status, the role of coercion and other mitigating factors, may be inappropriate or even counterproductive for YANSAG, who elicit less innate sympathy and often benefit from having their agency recognized. A more effective ap-

proach is to engage the community in discussions around context, the complexity of mid-stage cognitive development and the community-wide risks associated with unsuccessful reintegration. Engaging the community in a broader desistance project and as prevention actors can be another effective tool. Where such mechanisms work effectively, communities feel empowered against external threats, safer and hostilities towards/fear of returnees tend to dissipate.

8. YANSAG livelihoods:

Key to successful YANSAG reintegration is access to livelihoods. While resource-heavy, accelerated/out-of-school learning and vocational opportunities are the most effective way to prevent returnees from falling into a negative cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement. In any such intervention, steps to avoid community backlash are critical. Programs that target not only YANSAG but other youth in the community, or pairing projects with broader community development initiatives or investment, is the best way to avoid the perception that YANSAG are being unfairly rewarded or privileged.

INTRODUCTION

The disproportionate participation of young people in violent extremist and NSAG is a long-standing and historical trend.¹ A United Nations Development Program (UNDP) study of 718 members of NSAG (principally from the Islamic State group, al-Shabab and Boko Haram) found that 53 percent were aged between 17 and 26 at the time of their recruitment.² This is consistent with the previous year's World Youth Report, which noted that the 'jihadism' promoted by groups such as the Islamic State was "almost exclusively associated with young men under the age of 25".³ One explanation posited is that youth apply a different cost-benefit analysis when compared to older individuals: "From a temporal perspective, youth have the most to gain from positive social change, but as they have not yet accumulated social assets, such as career trajectory and family, they have less to lose".⁴ While this should not be disregarded as a contributing factor, today's engagement trends appear to be increasingly opportunity-driven. Especially in Africa and the Middle East, sluggish market growth, exposure to climate change and demographics have combined to create a context where youth face unprecedented levels of unemployment, disenfranchisement and political marginalization. Groups capitalize on these dynamics by promising opportunities for livelihoods, marriage and social advancement.⁵ Such trends are only set to worsen. Indeed, there is emerging evidence that the median age of non-state militant engagement is decreasing, of increasing female participation, and of piety becoming less relevant in an individual's decision to join a religiously-oriented group.⁶

In terms of remedies, the most effective entry point is indisputably prevention. International organizations such as UNDP and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as well as government and non-government organizations, are contributing much in this regard. A less comprehensively entertained/actively pursued entry point is promoting disengagement. Disengagement from a violent extremist or NSAG can be voluntary, for example defection or spontaneous community return, as well as involuntary, for example if an individual is arrested or its group militarily defeated. Disengagement typology must also be understood from a physical-conceptual perspective. Indeed, it is possible for an individual to dissociate themselves from a group but remain committed to its values and goals. Reciprocally, someone may remain physically attached to a group but reject its teachings, perhaps because they fear reprisals, are financially dependent or have no alternate social group to belong to. While policies and research on disengagement typically concentrate on defectors, it is equally important to target individuals who have involuntarily disengaged.

In the violent extremism and youth justice scholarship, the most important factor in effective disengagement is desistance; as long as the individual does not engage in violent, illegal or otherwise malign activities, belief in a group's philosophy is increasingly regarded as less of an issue.⁷ The question then is how to get youths who have disengaged (voluntarily or non-voluntarily) to reject extremist or terrorist methodologies. While there is no 'winning formula', much can be drawn from the scholarship on Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) and criminal justice. This body of knowledge suggests that sustained non-recidivism is less linked to punishment than it is to sound programming in rehabilitation and reintegration. Such interventions focus on building cognitive skills such as critical analysis and peaceful conflict resolution, and behavioral norms such as self-identity and social inclusion. Once internalized, these tools act as a bridge to gaining a 'stake in society' — "an existence based on connectedness and social interest where there is no need for or incentive to engage in deviant behavior".⁸ The most important interventions, however, are those aimed at building the practical skills disengaged individuals need to operate in society and to realize their potential as youth, including as agents of peace: basic education, literacy and/or vocational skills.⁹ Indeed, when returnees have deficits vis-a-vis others, reentry pathways become more difficult. When this combines with stigmatization and suspicion, blocks are formed that result in societal rejection, leading to recidivism and/or new forms of criminality.¹⁰ The key challenge is that such strategies are

resource-heavy and require the involvement of an interdisciplinary set of professionals. They may also sit uncomfortably in authoritarian societies where they may be considered an affront to dominant models of governance, or inimical to the tools through which stability is maintained.¹¹

It does not appear that this is the approach being applied to the current wave of youth who have disengaged from violent extremist and NSAG in the countries under review. Instead, there is a discernable preference for dealing with these ex-combatants under national security as opposed to criminal or transitional justice frameworks. Within these processes, rehabilitation is largely understood to mean ‘de-radicalization’. Such programs are narrow in scope and structured around religious philosophies of disciplines. They are generally run through Islamic clerics charged with challenging and reeducating individuals’ interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence.¹² Apart from this cursory knowledge, there is little known about the methodologies applied nor program effectiveness.

This paper attempts to respond to this gap by setting out detailed information on the disengagement experiences of 120 young individuals in Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan and Colombia. While there is no accepted definition of youth ex-combatants (nor of youth generally¹³) this paper uses the term Youths Associated with Non-State Armed Groups (YANSAG), defined as any person aged between 18-35 years, but not strictly limited to this age range, who is or who has been recruited or used by a NSAG in any capacity.¹⁴

Focusing on the youth demographic of violent extremist and NSAG is important for several reasons. Principally, youth make up the bulk of these groups’ membership — according to the 120 individuals sampled in research, between 70-90 percent. The findings also support the scholarship that youth have specific characteristics that make them vulnerable to recruitment, and prone to exploitation while in a group.¹⁵ From a brain maturation perspective, youth exhibit many child-like characteristics. For example, the delayed development of impulse control vis-à-vis risk apprehension that explains children’s proclivity to risk-taking and sensation-seeking is equally present in youth up until the third decade of life.¹⁶ Youth do not, however, benefit from the legal frameworks available to children. Indeed, the international position is that disengaged children should be considered as having been recruited by violent extremist groups in violation of international law.¹⁷ While this does not necessarily preclude liability where criminal acts have been perpetrated, their victim status should be taken into account in assessing a child’s culpability.¹⁸

Youth may also be the most difficult group to successfully rehabilitate and reintegrate. Adolescence and ‘youthhood’ are formative stages of development and any gaps in schooling and deficits in social growth place such individuals at significant disadvantage in terms of accessing livelihoods, maintaining healthy relationships and leveraging social mobility. Moreover, this group’s risk of recidivism is arguably more dangerous relative to other disengaged individuals given their legal autonomy, experiences of violence, knowledge of weaponry and opportunities for reengagement.

Finally, not having specific knowledge on, or strategies for, YANSAG is a missed opportunity. In today’s interconnected world, youth have an unprecedented opportunity to forge solutions to global challenges and contribute to a more socially just world. Neglecting a YANSAG focus also sits in contrast to the trends around the prioritization of youth as key stakeholders in peace, security and development. Starting with the 1965 ‘Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples’ there has been growing emphasis on the role and empowerment of youth in society.¹⁹ In 1999, 12 August was declared International Youth Day, and the next year, the ‘World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond’ was launched. In 2013, the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Youth was established, followed by the landmark UNSC Resolution 2250 (2015)²⁰ which set out an international policy framework recognizing the positive role youth play in preventing and resolving conflict.²¹ These trends continue to evolve; today, the presence of youth representatives is expected in conferences such as the G7, G20, COP, and youth-dedicated events such as the UN Economic and Social Council Youth Forum regularly feature on the multilateral agenda.

Taking these dynamics into account, this study aims to contribute to the start of a conversation around YANSAG as a specific group that needs to be better understood and empowered if the goals global peace, security and development are to be achieved.²² Section 2 of this paper explains the method of data collection used in the study, as well as limitations and caveats to be disclosed. Section 3 describes the general demographic of the study sample, including gender, age and length of engagement with the violent extremist or NSAG. It also provides a basic overview of the country contexts, including around the conflict, de-radicalization programs offered, and the security and political conditions against which disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration are taking place. Section 4 presents the data collected from 120 YANSAG in Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan and Colombia, including on the drivers of engagement, attitudes towards

disengagement, potential factors that might encourage/disencourage disengagement, and concerns around community reintegration. Section 5 draws conclusions from the data presented and the existing scholarship in four areas: prevention, disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration; policy recommendations are set out in the executive summary.

1. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to shed light on the factors that enabled YANSAG to disengage from their violent extremist or NSAG, and identify key challenges encountered post-disengagement. To enable this, 120 semi-structured interviews were conducted with equal numbers of YANSAG in Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan and Colombia. Access to these individuals was facilitated by way of the author's practitioner activities reintegration support and youth advocacy in the relevant locales.²³ Specifically, interviewees comprised as follows:

- **Somalia:** 16 male al-Shabaab defectors housed in the multi-functional reception centre and 14 male al-Shabaab prisoners held in Mogadishu central prison. The average duration of participation was 2.78 years and the average age at joining was 20.7 (ranging between 10 and 35 at the time of recruitment).

