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From Bullets to Ballots: Transformations from Armed to Unarmed Political Activism

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Introduction

Transformations from armed to unarmed political activism remains a global phenomenon, understudied in the Arab World and elsewhere.⁽¹⁾ Accordingly, the Strategic Studies Unit (SSU) of the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) organised its first annual conference entitled “From Bullets to Ballots: Transformations from Armed to Unarmed Political Activism” on 3 - 4 November 2018. The conference qualitatively examined a sample of 26 cases of armed organisations transforming into political parties or nonviolent social movements. These cases hail from four continents, covering the Arab World, Western and Southern Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Academic experts, former government officials and organisational leaders discussed transformation experiences from Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Syria, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom, Ethiopia, South Africa, Afghanistan, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Cuba, and others. The organizations included were inspired by ideologies ranging from the religious to leftist to ethno-nationalist and nationalist. The conference was the first of its kind in the Arab World and will be followed by the first Arabic academic book analysing transformations from armed to unarmed movements with a comparative, scholarly approach and proffering policy implications and recommendations.

The 26 case-studies discussed across 20 countries represent a carefully selected sample of a larger global phenomenon.⁽²⁾ One quantitative study demonstrated that among 268 identified armed groups that operated between 1968 and 2006, only 20 (7%) were defeated militarily.⁽³⁾ In contrast, 114 (43%) joined the political mainstream, either as political parties or socio-political movements. Policing, intelligence and public backlashes were responsible for dismantling 107 (40%) organizations, the majority of them small ones.⁽⁴⁾ For larger groups (especially those with over 1,000 members), by far the most common trajectory was a conversion to unarmed political or social activism.⁽⁵⁾ Smaller datasets have produced similar results. Of 133 armed groups fighting against regimes of different types between 1990 and 2009, 54.8% transformed into political parties in about 50 countries across the globe.⁽⁶⁾ However, as discussed in the conclusion, the available datasets in the literature need thorough revisions and updates.

How does such transformation happen? Why does it happen? What are the conditions for initiating the transformation? And what are the conditions for sustaining it? What are the different trajectories

1 Azmi Bishara, “Opening Remarks for the Conference titled Bullets to Ballots: Transformations from Armed to Unarmed Political Action,” The Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, 3/11/2018, accessed on 11/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2QjcCFG>.

2 Despite its cross-regional nature, this sample is incomprehensive. It neither included North American nor Australian cases of transformations, such as the factional and individual cases from the Black Panthers Organisation in the United States (especially the Illinois Chapter) and *Le Front de Libération du Québec* (FLQ) in Canada.

3 That is by exclusive military means. See for example: Seth G. Jones & Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qaeda*, (Santa Monica: RAND Publications, 2008), p. 19.

4 *Ibid*, pp. 141 - 185. The numbers are less than 200 members.

5 Omar Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 12 - 18.

6 Carrie Manning and Ian Smith. “Political Party Formation by Former Armed Opposition Groups after Civil War.” *Democratization*, vol. 23, no. 6 (September 2016), p. 973.



of moving away from armed action? Does the transformation happen after a military victory, a military defeat, or a draw in an armed conflict between an insurgent group(s) and an incumbent authority(ies)? These are the main research questions that the conference and the forthcoming book⁽⁷⁾ – based on the conference – will engage with to explain transformations from armed to unarmed political activism.

This Strategic Paper provides an analytical overview of the phenomenon, its defining terms, causal variables, dynamic trajectories, selected empirical cases and policy implications and recommendations. These implications and recommendations are also relevant to democratisation, peacebuilding, civil-military relations, countering and preventing violent extremism, and countering terrorism.⁽⁸⁾ The Strategic Paper is composed of four other sections. The following section briefly outlines a theoretical framework for the transformations. It defines the relevant terminology and methods when approaching the topic. The third section discusses some of the most salient case-studies of collective transformations from armed to unarmed political activism. The last two sections provide some scholastic observations for future research agendas, as well as policy implications and recommendations.

Bullets to Ballots: A Theoretical Framework

The collective transformations from armed to unarmed activism are a process of relative change, in which an armed group can reverse its ideology, narratives, rhetoric, behaviour and/or organisational structure away from armed action, and towards unarmed political or social activism. In Security Studies literature, this phenomenon is sometimes referred to as “de-radicalisation” or a process by which an armed organisation de-legitimizes the use of armed tactics to achieve political goals, while also moving toward an acceptance of gradual social, political and economic changes within a pluralist context. But scholars have never agreed on one precise term for it and the security studies community has debated the definition and the dimensions of “de-radicalisation.”⁽⁹⁾

Some scholars argue that the concept should be centred on changing attitudes toward political violence and the pace of socio-political change, rather than toward constitutional liberalism.⁽¹⁰⁾ This means that deradicalized groups will reject violence and accept slow and gradual institutional reform within a relatively reformed status-quo, but may still uphold intolerant, misogynist, xenophobic and other illiberal views. Others believe that deradicalized groups and individuals must uphold constitutional liberalism. This sets the standard of “de-radicalisation” and even transformations to unarmed politics at a higher level, at which many political parties, social movements and particularly armed groups may fail.