- **Yemen:** 30 male Houthi detainees held in a special detention facility in the Taiz central prison. The average duration of participation was 2.41 years and the average age of joining was 23.6 years (ranging between 15 and 50 at the time of recruitment).

- **South Sudan:** 30 male SPLM-LO, SSUF and SSOA²⁴ (voluntary and non-voluntary) ex-combatants from various cantonment sites in Juba. The average duration of participation was 4.91 years and the average age of joining was 24.6 years (ranging between 16 and 33 at the time of recruitment).

- **Colombia:** 30 (19 male and 11 female) former FARC living in and around the capital city of Bogota, and in reception sites in Medellín, Gaitania or Caquetá. The average duration of participation was 17 years and the average age of joining was 18.3 years (ranging between 8 and 47 at the time of recruitment).

For the purposes of interviews the term 'disengagement' was used to denote the individual's physical departure from the group. This is to acknowledge that an individual may leave a group but remain ideologically connected, for example if they were forcibly disengaged due to capture.²⁵ Likewise, some individuals remain members of a group but not feel connected to its ideals, including due to fear, duress or necessity.²⁶ To account for this diversity, some adjustments were made during interviews. For those who had not disengaged on their own initiative (e.g., prisoners, detainees, and

some ex-combatants), questions regarding voluntary disengagement and post-disengagement reintegration were posed in a hypothetical manner.

The messages contained in this paper should be not be taken as instructive but interpreted relative to the respondent sample size (120) and conditions under which the data was collected. Specifically, the following caveats should be noted. Collecting interview data in prisons and special detention centers is high risk and problematic to analyze. To mitigate against this, an ethical protocol²⁷ was developed and applied to the data collection and analysis process, as well as a safeguarding protocol.²⁸ The purpose and specificities of the research were fully explained to both interviewees and staff, and consent obtained. Prison staff were not present during interviews, however the author acknowledges that research subjects may have still favored answers likely to better their situation or protect them from reprisals. This said, it should be highlighted that the author had established rapport with both staff and research subjects over a period of years by way of a practitioner relationship. Moreover, the questionnaire was designed with a strong emphasis on present and future context with a view to eliciting opinion as opposed to self-narrative.

2. BACKGROUND ON THE RESEARCH SUBJECTS AND COUNTRY CONTEXTS

A. YANSAG INTERVIEWEES

This study involved 120 YANSAG previously associated with a violent extremist or NSAG. Consistent with the literature, the circumstances under which these individuals joined their group varied widely, from forced conscription, to kidnaping, coercion and voluntary choice. As part of the group, they performed varied roles including as combatants, scouts, cooks, porters, guards, messengers and sexual slaves.²⁹ The circumstances of their departure fell into five main typologies. Some research subjects (usually termed 'ex-combatants') left their group as part of an organized process attached to a peace agreement, akin to a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program.³⁰ A second set of interviewees ('returnees') left their group spontaneously — most returning to their communities in the absence of a judicial process or reintegration support. A third and fourth set of research subjects were forced to leave their group, either because it was defeated or they were captured. Some were then released, either due to weak judicial processing capacity or a lack of evidence to support prosecution, while others were detained. Finally, there were youth who voluntarily defected and opted in to a specific disengagement

program available (in Somalia and the Lake Chad basin countries, for example).³¹ Whether they left voluntarily or involuntarily, YANSAG deemed high-risk or suspected of having committed serious crimes were usually referred to a criminal or military justice process. Whether they were in pre-trial detention or prison, conditions were invariably poor and rates of violence high.³² It should also be noted that an unknown number of YANSAG are detained in military facilities outside of a judicial process where they are extremely vulnerable to torture, due process violations, extrajudicial killing etc. In Yemen, there is anecdotal evidence that both the Houthi de facto authority and Yemeni government detain group members outside of a judicial framework for the purposes of prisoner exchange.³³

B. BACKGROUND ON THE STUDY AREAS

1. Somalia

Located in the eastern Horn of Africa, Somalia has been ravaged by conflict for over 30 years, with more than 60 identified NSAGs.³⁴ Among these, al-Shabaab — an extremist group with ties to al-Qaeda — is considered the most potent and immediate threat. With an estimated 7-12,000 fighters, al-Shabaab operates over large areas of Somalia, and is rated among the most active of all al-Qaeda affiliate groups.³⁵

Disengaged al-Shabaab account for a high proportion of those imprisoned in Somalia; such inmates number around 750 of 1,500 total in Mogadishu central prison. For several years, this prison has suffered from severe overcrowding, prompting the construction of a new facility called the Mogadishu Prison and Court Complex (MPCC) in 2019. Due to security concerns, prisoners affiliated with al-Shabaab have not been relocated and remain in the central prison. This facility operates a de-radicalization program that includes counseling, basic education, religious reeducation and vocational training. It is unclear whether such programs are offered at other prisons in the country. There is strong anecdotal evidence that high ranking al-Shabaab are held in secret military detention centers; little is known about their condition.

Since 2013, the Somali Federal Government has operated a rehabilitation and reintegration program for defectors.³⁶ It delivers basic education, religious reeducation and life skills training³⁷ over a 12 month period to individuals that have surrendered and are classified as low risk. There are currently three facilities — in Mogadishu, Baidoa, and Kismayo. In Kismayo and Baidoa, programs catering exclusively for women exist. In Dhusamareb a multi-functional reception center that provides accommodation and interim rehabilitation has recently been established.

2. Yemen

The Republic of Yemen, located at the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, has weathered political instability since the Arab Spring of 2011, and civil war since 2014. The conflict also has an international dimension; Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have waged military attacks on rebel groups starting in 2015.³⁸ In April 2022, a UN-mediated ceasefire agreement was reached. This agreement expired in October of the same year, and the situation remains unstable.

Several NSAG are engaged in the conflict, the largest being the Houthis, officially known as Ansar Allah. The group originates from the Zaydiyya Reconstruction Movement³⁹ and has close ties to Iran.⁴⁰ In 2014, it seized control of large swaths of territory in north Yemen, including the capital Sana'a. Its military capability has evolved by drafting soldiers in the areas it controls.⁴¹ As of 2021, the group comprised approximately 200,000 soldiers, 130,000 of which were recruited following the 2015 Saudi military intervention.⁴² The number of children in the group is estimated at 3,895, including 88 girls.⁴³ Many of the YANSAG interviewed for this research were recruited as children. A common technique was sending supervisors to schools to scout for students, and by using enticements such as offers of money and supplies to their families.⁴⁴

3. South Sudan

South Sudan, which separated from Sudan in 2011, has suffered escalating political tension since 2013 mainly stemming from discord between the ruling party and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). Clashes between presidential guard soldiers aligned with President Kiir and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO)⁴⁵ supporting Vice President Machar have occurred in the capital Juba and spread to other parts of the country. In the eastern states of Jonglei, Upper Nile, and Unity, both groups have targeted opposition areas with violence, looting, infrastructure destruction, and the conscription of child soldiers.

In 2014, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) mediated a ceasefire, which was followed by a Compromise Peace Agreement between President Kiir and Machar in 2015.⁴⁶ Clashes between government and non-state forces have however continued, with new groups including the South Sudan United Front (SSUF) and South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA) entering the conflict. In 2018, the government and rebel groups led by the SPLM-IO agreed to a Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), which

included the establishment of a coalition government.

The 2018 peace agreement also included Transitional Security Arrangements (TSA) under which militia would be integrated into the South Sudanese army.⁴⁷ The process was for ex-combatants to be transferred to 40 cantonment sites where they would live with government soldiers and participate in an 8-month pre-transition training program. Many subsequently returned to their communities, somewhat due to a lack of food, water, sanitation and adequate living conditions.⁴⁸ Of those who chose to remain, a screening process was implemented to identify suitable candidates to be assigned to the Necessary Unified Forces (NUF). Those deemed unsuitable or who did not want to join the security sector, are eligible to participate in a DDR process to be led by the National DDR Commission, however this has not yet become operational. As a result, more have opted to return to their communities.⁴⁹

4. Colombia

Colombia has suffered more than 50 years of civil war between government forces and NSAG.⁵⁰ The largest group — the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia: FARC-EP)⁵¹ — boasted a height of 20,000 members⁵² and conducted sophisticated attacks against governmental forces, including assassinations, bombings, hijackings and kidnappings. A peace agreement, brokered by the Cuban government, was concluded in 2016. The agreement led to the disarmament of approximately 14,000 FARC members, prisoners, and civilian militia in 2017⁵³, and the establishment of a legal political party, Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común.⁵⁴

FARC ex-combatants then participated in a ‘reincorporation process’ run by the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN), a Colombian government agency. A first phase comprised social integration training over a two-year residency period in reincorporation zones (Former Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation, AETCRs).⁵⁵ During this period, participants received 2,000,000 COP (approximately 400 USD) for new living conditions, and those not in employment received a monthly basic income equivalent to 90 percent of the minimum wage. The subsequent ‘long-term reincorporation stage’ involved participants being assigned to an ARN representative and provided a comprehensive support package (targeting the ex-combatant and his/her family) including access to education, housing, health care and psychosocial assistance. If conditions were met, participants also continued to receive the monthly allowance.⁵⁶

The program has had mixed effectiveness. Since President Duque, an opponent of the agreements, took office in

2018, implementation has waned and protection of former FARC members has been inconsistent.⁵⁷ Public opinion on the reintegration of the FARC is also divided, mainly around a lack of accountability for perpetrators of serious crimes. It should also be noted that not all FARC joined the peace agreement, and splinter dissident groups continue to engage in sporadic violence, along with other NSAG.⁵⁸

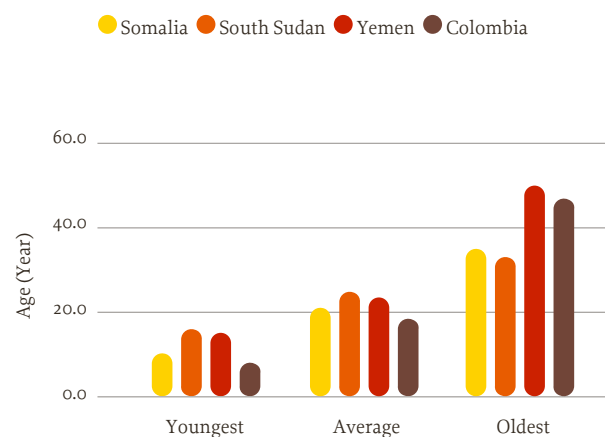
3. PRESENTATION OF DATA COLLECTED

A. ESTIMATED YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN VIOLENT EXTREMIST AND NSAG

Precise age demographics on youth involved in violent extremist and NSAG are difficult to assess. Key factors include: a lack of priority in data collection (research has generally focused on assessing the number of child combatants and gender ratios), youth not disclosing their correct ages (either to expedite their entry into a group or avoid harsher penalties upon disengagement), and competing definitions of ‘youth’. In South Sudan, an additional problematic is that many people do not know their exact birth dates. With these caveats, respondents made the following estimates of the percentage of youth participating in their former group, divided into the age brackets 18-29 and 30-35.

	18-29	30-35	Total youth
Somalia	58%	29%	86%
Yemen	54%	36%	90%
South Sudan	57%	23%	80%
Colombia	40%	44%	84%

Age at joining the group



B. THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT INCENTIVIZED YANSAG TO JOIN A VIOLENT EXTREMIST OR NSAG

Persuasion was the most common explanation for how interviewees came to join their violent extremist or NSAG (Somalia: 48.3 percent, Yemen: 46.7 percent, South Sudan: 30 percent). This was often associated with financial enticements such as income, rewards such as access to weapons, and/or narratives of religious altruism or nationalistic honor. Friends were also influential in a significant number of cases, particularly by encouraging the YANSAG to earn a living or defend their nation. One respondent from South Sudan noted that they felt peer pressure “to stand up as a community” because the capital, Juba, might be conquered, or their land invaded. There were also cases where a youth was nominated by tribal elders to join a group, manifesting in a more localized and cultural obligation.

Cases of forced recruitment were also significant (Somalia: 20.7 percent, Yemen: 10 percent, South Sudan: 26.7 and Colombia: 3.3 percent). This may have occurred anonymously (for example, by way of a threatening phone call), or directly through relatives (particularly fathers) who instructed their sons to protect their country or fulfil a religious obligation. One Somali recalled being asked to join al-Shabab by telephone, and following his refusal he was ‘arrested’ and detained until he complied. In Yemen, Houthis would send recruiters to communities to draft people house-by-house. In South Sudan, death threats were the most common form of coercion (and likewise a common deterrent against defection). Cases of kidnapping were rare but nonetheless noteworthy: Somalia: 6.9 percent and South Sudan: 6.7 percent.

Deception was another explanation (Somalia: 6.9 percent, Yemen: 11.7 percent, South Sudan: 23.3 percent). Almost exclusively, this related to promises of employment that did not eventuate. Several Somali respondents noted that they were invited to a location that they believed was an opportunity for work, but upon induction found themselves working for al-Shabaab. A Yemeni respondent stated that they were told that there was ‘a meeting’ which turned out to be a gathering of Houthis

It is critical to highlight that some YANSAG joined their group voluntarily (Yemen: 21.7 percent, South Sudan: 23.3 percent, Colombia: 86.7 percent). The reasons behind this were context specific. In Yemen, participation was principally a means to earn income or (albeit more rarely) escape a violent or otherwise dysfunctional domestic situation. In South Sudan, YANSAG participation was most commonly a response to family members or friends being killed or attacked by hostile forces, or a strategic move to protect friends

or their community. In the case of FARC, the three principal drivers were revenge against the government and its exercising of military prowess, lack of access to education and jobs, and commitment to FARC ideals to eradicate poverty and promote equality in Colombia. Still, many respondents highlighted that their choice was ‘grey’ with multiple reinforcing influences combining to make group participation the best choice for them.

	Persuasion	Forced recruitment and kidnapping	deception	voluntary	other	total
Somalia	46.7%	20.7%	6.7%	13.3%	6.7%	100.1%
Yemen	46.7%	10%	11.7%	21.7%	10%	100.1%
South Sudan	30%	33.4%	13.3%	23.3%	0%	100%
Colombia	0%	3.3%	0%	86.7%	10%	100%

C. THE PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF YANSAG PRECEDING ENGAGEMENT

The data collection process specifically touched upon interviewees’ living conditions at the time of recruitment. While answers varied, a running theme was few (or no) employment opportunities creating financial pressure, limited access to education, and food insecurity. Some interviewees from Somalia and Yemen noted a lack of family support or violent domestic situation. Yemenis in particular highlighted an expectation that living conditions would improve with the Houthis as a principal motivating factor. The outlier was South Sudan where many YANSAG respondents did not particularly note deficits in their living conditions.

Regarding the physical conditions and emotions experienced while with their group, former members of al-Shabaab overwhelmingly stated that they felt fearful and worried, and some recalled those days as hopeless. In Yemen, life with the Houthi group was highly dependent on the role assumed. Those deployed to stable locations and in non-combatant roles described their lives as surprisingly normal or mildly bad. Those in combat roles, however, were more likely to feel fear and anxiety on a daily basis. In South Sudan, most respondents, including those who joined voluntarily, described feeling fear and despair, as well as exposure to food shortages and violence. The situation for YANSAG in Colombia sits in contrast to the other countries. Most respondents described their life and feelings during their time in FARC as positive. They described having a “good time” and recalled forming bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood with FARC members. While work was physically demanding and mil-

itary battles violent, recruits were provided with food, clothing and access to various social services. The most common negative comment was being prevented from communicating with family and friends; the enforced severance of family ties was also reported by members of al-Shabaab in Somalia and the Houthis in Yemen.

D. ASSESSING THE SCOPE FOR VOLUNTARY DISENGAGEMENT BY YANSAG

It is important to note that the data collection process posed the same questions around the factors influencing disengagement irrespective of whether the YANSAG had disengaged voluntarily or involuntarily. In the case of involuntary disengagement, these questions were posed hypothetically i.e. what the respondent believed others in the group might have preferred given the opportunity.

With the exception of those from Colombia, a large majority of respondents stated that they would have left or surrendered from their group had they been given the opportunity (Somalia 86.6 percent, Yemen 93.3 percent, South Sudan: 89.2 percent). A minority stated that they would not have left their group, even if they had the chance (Somalia: 3.3 percent, Yemen: 6.6 percent, South Sudan: 8 percent). Particularly noteworthy is how respondents perceived the attitudes of those who remained in the group. With the exception of Yemen, there was a strong sense that most engaged youth combatants would leave the group given the opportunity.

	YANSAG self description			Total
	Would have disengaged	Would not have disengaged	Unsure	
Somalia	86.6%	3.3%	10%	99.9%
Yemen	93.3%	6.6%	0%	99.9%
South Sudan	89.2%	7%	3.5%	99.7%
Colombia	20%	80%	0%	100%
Total				
	YANSAG perception of others			Total
	Would have disengaged	Would not have disengaged	Unsure	
Somalia	80%	3.3%	16.6%	99.9%
Yemen	0%	0%	100%	100%
South Sudan	53.5%	3.5%	42.8%	99.8%
Colombia	33.3%	51.8%	14.8%	99.9%
Total				

When asked to contextualize these answers, Somali respondents (consistent with the de-radicalization scholarship)⁵⁹ noted that their experience with al-Shabab was not what they had anticipated, or had been led to believe. Respondents from South Sudan also referenced negative events experienced during their participation in the group. In Yemen, the principal explanation was feelings of opposition to the Houthi strategy and methods of warfare, however some simply desired to live a more peaceful and less violent existence. It is noteworthy that a significant number of respondents who had been released by way of prisoner exchange stated that they did not want to return to their Houthi group. Reasons included their family or friends houses having been burned, disabilities stemming from the conflict (such as the loss of a limb) and conflict fatigue. This said, these respondents did want to return to the Houthi-controlled areas from which they were from.