7 Omar Ashour (ed.), *Bullets to Ballots: Collective De-Radicalization of Armed Movements*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2021).

8 See: The United Nations, “Plan of Action for Preventing Violent Extremism,” *Report of the Secretary-General, 24/12/2015*, accessed on 11/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/1n0F1wu>.

9 Jillian Schwedler, “Can Islamists Become Moderates? Rethinking the Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis,” *World Politics*, vol. 63, no. 2 (April 2011), pp. 347 - 376.

10 Thomas Hegghammer, “The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements by Omar Ashour,” *Perspective in Politics*, vol. 9, no. 2 (June 2011), pp. 472 - 474.

There are political costs and policy implications for upholding either of the definitions. The first definition (transforming to unarmed politics behaviourally but upholding illiberal views ideologically and rhetorically) may risk undermining social cohesion, especially in multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religions societies. The second definition can be abused to dismiss mere transitions from armed to unarmed activism as “deradicalization failures” and therefore politically and legally exclude particular groups on the basis that they did not become liberal democratic entities, even if the contexts in which they operate are ruled by brutal dictatorships. In previous works based on the experiences of the Arab World,⁽¹¹⁾ the author found it useful to distinguish between *deradicalization* and *moderation*. The latter is also a process of relative change that is mainly concerned with attitudes toward liberal democracy. Still, as Jillian Schwedler asserted,⁽¹²⁾ there is also no scholarly consensus on the definition of *moderation*.⁽¹³⁾

Within authoritarian regimes, “deradicalization” and transformation to unarmed activism are sometimes conflated with political co-optation and buy offs. Only groups and individuals that toe the regime line and show loyalty to the leader – whether an authoritarian president or a regressive king – are considered “de-radicalized” or “moderates.” If a group transforms its means for change – from armed to unarmed – but remains in opposition, it is still “radical” or “extreme.”

Transformations from armed to unarmed activism can occur on three dimensions: ideological, behavioural and organizational. And usually a combination of charismatic leadership within the organization, a hurting stalemate, interactions with the non-like-minded “other” as well as between the layers of the organization, and selective inducements from the state and other regional and international actors within a de-escalatory environment are common causal variables of initiating the transformations. There is a pattern of interaction between these meso- and micro-level factors.⁽¹⁴⁾ A hurting military stalemate and interaction with non-like-minded actors often affect the ideas and the behaviour of the leadership of an armed organization and are likely to lead those leaders to initiate three endogenous processes: strategic calculations based on cost-benefit analysis, political learning based on interaction with the non-like-minded and modification of the group’s worldview as a result of severe crises, frustration and dramatic changes in the environment. Following these processes, the leadership of an armed organization initiates a transformation process that is bolstered by selective inducements from the incumbent authorities as well as by internal interactions. Also, transformed groups often interact with armed groups and sometimes influence them in a controlled, pressured environment (such as prisons, areas of exile, or rugged strongholds). A similar process occurs within the armed institutions of the state and the incumbent authorities. Finally, macro-level (state or interstate) variables are critical in sustaining (as opposed to initiating) the transformations. These variables include democratisation levels, security sector reform processes, balanced civil-military relations, credible transitional justice processes, and levels of regional and international support.

11 Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*.

12 Jillian Schwedler, “Why Academics Cannot Get Beyond Moderates and Radicals,” *Washington Post*, 12/2/2015.

13 Ibid. See also: Schwedler, “Can Islamists Become Moderates? Rethinking the Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis.”