In Colombia, by contrast, when asked if they would have chosen to leave FARC given the opportunity, 75 percent answered in the negative. In interpreting this difference, it should be recalled that most Colombian respondents joined FARC voluntarily and that experiences while with the group were largely positive. For those who stated that they would have left the group given the opportunity, reasons included conflict fatigue and losing commitment to the ideals of the conflict.

E. FACTORS INCENTIVIZING AND DIS-INCENTIVIZING VOLUNTARY DISENGAGEMENT

The data collection also investigated the potential factors that impacted/might have impacted respondents' decision to disengage. In Somalia, having protection from attacks by al-Shabab was deemed the most important factor. This is consistent with other scholarly evidence that killing defectors or others (for example family members) as revenge for defection is a common al-Shabab tactic. The second most important factor was protection by amnesty, practical disengagement support and practical community reintegration support, in equal numbers. Interestingly, having a legal status as a 'disengaged' or 'former combatant' was less of an important factor for respondents. Respondents were also less concerned about reintegration/reconciliation with their community, suggesting a broad support/understanding of the al-Shabab cause, and/or tightly knit tribal dynamics.

In Yemen, the most important factor influencing disengagement was receiving practical reintegration support, followed by job opportunities, and then protection from reprisal attacks and community level reintegration and reconciliation. That respondents attached less importance to prac-

tical disengagement support is consistent with the evidence that leaving/defecting from the Houthis is less problematic than in other contexts. Respondents also de-prioritized the need for amnesty and/or an official legal status, again suggesting that the challenges post-disengagement are more pressing than the challenges of actually disengaging from the Houthi group.

In South Sudan, the most important factor influencing disengagement was practical disengagement support, signaling the physical and logistical difficulty of leaving the various militant groups operating in the country. Respondents' next priority was practical reintegration support, followed by protection from reprisal attacks and legal status in equal numbers. A surprisingly low number of respondents noted job opportunities and community-level reconciliation. As in Somalia, this suggests that YANSAG are more concerned with the immediate difficulties associated with defection/disengagement, than establishing the new life. Attention was drawn anecdotally to high rates of defector targeting, and a (albeit lesser) risk of reprisal attacks on the families or communities of defectors.

It is unsurprising that results from respondents in Colombia are different given that a peace agreement facilitated disarmament and demobilization, and that the FARC currently exists in a non-violent form. Disengagement for this group of respondents thus unequivocally equates with disengagement from violence. The most important factor influencing disengagement was 'other'. When unpacked, this largely connoted loyalty to or following FARC leaders' decision-making. The next most important factor was practical disengagement support. Respondents' explanation of this boiled down to the conditions attached to disengagement rather than actual support for disengagement. In particular there was broad criticism of the Colombian government, with many stating that they would have laid down their arms earlier if the government had responded to the group's legitimate demands appropriately. The next most common response was practical reintegration support, legal status and community-level reintegration-reconciliation. Discussions with respondents indicated that the long duration spent in FARC created a situation where they had few skills to live a civilian or urban life. Many also expressed concern about the prejudice they faced from society. For those who noted their 'legal status', this reflected concern about whether FARC could participate in politics appropriately, as opposed to their own legal status. The low concern attached to fear of reprisal attacks is also noteworthy given the increase in attack rates in recent years.

F. POTENTIAL POST-DISENGAGEMENT ISSUES TO BE OVERCOME

YANSAG disengaged from al-Shabab were principally concerned with physical attacks from their former group, followed by economic difficulties and discrimination/stigma at an equal weighting. Indeed, in the capital city of Mogadishu, some low-risk defectors have been targeted and killed by al-Shabaab operatives only weeks after completing rehabilitation programs. In addition, some prison guards who were responsible for supervising high-risk disengaged individuals have been assassinated following their service at the prison. While mental health and post-traumatic stress disorders are often referenced in the academic literature, these were not cited by respondents in significant numbers. Having an official legal status was the lowest priority of respondents.

In Yemen, the highest priority concern was physical reprisal attacks, along with discrimination/ stigma. It is noteworthy that several respondents indicated a fear of being attacked or arrested by a Houthi representative even following their release as part of a prisoner exchange agreement. Economic difficulties was the most frequently selected factor, however deemed a lesser priority. As in Somalia, psychological difficulties and legal status were not prioritized by respondents as significant concerns. The author's observation, however, is that many YANSAG failed to recognize the signs of psychological distress, either in themselves or their peers. This was particularly evident, for example, in the special detention facility for Houthi detainees located within the Taiz central prison, where living conditions are very poor.

In South Sudan, the most frequently cited post-disengagement concern was economic difficulties, followed by physical reprisal attacks and discrimination/stigma. Some YANSAG interviewees reported feeling stigmatized by members of the broader community while living in cantonment sites designed for ex-combatants. As a result, some had decided to return to their communities despite feeling uncomfortable or uneasy in doing so. Of those who noted concern about physical attacks, this principally pertained to military authorities or re-arrest by the police. As in Somalia and Yemen, YANSAG did not regard psychological issues and legal status as significant post-disengagement concerns.

For disengaged FARC, the most frequently referenced post-disengagement issue (as well as the issue attributed the highest priority) was discrimination/stigma, by a large degree, followed by economic difficulties. Respondents provided examples of being 'labeled' a former combatant, not being able to open a bank account or rent a house, being banned or excluded from attending specific events, and being pre-

vented from traveling abroad. A number of respondents described the government and media as having a one-sided and polarized view of FARC members and that this contributed to their experiences of discrimination/stigma. As for economic difficulties, many blamed the government for a lack of financial support; others said that their years living guerilla-style in the mountains had left them with no transferable skills and lacking the relevant educational qualifications to apply for jobs.

From a prioritization perspective, respondents also referenced physical attacks from communities or from the former group, however in this case ‘former group’ referred to splinter groups that did not participate in the peace agreement. Indeed over 300 former FARC members have been killed since the peace agreement through this type of violence. Psychological difficulties and legal status were again viewed as the lesser priorities from a post-disengagement perspective.

G. YANSAG MESSAGES TO GROUP MEMBERS, THE GOVERNMENT AND INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY.

A review of the counter-terrorism literature reveals that the voices of YANSAG have been largely ignored in both research and policy. The perspectives and insights provided by these individuals, however, are critical to crafting effective interventions and fostering the conditions needed for them to reach their potential as agents of peace and contribute to the sustaining peace agenda more broadly. To help close this gap this research collected testimony on YANSAG’s messages to different stakeholders on the issue of disengagement.

Somali respondents were consistent and unequivocal in their messaging to youth still engaged with al-Shabab to “leave the organization” and “go back and live with your family and community”. Many criticized the group, insofar as its methods and norms were inconsistent with Islamic teachings and doctrine. Messages to the government and the international community were more varied, but mainly spoke to additional and targeted support to technically assist more young people to disengage, and to practical assistance (especially livelihoods and financial) for those already disengaged.

Respondents from Yemen again strongly advocated that YANSAG should leave the Houthi group and that the war and how it is being perpetrated was wrong and un-Islamic. Moreover, those still engaged should be directed by what is the correct and moral pathway, both for themselves and their families. Interestingly, their messaging focused, not on criticizing the Houthi per se (who are fellow Yemeni) but the war and the political nature of the conflict. The most consistent message to the government and the international

community was that disengaged combatants should be released from detention facilities and for clarity in terms of the policies (security and criminal) to be applied to disengaged combatants. Others felt it was important to convey to those still engaged the types of support that would be made available during their detention and upon release.

South Sudanese respondents likewise urged engaged youth to choose peace over fighting and to leave their organized groups irrespective of the potential risks. They particularly urged youth to entertain the possibilities of a bright future and contributing to society (marriage, employment etc.) as opposed to the ends accruing from violence and fighting. Few wished to convey messages to the government (indicating a lack of trust), however there was consistent advocacy towards the international community to facilitate and push the peace process forward more structurally.

Respondents’ messages to young FARC dissidents who refused to participate in the peace agreement was that the use of force would not deliver on their goals, and that a non-violent pathway should be considered. Some reasoned that, in hindsight, war and life in an armed conflict was not good for youth. Another message was to recall the original FARC ideology and consider the extent to which current practice correlates with this. A significant number, however, hesitated to make strong recommendations as they recalled their own logic for joining FARC, and understood that engaged combatants were most probably trying to ensure their own survival. Indeed, unlike in the other countries, the overall message was not to leave the group but to amend their approach. Messages towards the government were ridden with recrimination and specifically that it had failed to deliver on peace agreement commitments. Particular sources of angst were the harsh conditions under which former combatants now lived, and a failure to protect the disengaged from reprisal attacks. This spilled over to requests directed towards the international community to monitor the government and also provide the assistance promised but not delivered by authorities (particularly education, income generation projects, and adequate housing).

4. ANALYSIS

A. MORE CONTEXTUALIZED APPROACHES TO PREVENTION

YANSAG are exposed to different environmental and situational vulnerabilities that make certain pathways into a violent extremist or NSAG more likely. From the data collected, most youth were affected by coercion or another form of context-driven manipulation. Rarely did this mean physi-

cal force. In most cases, youth were misled into a decision or situation from which it was difficult to extricate themselves. Here it is again important to highlight the neurobiological specificities of youth. Adolescents have a predisposition towards risk imbued, boundary-pushing and asocial behaviors which continue until part-way through the third decade of life (around 25 years). This tendency is linked to brain maturation, specifically that changes in the limbic system precede regulatory competence and cognitive control systems. During this period, a limited ability to appraise risk and consequence, combines with an increased vulnerability to external pressure, especially group and peer pressure.⁶⁰ The other pathway highlighted in the data was YANSAG exercising choice or agency. Context, however, is important. Respondents cited a variety of situational factors influencing their decision including insecurity, economic necessity, and a desire to leave a dysfunctional family environment. This is consistent with the broader scholarship which has highlighted collapsed community protection systems, inadequate educational opportunities and poverty as key factors that leave youth highly vulnerable to the lure of remuneration, status and camaraderie promised by violent extremist and militia groups.⁶¹

The complexity of these situations means that agency can rarely be understood in black and white terms. Moreover, youth who voluntarily join militant groups should not be dogmatically classified as ideologues of violence, but their reasoning unpacked and taken seriously in prevention strategies. Few can deny that political marginalization, lack of employment opportunities and human rights abuses are legitimate sources of angst held by large populations in developing and fragile countries. Too often, however, these issues are technically categorized as development or governance issues and thus falling outside of peace and security mandates. Such 'silencing' is arguably shortsighted and inhibiting more sustainable and coherent solutions from being crafted. A compounding issue is the breadth of these challenges; indeed there is no rapid, cost-effective or uncomplicated programming 'fix' for youth unemployment, systematic corruption or authoritarian governance. This should not be used as a pretext to *not* engage, but instead as an *invitation* to identify new ways of working with these groups in an economically pragmatic manner and at scale. In this process, the perspectives of YANSAG collected in this research might shed some light. Their priorities seem to sit at the community level, in empowerment, livelihoods and civic purpose. Attention might therefore focus on opportunities for youth to reroute their dissatisfaction in non-violent or even positive ways. Examples include volunteerism, sport, civic engagement and entrepreneurial endeavors. Youth also

need capacity development in specific skillsets such as critical thinking, risk assessment, conflict dynamics and peaceful dispute resolution. In evaluating such possibilities, it might also be necessary to rethink conceptions of Value-for-Money against the costs associated with conflict. There is some validity in the argument that engaging youth in safe and socially productive activities, even in the absence of a financially self-sustaining end, are worthwhile if they provide a bridge over the stage where they are most vulnerable to extremist or militant (re-)recruitment.

B. APPROPRIATE AND CONCRETE ASSISTANCE FOR SAFE DISENGAGEMENT

This research suggests that significant numbers of YANSAG wish to disengage from their group, but are fearful of reappraisal attacks and lack the necessary information and logistical support. This suggests a need for policies and procedures that illustrate, clearly and convincingly, the steps that YANSAG need to follow to disengage successfully and safely.⁶² The research also suggests that the type of information and supports needed may be more comprehensive than typically expected.

It must be highlighted that 'youthhood' is a time of rapid socio-cognitive development where relational bonds shift from the nuclear family to peer and mentor networks, and practical life skills amass quickly. When individuals are removed from their families, communities and education systems during this period, deficits can accrue. Such gaps tend to be wider and more heavily entrenched for YANSAG who entered their group as children. Results manifest in a number of ways, but particularly reflect a tendency towards high commitment-low trust social bonds, weak information processing and reasoning skills, an exaggerated fear of group rejection, and a narrow and often polarized world view.⁶³ Such characteristics need to be reflected in disengagement strategies.

A first hurdle is to deliver relevant, comprehensive and accurate information to engaged youth.⁶⁴ Evaluations of leaflet campaigns (dropped from vehicles/by air or distributed by hand in a frontline situation) and radio interventions suggest that these are less effective with youth due to issues around literacy, difficulty processing complex logistical information and because the process of disengagement is usually longer-term for younger people vis-à-vis older group members.⁶⁵ Indeed a lesson gleaned from this research is the importance of a communication channel through which YANSAG can develop ideas around the possibility of disengagement, understand the process, and discuss it in an objective manner. One under-tapped option may be toll-free, untraceable disengagement hotlines where YANSAG can

receive age-appropriate information at moments when they are receptive. With regards to the operation of a hotline, it may be advisable to involve civilian organizations such as NGOs and human rights defenders, particularly in fragile countries where the government and security sectors may be distrusted. Information routing via networks may also have more potential than is common believed. Within any group there will be a variety of attitudes held concerning its validity, thus providing opportunities for alternate narratives and information to filter upwards from communities and official sources to group members. This underscores the importance of ensuring that information is consistent and reliable, particularly with respect to justice processes and the mechanisms in place to protect YANSAG from reprisal attacks. Information-generating and dissemination hubs, such as police stations, hospitals, health centres, schools, youth groups, tribal authorities etc., need to be informed and empowered in this regard.

Another hurdle is trust building. The scholarly evidence suggests that defecting adults make the decision to disengage over a medium-term period, but then act quickly on a given opportunity. Youth, whose group bonds are stronger and who have less developed skills to critically evaluate option-taking, tend to take longer, needing the idea of a life outside the group to take root and mature before action is taken. Youth are also more vulnerable to false narratives peddled by a group, even unlikely ones. This research revealed that groups fostered stories to dissuade against defection, including that communities and/or families had been killed or resettled to other locations, that tribal elders had signed a pact with the government to not accept group members back to their communities, or that the group had taken over their former communities. Another common narrative was around justice processes, such as group members being summarily sentenced, and that torture and sexual assault were common-place in detention settings. With limited access to outside sources of information, YANSAG were often highly influenced by these stories. The solution, however, is not as easy as countering false narratives with accurate information. In the terrorism scholarship, evaluations of counter-messaging suggest mixed results, and there are many examples of groups exploiting such efforts to consolidate their ideological positions. Messaging from sources trusted by YANSAG such as family members, community leaders and religious figures, seem to have greater impact. The voices of disengaged YANSAG might also be better utilized. As showcased in this research, respondents had clear and consistent messages for their former comrades. Stories of how they were misled or coerced, or that

their expectations of group life were not made out, might have particularly resonance.⁶⁶

Finally, it must be appreciated that the logistics of disengagement is often more difficult for YANSAG vis-à-vis older adults. Previous experience with defection programs has revealed that youth may not have the skills to navigate an unfamiliar geographical environment or follow a complex set of processes. In this research, some youth recounted that they did not know how to tell the time, ask for directions or complete paperwork. The lesson is that YANSAG generally need higher levels of logistical, physical and administrative support than is popularly assumed. Moreover, planners need to incorporate what may appear to be obvious instructions around the practicalities of disengagement, such as substituting location coordinates for maps, using code-words/actions to identify safe actors/locations, and developing strategies to apply in the case of a failed or thwarted defection.

C. EXTENDING JUVENILE JUSTICE PROCESSES TO YANSAG

Over the past decade, a trend has emerged whereby individuals disengaged from violent extremist and NSAG are processed under counter-terrorism and national security laws as opposed to criminal justice frameworks. While information is scant, such individuals tend to be dealt with punitively, without strong due process safeguards and with little scope for judges to take into account mitigating factors such as age or duress. Detention conditions, at least in the countries under review, are extremely poor with youth particularly vulnerable to violence and sexual exploitation. The rationale touted often speaks to the risks posed by weapons trained, violence-indoctrinated individuals to communities and overall national security.

This can be contrasted to disengaged children who, according to international law, are entitled to a legal process that affords them specific protections, including solutions geared towards rehabilitation and reintegration.⁶⁷ This is not to say that such regimes are well implemented or that disengaged children have consistent access to them, however a framework does exist around which advocacy and capacity building can take place.

This begs an important question around whether juvenile justice principles should be extended to YANSAG (especially for the significant number who entered their group as children),⁶⁸ or another framework developed that takes into account their special needs, vulnerabilities and status.⁶⁹ From the data collected, a majority of YANSAG were forced or coerced into joining their group, and even for those who joined voluntarily, the choice was rarely

black and white but influenced by factors such as poverty and insecurity.