14 By micro-level, we mean individual-level variables. By meso-level, we mean organizational level variables



Methodologically and conceptually, several important and critical observations were made at the onset of the ACRPS conference.⁽¹⁵⁾ The first is how the “War on Terror” discourse, the definition of terrorism according to the identity of the perpetrator⁽¹⁶⁾ rather than the victim,⁽¹⁷⁾ and the subsequent media and policy treatment have affected the research agenda on transformations from armed to unarmed activism. This has impeded critical research questions and made the topic subject to political, as opposed to scholarly, agendas.⁽¹⁸⁾ The second observation is how the inherent (positive) bias of scholars towards peace and ways to consolidate it, have affected their conclusions and findings, and exposed them to the risk of teleological and even tautological argumentations. A third observation was about the need for nuanced typologies of the different forms of armed and unarmed activism, given the unnuanced categorisations in much of the Security Studies and Political Science literature. A final observation had to do with how brutal political environments can cause an alternative transformation: from peaceful to violent activism. Certainly, some of the Arab World’s experiences in recent years has shown that “tyranny leaves no room for political reform and peaceful transformation....and if combined with a policy of social marginalization and physical and psychological humiliation of large segments of the population, it [tyranny] will inevitably create an environment conducive to armed action.”⁽¹⁹⁾

The Empirical Dimension: Twenty-Six Case-Studies

In March 2010, an official conference was held in the Libyan capital of Tripoli with academics, western journalists and officials. It marked the release of the leaders of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) in a “reconciliation” process led by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the then heir-apparent of Libya’s dictator, Muammar Gaddafi. “Deradicalization” was a major component of the process. The LIFG did not just abandon armed activism against the Gaddafi regime, but also produced 416-pages of thorough theological, ideological, instrumental and socio-psychological argumentations de-legitimizing various forms of non-state armed activism – including national and international terrorism tactics. Back then, the document served, and was celebrated, as a counter-narrative to the rhetoric and ideas of violent extremist groups, particularly Al Qaeda.⁽²⁰⁾

In August 2011, in the middle of an armed revolution, Abdul Hakim Belhaj, the former Emir of the LIFG spearheaded an attack on Bab al-Aziziya compound, Colonel Gaddafi’s headquarters.⁽²¹⁾ That was more of a counteroffensive to the regime’s onslaught, than “reneging on the deal” or abandoning

15 Bishara, “Opening Remarks for the Conference titled Bullets to Ballots: Transformations from Armed to Unarmed Political Action.”

16 As mainly violent non-state actors

17 As mainly civilians

18 Bishara, “Opening Remarks for the Conference titled Bullets to Ballots: Transformations from Armed to Unarmed Political Action.”

19 Ibid.

20 Omar Ashour, “Post-Jihadism: Libya and the Global Transformations of Armed Islamist Movements,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 23, no. 3, (July 2011), pp. 377 - 397.

21 Omar Ashour, “Fears over Islamists within Libyan rebel ranks,” *BBC News*, 31/8/2011, accessed on 11/12/2018, at: <https://bbc.in/2PnATVL>

the transformation. Between February and August 2011, the political environment had no room for deradicalization or reconciliation. And between March 2010⁽²²⁾ and February 2011,⁽²³⁾ institutionalized mechanisms of non-violent conflict-resolution had not been introduced in Libya. Security sector reform processes, revisions of standard operating procedures (SOPs) in times of political crises, and a credible transitional justice process were unheard of. In other words, a sustained transformation from armed to peaceful activism had little-to-no chance of surviving, despite significant investments in creating/initiating it.

This has not been just a Libyan story. Officers, soldiers and employees of Task Force 134 – the unit commanding all detention operations in Iraq, including Camp Bucca (the former home of Abu Baker al-Baghdadi) understand this well.⁽²⁴⁾ A “rehabilitation” program with a deradicalization component was introduced by the United States and the Iraqi government in Iraqi prisons in 2007. It had some initial effects⁽²⁵⁾ and by 2008 about 10,000 prisoners were freed while the country was in a process of initial de-escalation. By late 2010, almost all of the effects dissipated. Rather than a transformation towards unarmed, less-sectarian, constitutional and institutionalized politics, the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS) was established in April 2013; on the ashes of both this program and the whole US-led de-escalation process.

As elaborated upon in the Conference, this is not to conclude that transformation processes and “de-radicalisation” programs in the Arab World are destined to fail. The failure in Arab Countries is just a reminder of how critical the reforms on the macro-level are for sustaining the transformations, as exemplified by the European, Latin American, and African cases discussed below. After all, processes of transformation to unarmed activism are critical to national reconciliation, social cohesion, the functioning of state institutions, human security and human rights. Hence, they are worth investing in and fighting for.