An argument can certainly be raised that the logic underpinning the application of juvenile justice standards to children extends to youth, and thus would serve the broader goals of non-recidivism. Principally, when children engage in asocial or criminal behaviors, they are generally understood to be responding to socio-developmental deficits and/or age-specific neuro-biological characteristics that carry on through ‘youthhood’ (albeit on a diminishing basis). Equally relevant is the evidence that punitive treatment, and detention in particular, does not deter re-offending in children.⁷⁰ Most likely, this is because criminal justice processes produce negative externalities, including exposure to violence, and the deficits created when children are removed from educational and social networks. These externalities manifest in social and economic disadvantages that place them on a negative trajectory of low expectation and learned behaviors, which then correlate with recidivism and cyclical patterns of deviance.⁷¹ These forces logically apply, perhaps even more so to YANSAG, whose main cited post-disengagement challenges were poor livelihoods opportunities, discrimination and stigmatization.⁷²

The non-utility of punishment (and the efficacy of diversion and rehabilitation) in reducing recidivism, apply irrespective of the gravity of the offence, and thus extend to situations where youth are involved in violent extremist and NSAG. In fact, it might be argued that juvenile justice approaches are more urgently needed for this group of YANSAG when compared to other contexts. This is because in Middle East and North African countries, contact with the justice system is associated with atypically high rates of youth recidivism. This is likely due to the three, mutually reinforcing factors. First, in contexts of high unemployment and weak opportunity, even small disadvantages in terms of educational continuity and skills acquisition can have broad and long-term consequences on an individual’s ability to enter the job market and/or obtain economic autonomy. Second, in governance systems that rely on ‘knowledge power’ (population control via surveillance, extensive intelligence apparatus and carefully placed agents of state), even a singular contact with the justice system is strongly associated with harassment, stigmatization and discrimination. Third, entrenched norms around authoritarianism and repression increase the likelihood that youth in contact with the law will be exposed to forms of violence and due process violations. This combination of reduced opportunity, social marginalization and targeting by authorities drives youth towards cycles of deviant and asocial behavior.

The risks for YANSAG processed under counter-terrorism or national security legislation scarcely need spelling out. For youth who had an association with a violent extremist or NSAG — even where this relationship was non-consensual or tacit — the structural and governance features that drive atypical rates of recidivism create a vulnerability to re-recruitment. Recidivism can also manifest in other forms of civic deviance. Especially if YANSAG engaged in weapons training, perpetrated acts of violence, or witnessed atrocity acts, the resulting general desensitization to violence can augment the scope for both randomized and orchestrated criminality. The takeaway is that if security is the main objective, deliberate steps need to be taken to minimize the risk of YANSAG recidivism and the most effective means of achieving this is by diverting them away from justice processes and applying interventions geared towards their rehabilitation and community reintegration.

This is not to say that youth should not face consequences for their actions. As confirmed in YPS-related UNSC resolutions⁷³, genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other serious crimes committed by young combatants should be prosecuted. Even when an act is not prosecutable (e.g. due to an amnesty, court prioritization, on jurisdictional grounds or because of a lack of evidence) participating in a quasi-justice process can be a beneficial component of youth rehabilitation, as discussed below.

D FROM DE-RADICALIZATION TO DESISTENCE-BASED REHABILITATION

While programs for defectors have become increasingly common within the broader framework of countering violent extremism, access to rehabilitation programs by YANSAG varied significantly according to context. The most consistent access was to the national rehabilitation program in Somalia, with a similar program operating for Boko Haram defectors in the Lake Chad Basin. Such programs were not available to YANSAG in Yemen and South Sudan. Moreover, while some YANSAG interviewed for this research had access to rehabilitation programs in a prison setting, these remain rare.

From a pedagogical perspective it appears that the programs offered to respondents are characteristic of those deployed in the Middle East and North Africa region generally, with a steep focus on religious ‘re-indoctrination’. Little is known, however, about effectiveness, with no reported data around key metrics such as recidivism rates, risk assessments, and program outcomes. What can be said with more certainty is that the outcome effectiveness of such approaches has little support in the counter-terrorism scholarship.⁷⁴

One argument concerns the lack of connection between the aims of de-radicalization and the characteristics of youth members of violent extremist and NSAG. The presumption underpinning de-radicalization is that ideology is the main motivation for group association, whereas this rarely explains the trajectories of YANSAG who are more likely to be driven by marginalization, insecurity and lack of opportunity. As documented in Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan and Egypt,⁷⁵ there is also a risk that interventions geared towards individuals abandoning their ideological position can work to consolidate their beliefs and sense of disenfranchisement.⁷⁶

Given these uncertainties and risks, the question becomes what alternate strategies can be presented that will address a State's security imperatives, be cost-effective and (where necessary) implemented at scale. Indeed, the goal should be more rehabilitation (as opposed to less), but in forms more likely to support non-recidivism.⁷⁷ From the literature, the intervention strategy with the strongest potential is cognition-supported desistance (or more simply, disengagement from violence).⁷⁸ Desistance approaches are based around the idea that asocial/malign behaviors should not be delegitimized or punished. Instead, an environment should be cultivated where such behaviors become irrelevant, for example, by building the skills, relationships and opportunities that better deliver upon the individual's needs than membership in the group. Such approaches may prove particularly effective with YANSAG, as desistance does not involve a relinquishment of power and may offer some protection against future stigmatization and/or targeting.

In crafting rehabilitation strategies for YANSAG, this research suggests that three elements require specific focus.⁷⁹ A first priority should be recalibrating life direction and purpose. It should be recalled that a significant number of respondents joined their violent extremist or NSAG in reaction to threats posed to their identity group. Moreover, that a tactic employed by group leaders was to build a single, shared identity (that of a jihadist or militant) connected to a single goal.⁸⁰ One result is that these YANSAG developed a highly polarized view of the world and their place in it; some saw no alternative than war and for them to participate in it. These dynamics need to be addressed in rehabilitation strategies, particularly by helping YANSAG to build a new sense of life direction around non-violent methods of expression and other forms of contribution.⁸¹ To this end, the scholarship suggests that adults who successfully rehabilitate are more likely to possess alternative, meaningful identities (e.g. jihadist, Muslim, husband, father, son, professional). Not only do they leverage these identities to enable social mobility,⁸² but goal systems become more malleable, as opposed

to unidirectional. Pairing a YANSAG with a mentor who has successfully rehabilitated can be particularly impactful; this seems to satisfy needs for companionship with someone who shares their experiences, while providing some guard against re-engagement.⁸³

Another priority should be to address YANSAGs' exposure to learned violence, violence desensitization and out-group prejudice/dehumanization.⁸⁴ This especially concerns youth who witnessed atrocity crimes, suffered torture or were forced to kill — events that strongly correlate with post-traumatic stress and other mental health conditions⁸⁵ Certainly, although YANSAG deprioritized concerns around mental health, this is not to say that these psychological impacts of armed conflict do not exist or should remain unaddressed.⁸⁶ The question is how to roll out psycho-social risk assessment and care in highly securitized contexts, with limited resources and few trained professionals,⁸⁷ especially given the social stigma attached to mental health intervention in these regions. To this end, it is important to explore approaches that deliver the same types of outcomes but that may be more popularly received, and can be rolled out widely without the engagement of medical professionals. Examples include methodologies such as Community Violence Reduction and Functional Family Therapy (FFT),⁸⁸ both of which have positive outcomes (long and short-term) in reducing serious antisocial behavioral recidivism.⁸⁹ Integrating cognitive skills building into education programs is another entry point, specifically those that focus on antiviolence, problem solving and tolerance.

A final priority to consider is opportunities for YANSAG to participate in restorative justice processes for wrongful acts perpetrated but where a judicial process is either inappropriate or not possible. Restorative approaches aim to assist disengaged individuals understand how their actions impacted others, contextualize the violence they were involved in and develop — sometimes along with their community or the state — a shared sense of responsibility for conflict events. Importantly such processes are low-cost, rarely require external assistance and can incorporate entire communities or even groups of communities. Examples include return ceremonies, reconciliation meetings, apologies, community service, volunteer work, civic education, awareness raising, street theatre etc. The evidence on the effectiveness of restorative justice is strong, particularly with regard to reduced stigmatization and recidivism.⁹⁰ It may be particularly constructive for youth, who often acted with an element of agency, for altruistic reasons, or to assert control over their circumstances. Indeed, according such individuals victim or no status has the potential to further entrench their sense

of disenfranchisement and powerlessness. A measure of accountability, however, acknowledges YANSAG agency and provides a vehicle through which to re-establish social interest and their place in the community structure.⁹⁷

E. SAFE AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION

It is noteworthy that, quite overwhelmingly, the evidence is that reintegrated ex-combatants enjoy positive outcomes, provided that certain conditions are met.⁹² The most important elements are: family acceptance, protection from discrimination and stigmatization (by security authorities and the community generally) and having a meaningful community role (livelihoods or community service based). These conditions seem to facilitate returnees transitioning to a non-combatant identity and adopting behaviors that typecast them as community assets as opposed to threats.⁹³ Unsuccessful reintegration (which is highly correlated with recidivism) likewise shares common elements, principally unmitigated stigmatization, livelihoods failure and chronic mental health challenges.⁹⁴ Interestingly, this is broadly consistent with the views of respondents who rated community acceptance and livelihoods as their most significant concerns during the post-disengagement phase.

The takeaway is that how community reintegration is undertaken is key to overall outcomes, and (given the risks associated with recidivism) needs to be approached strategically and methodically.⁹⁵ The question is which combination of supports will facilitate successful reintegration given the resource and capacity constraints faced by receiving communities, and the fact the drivers of YANSAG participation in a violent extremist or NSAG are likely to still be present.

In terms of priorities, this research suggests that the most important action is to set in place community-based support structures that limit discrimination and stigmatization. The extent of intervention required will be highly contingent on context. Indeed, some disengaged individuals faced or anticipated no problems around community acceptance. In most contexts, however, YANSAG are depicted, at least by some, as security threats, prone to violence and indoctrinated. Another frequently referenced community concern was that returnees might be a target for reprisal attacks, creating a risk for the entire community.

For the disengaged individual, family-level support (nuclear family followed by the extended family) is the most important safeguard.⁹⁶ This seems to counterbalance the individual's threat perception, reduce discrimination and/or mitigate the impact of external challenges (social and practical) encountered. In terms of promoting acceptance at the broader community level, the most common approach is instructions/

appeals/negotiations led by moral authority figures (which may be a government official, village leader, tribal elder, or religious figure etc. depending on the circumstance). While effective in the case of child returnees,⁹⁷ narratives that focus on a disengaged individual's victim's status, the role of coercion and other mitigating factors, may be inappropriate or even counterproductive for YANSAG, who elicit less innate sympathy and often benefit from having their agency recognized. Potentially more effective is engaging the community in discussions around context, the complexity of mid-stage cognitive development and the community-wide risks associated with unsuccessful reintegration.⁹⁸ Also impactful can be securing the support of norm-setters and/or individuals with the least incentive to forgive (such as those who suffered direct harm from the conflict).⁹⁹ In both approaches, the aim is to promote an understanding that conflict experiences are multifaceted, that the harm caused is broad ranging, and that victim-perpetrator conceptualizations are rarely clear-cut and thus problematic to typecast.¹⁰⁰

It is important to highlight that community acceptance is not simply the absence of discrimination and stigmatization. All people need to see themselves as contributing members of a social unit that values them and will protect them. For YANSAG this will involve creating a meaningful identity other than that of a returned militant.¹⁰¹ Because identity is socially constructed, how a YANSAG self-identifies will be influenced by the views and actions of their family, friends and role models.¹⁰² YANSAG thus need interlocutors, all of whom reinforce a new positive, nonviolent, communitarian identity. Apart from family members, these might include community leaders, social workers, religious leaders, teachers and peers. A promising practice is the 'social net of benefits' approach, a practice derived from the juvenile justice scholarship. Here, the YANSAG is supported by a network of significant others who sign a mutually crafted and agreed upon contract. The contract places responsibility jointly on the YANSAG (to desist from specific behaviors and achieve certain gains) and the network (to serve as a social safety net against community pushback).¹⁰³

An important question to be answered in social network interventions is whether groups of YANSAG should be separated as a risk-mitigation strategy. While this can placate community concerns, forced distancing in YANSAG is more likely to be counterproductive. This is because voids with respect to ideological companionship tend to grow, which can result in feelings of isolation and regression. There is also some evidence that transitioning to a peacetime identity takes place most rapidly and easily when it occurs in groups (probably because this avoids a situation of having to 'reject'

the prior group). In short, there is a strong argument that preserving group bonds and associated social support structures will allow YANSAG to more easily imagine (and thus realize) a future life outside an armed group.¹⁰⁴

A final tool to promote reintegration is engaging the community in a broader desistance project and as prevention actors. For example, communities might be educated on the ideologies and extremist recruitment techniques that youth may be exposed to, on how to detect the early signs and stages of radicalization, and be provided with tools to be able to speak out against militancy. Safe channels, by which individuals can seek advice on questions pertaining to extremist or violent ideology or report cases of suspicious activity, are also needed. Where such mechanisms work effectively, communities tend to feel empowered against external threats, safer, and hostilities towards/fear of returnees tend to dissipate. In addition, YANSAG's experiences and insights can be valuable not only at the local level but also at the global level. By sharing their stories and perspectives, they can contribute to the development of more effective policies and strategies for youth empowerment, peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Moreover, their participation in global debate can help raise awareness about the unique challenges faced by young people in conflict-affected areas and the importance of investing in their potential as agents of change and peace consolidation.

F. LIVELIHOODS FOR A LIFE BEYOND VIOLENCE

The second priority in promoting YANSAG reintegration is access to livelihoods, which serves as a bridge to future self-sufficiency and other life milestones. Indeed, developing a livelihood has an important social meaning,¹⁰⁵ and can expedite reintegration through the normalizing and equalizing effect of performing occupational activities, as well as the associated sense of utility within a community. The options for YANSAG however, tend to be limited. While it may be deemed a logical pathway, a minority of YANSAG desire to be incorporated into the police/armed forces when this is a formal option (however for those that do, the outcomes are largely positive). Another key challenge securing livelihoods is that YANSAG often have education gaps that may prevent them entering higher education (high school, technical education or a university) or even the most basic forms of work (for example if the YANSAG lacks literacy and numeracy skills). YANSAG, especially those who engaged in combat roles, may also feel infantilized by the prospect of returning to education,¹⁰⁶ particularly if this means being placed with younger students.¹⁰⁷

In terms of solutions, while resource-heavy, accelerated or out-of-school learning opportunities can be the most

effective way to prevent such YANSAG from falling into a negative cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement.¹⁰⁸ Another option is vocational training, for example apprenticeships targeting key markets. A particularly novel approach is pairing a YANSAG with a selected mentor who is provided with material assistance to grow their business and trained in the needs of youth impacted by conflict. It may even be that YANSAG have certain attributes that they can bring to entrepreneurial initiatives. Studies from Nepal and Burundi found that reintegrated young ex-combatants outperformed, albeit slightly, their peers in terms of medium-term economic independence. It is speculated that their conflict experiences provided them with certain skills and knowledge that they positively harnessed in the workplace.¹⁰⁹

In all of these interventions — recruitment into the armed forces/police, accelerated learning, out of school programs and vocational training — taking steps to avoid community backlash is critical. Programs that target not only YANSAG but other youth in the community, or pairing projects with broader community development initiatives or investment, is the best way to avoid the perception that YANSAG are being unfairly rewarded or privileged.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that, although helpful in attaining other life goals, livelihoods do not have to be remunerated to deliver other on forms of satisfaction. A unique opportunity for YANSAG is to serve as youth and community role models. The empirical evidence suggests that positive relationships between disengaged individuals and younger youth and children is a safeguard against many forms of asocial behavior, especially engagement in political and religiously-motivated violence. These individuals seem to have particular success in teaching others how to identify and deconstruct content-manipulated messaging, and helping them to reconcile a strong masculine identity with a non-violent civilian life. Moreover, such roles can accelerate and consolidate the YANSAG reintegration process.¹¹⁰

5. CONCLUSION

Today, securing a place for youth in the global development agenda is a recognized imperative, including in the prevention of violent extremism, conflict mitigation and peacebuilding. Both UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) and the Youth Action Agenda to Prevent Violent Extremism and Promote Peace (2015) call for strategies that target vulnerable and disengaged youth.¹¹¹ UNSC Resolution 2419 (2018) likewise demands for the full and effective participation of youth without discrimination to ensure a holistic peacebuilding process that responds to the needs all social groups.¹¹² Despite these aspirations, the engagement

and empowerment of youth remains lacking in both policy-making and program implementation. This is especially the case in conflict settings, rural and peri-urban environs and in the latter stages of the programming cycle.

Within the broader youth demographic, YANSAG are a specific sub-group that are simultaneously excluded and overlooked. Although they account for the largest contingent within violent extremist and NSAG, little is known about how their entry pathways vary from older adults, who differ markedly in terms of brain maturation, perspective and reasoning skills, and connectedness within social networks. There has likewise been insufficient inquiry into how their experiences (particularly exposure to violence) impact youth socio-cognitive development, and the specific challenges they face disengaging and reentering their communities.

In closing these knowledge gaps, it must be highlighted that youth are uniquely vulnerable during all phases of the violent extremist/NSAG engagement cycle. Having passed childhood, they can exercise greater agency and decision-making power, yet their cognitive proclivity towards novelty and sensation seeking exceeds their (lesser developed) reasoning skills and ability to appraise risk. They also do not have the structural protections provided in law, as well as those protections derived through social conventions. Especially for youth entering an adult world marked by mal-governance, lack of civic freedoms and limited livelihoods opportunities, these forces can combine to make rejoining a violent extremist or NSAG an attractive option. Once in the group, youth slip into a dangerous zone where exploitation and social deficits can accumulate rapidly, making their pathways back to civic life complicated and risk-ridden.

This paper argues that YANSAG should be recognized as a group with age-specific vulnerabilities and potentiality. Moreover, that policies specifically geared towards their protection, inclusion and empowerment should be seen as a sine qua non for preventing conflict in all its manifestations. To empower YANSAG to realize their potential, their voices, needs and aspirations should be reflected, not only in peace-building agendas, but also in broader youth agendas, development policy and rights debates. Indeed, the participation of youth in violent extremist and NSAGs is often rooted in a variety of structural and situational factors, including political exclusion, poor access to livelihoods, marginalization and human rights violations.

Towards these ends, this paper has presented primary research on the experiences of YANSAG, especially around how they entered their groups, the process of disengagement and factors relevant to their successful reintegration, as well as their messages for current group members, government and

the international community. The conclusions presented should be seen as instructive rather than conclusive — a set of ideas that might be tailored to individual contexts. Indeed, one of the most significant challenges in crafting policy for YANSAG is repackaging what is needed into a set of interventions that are practicable given limited resources, security concerns, existing capacity and competing development imperatives. At the centre of such thinking should be how to actualize the potential of YANSAG for promoting peace.

END NOTES

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2 'Journey into Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment' UNDP (2017)

p.27.

3 UN World Youth Report: Youth Civic Engagement (2016).

4 'Reconceptualizing the drivers of violent extremism: an agenda for child & youth resilience'. (2019) Terre des hommes, p.9.

5 'Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent Extremism and Gender in Central Sahel' International Alert (2020) pp.7-12.

6 Harper, E. *The Last 10 Percent: Why the World Needs a Leaner, More Innovative and Pragmatic Development Sector, Today*, (2023) Routledge, pp.110-135.

7 'Theoretical Frame to Guide Interventions with Children in Conflict with the Law: Promoting desistance from crime and restorative justice programmes from Terre des Hommes', Terre des Hommes (2019).

8 Harper, E. 'Solutions for Children Previously Affiliated with Extremist Groups' Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (2020) UN New York. p17.

9 See further, Muluk, H. et al 'Insights from a deradicalization program in Indonesian prisons: The potential benefits of psychological intervention prior to ideological discussion' Asian Journal of Social Psychology 23 (2020) 50, 85.

10 Note that this approach is advocated irrespective of whether individuals disengaged voluntarily and coercively, however the process is less complicated in the case of the former.

11 Harper, E. 'Solutions for Children Previously Affiliated with Extremist Groups' Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (2020) UN New York. p.17

12 Kruglanski, A. et al 'The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism' Political Psychology 35 (2011); Lankford, A. and Gillespie, K. 'Rehabilitating Terrorists Through Counter-Indoctrination: Lessons Learned From The Saudi Arabian Program' Intl criminal justice review 21(2) 2011.

13 Youth is a unique and transitional status between childhood and adulthood, for which there is no universally agreed definition. The UN General Assembly and Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth define youth as persons aged between 15-24, whereas Security Council Resolution 2250 on Roles of Youth in the Context of Peace and Security uses the 18-29 age category, and the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda sets a minimum age of 18 years. Regionally and at the country level there is even more diversity. The African Union (AU), Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) see youth as extending to 35 years. An examination of 46 conflict-affected countries saw a minimum and maximum mean of 15 to 31 years. Definitions of youth can differ again at the sub-state level, pursuant to custom, religion and tradition. Using the 18-35 age definition applied in this paper, it can be said that there are more than 1.2 billion youth. United Nations, "GLOBAL ISSUES Youth." [<https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>] (accessed: 22 March 2023).

14 As for children taking part in armed forces and armed groups, the term 'Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (CAAFAG)' was adopted in 2007 and defined as: "any person below 18 years of age who is or who

has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities." 'Paris Principle: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups' (2007), p.7.

15 For example, see Doosje, B. et al. 'Terrorism, radicalization and de-radicalization' Current Opinion in Psychology, 11, (2016); Vergani, M. et al. 'The three Ps of radicalization: Push, pull and personal. A systematic scoping review of the scientific evidence about radicalization into violent extremism' Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 43, 10, (2020); UNDP 'Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment', UNDP (2017); OECD, 'Reducing the Involvement of Youth in Armed Violence' (2011), pp. 15-17.

16 Johnson, S.B., Blum, R.W. and Giedd, J.N. 'Adolescent maturity and the brain: the promise and pitfalls of neuroscience research in adolescent health policy' Journal of Adolescent Health, vol. 45, No. 3 (2009).

17 The legal basis for this is complex, but is grounded in article 4 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2002), which prohibits the recruitment and use of children by non-State armed groups in hostilities. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (2002) criminalizes actions relating to the sale of children, including for the purposes of forced labour. See further Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007) para 8.7.

18 Moreover, legal processes should reflect international juvenile justice standards, which provide children with special rights and protections, irrespective of the gravity of the offence, such as detention being used only as a last resort, never with adults, and for the shortest period of time. Under international law, any child – provided that they have reached the age of criminal responsibility – can be held legally accountable for crimes committed. See generally, 'Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (Paris Principles)', adopted in 2007.

19 United Nations, 'Global Issues: Youth' [<https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>] (accessed: 22 March 2023).

20 UNSC, Resolution 2250, UN doc S/RES/2250, (9 December 2015), p.3.

21 Since then several Security Council resolutions have called for states to develop inclusive approaches that enable the participation of youth from diverse backgrounds in decision-making and policymaking at all levels in local, national, regional, and international institutions for peacebuilding mechanisms and conflict prevention/resolution. See, for example UNSC, Resolution 2419, UN doc S/RES/2419 (6 June 2018) p.1.

22 The concept of 'sustaining peace', which emphasizes the importance of prevention, the integration of peace and security, development, and human rights, as well as the need for comprehensive ownership and partnerships, is among the most current keywords in the UN system. For example, see UNGA & UNSC, Identical letters dated 29 June 2015 from the Chair of the Advisory Group of Experts on the Review of the Peacebuilding Architecture addressed to the President of the General Assembly and the President of the Security Council, UN doc A/69/968-S/2015/490, June 2015.

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- 29 UNICEF, 'Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups' [<https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>](accessed 22 March 2023).
- 30 It should be noted that in South-Sudan, the government has made arrangements for a DDR program, but implementation has not yet commenced. DDR is a strictly defined process established as part of a peace settlement, usually involving a large number of people and a long-term reintegration process. In the DDR literature an ex-combatant is defined as: "a person who has assumed any of the responsibilities or carried out any of the activities mentioned in the definition of 'combatant', and has laid down or surrendered his/her arms with a view to entering a DDR process. Former combatant status may be certified through a demobilization process by a recognized authority. Spontaneously auto-demobilized individuals, such as deserters, may also be considered ex-combatants if proof of non-combatant status over a period of time can be given." United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration resource center, 'Module 1.20: Glossary: Terms and Definitions' *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards* (2006) p.7 [<https://www.unddr.org/modules/IDDRS-1.20-Glossary.pdf>](Accessed 22 March 2023).
- 31 There has long been debate over whether these programs can be considered DDR, as they are not attached to a peace agreement, nor accompanied by a DD component. See for example, Mehra, T. and Wentworth, M. 'The suitability of DDR programmes to disarm terrorist groups', *Cashing in on Guns: Identifying the Nexus between Small Arms, Light Weapons and Terrorist Financing*, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism –The Hague (2021) p.72. The UN has been working on a revised integrated DDR standard (IDDRS), released in November 2019, and these efforts are now organized under the name Reintegration Supports, which can be implemented when the conditions for establishing DDR programs are not met. For example, see Khalil, J. et al., 'Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia: Evidence from a Rehabilitation Programme for Former Members of Al-Shabaab', The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), (2019); Bulama Bukarti, A. and Bryson, A. 'Dealing With Boko Haram Defectors in the Lake Chad Basin: Lessons From Nigeria', Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, [<https://institute.global/policy/dealing-boko-haram-defectors-lake-chad-basin-lessons-nigeria>] (accessed: 23 March 2023).
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- 36 See further European Union Agency for Asylum, 'Somalia: Defection, desertion and disengagement from Al-Shabaab' (2023).
- 37 Since 2017, Accept International has implemented de-radicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration programs for defectors and prisoners of Al-Shabaab inside of the Mogadishu Central Prison.
- 38 Al Jazeera, 'Houthi missiles target Saudi Arabia and UAE as escalation grows' [<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/24/uae-says-intercepted-and-destroyed-Houthi-missiles>] (accessed: 17 March 2023).
- 39 The Zaydiyya is a Shiite sect that emerged from the Zayd rebellion in 740. The Zaydi polity had existed in Yemen since 897, but its monarchy was overthrown in 1962 to form the Arab Republic of Yemen (so-called North Yemen). See Bearman, P.J. et al. (eds) *The Encyclopedia of Islam* 6 (2002) pp. 477-480. Houthis have periodically united or cooperated with other military factions (mainly supporters of former President Saleh)
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- 41 See Al-Qodasi, N. and Al-Gabarni, A. 'Parallel militaries: Anatomy of the armed forces fighting Yemen's war' [<https://almasdaronline.net/national/915>] (accessed: 17 March 2023).
- 42 *ibid.*
- 43 UN Secretary-General, Children and Armed Conflict in Yemen: report of the Secretary-General, UN doc A/76/871-S/2022/493, 23 June 2022.
- 44 Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, SAM for Rights and Liberties, 'Militarized Childhood: A Report on the Houthis' Recruitment of Yemeni Children During War' (2021), p.13.
- 45 The SPLM-IO is supported by the Nuer ethnic group and opposed to President Kiir, who was supported by the Dinka ethnic group. The newly established S-UF has been active as a NSAG since 2015 when Malong, a former chief of staff of the Kiir administration, was forced to resign and placed under house arrest by the president. This group and the SPLM-IO formed SSOA as an anti-government coalition.
- 46 This agreement promised power-sharing in the form of Machar's reappointment as Vice President.
- 47 Intergovernmental Authority on Development, 'Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan' (2018) pp. 29-38.
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