When pro-democracy changes happened on the macro-level and very basic political freedoms were briefly gained after the Arab Uprisings of 2010 and 2011, once-armed large groups upheld their transformation from armed to unarmed activism. Organizations such as the Egyptian Islamic Group (IG), factions and individuals from the Egyptian al-Jihad organization, and the LIFG have not only turned into political parties, but also participated in elections, constitutional crafting and mainstream political compromises. In 2011, the IG for example held internal elections, asked its members to fill out party registration forms, held rallies against sectarian violence and issued joint-statements with the Coptic Church of Assyut for promoting peaceful coexistence. However, the stance on constitutional liberalism did not change much. For example, the IG still did not accept the right of specific minorities and women to run for presidency. And in general, ultraconservative

22 The month in which the “reconciliation” was officially declared.

23 The month in which the Libyan revolution has started.

24 Major-General Douglas Stone. Commander of Task Force 134, Interview by the author, Singapore, 24/2/2008.

25 Babak Dehghanpisheh, “Iraqi Prison Tries to Un-Brainwash Radical Youth,” *Newsweek*, 8/8/2007, accessed on 11/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2rj0eX6>



regressive ideologies, such as Saudi Wahhabism, partly shape the worldview of the organization. In Algeria, organisations such as the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) and smaller groups has laid down arms since the late 1990s. Despite the selective (and relatively successful) socioeconomic reintegration of some of their leading commanders, these organizations were not allowed to participate in electoral politics.⁽²⁶⁾ Additionally, any research or investigative attempts into the security sectors' procedures, behaviours and policies during the “national tragedy”⁽²⁷⁾ and/or into a post-war transitional justice process are punishable by Algerian laws.⁽²⁸⁾

In comparison, European cases of collective transformations (or attempted ones) from armed to unarmed activism show stark differences in terms of initiation and sustainability of the processes, institutional maturity, strength and flexibility, both resilience and tolerance at societal and official levels, elite and leadership awareness, and reintegration capacities. The cases of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) in the United Kingdom, the Basque Homeland and Liberty (ETA) in Spain, and Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey were discussed at length in the conference. In the United Kingdom, macro- and meso-level factors initiated the peace process and sustained the Good Friday agreement. They included the charismatic leadership, the British government's innovative counter-terrorism strategy, the European Union peace funding (inducements), and the role of ex-combatants particularly at the community level (internal interactions).⁽²⁹⁾ In Spain, the continuous factional transformation of ETA – from the 1970s to 2017 – has shown the critical importance of meso-level factors (especially charismatic leadership), even when macro-level changes occur (such as democratic transition in Spain and the EU's consistent support for transformations to unarmed politics). Macro-level factors can certainly reduce the risk of a strong insurgent organisation, with significant local support.⁽³⁰⁾ However, these elements do not guarantee a comprehensive transformation of an armed organisation to non-violent activism, without meso-level (organisational-level) factors.⁽³¹⁾ In Turkey, the failure of the PKK to transform to unarmed politics, despite the presence of charismatic leaderships on both of the warring sides, and despite available opportunity structures, and the relatively free environment to participate in electoral and constitutional politics.⁽³²⁾ In a way, the PKK represents an outlier case, where the regional developments, external support, mutual distrust and perceived strategic gains by the guerrilla leaders from the armed path, all outweighed the estimated gains from transforming to compete in the ballot boxes.

26 Omar Ashour, “Islamist De-Radicalization in Algeria: Successes and Failures,” *Middle East Institute*, 1/11/2008, accessed on 11/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2rlZVLd>

27 A politically charged term that Algerian official use to refer to the civil war of the 1990s.

28 Rachid Tlemçani, “Algeria Under Bouteflika: Civil Strife and National Reconciliation,” *Carnegie Papers*, no. 7 (February 2008), accessed on 11/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2EffBs2>; Human Rights Watch, “Algeria: New Amnesty Law Will Ensure Atrocities Go Unpunished: Muzzles Discussion of Civil Conflict,” 28/2/2006, accessed on 5/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2KXglTc>

29 Gordon Clubb, “A Draw or a Defeat? How the IRA Transitioned from Arms to Peace?” in: Omar Ashour (ed.), *Bullets to Ballots: Collective De-Radicalization of Armed Movements*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2021).

30 Barbara Walter, “Why Bad Governance Lead to Repeated Civil War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 59, no. 7 (October 2015), pp. 1-31; Anna Gemtansky, “You Can't Win If You Don't Fight.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 57, no. 4, (August 2012), p. 710; Philip Keefer, “Insurgency and Credible commitment in Autocracies and Democracies,” *The World Bank Economic Review*, vol. 22, no. 1 (January 2008), pp. 33 - 61.

31 Nick Hatcheon, “Transformations after Defeats: ETA and the Basque armed struggle, 1959-2018,” in: Omar Ashour (ed.), *Bullets to Ballots: Collective De-Radicalization of Armed Movements*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2021).

32 Murat Yesiltas, “When Politics is not Enough: Explaining the Failure of the Peace Process and the PKK's Urban Insurgency in Turkey (2015-2016),” in: Omar Ashour (ed.), *Bullets to Ballots: Collective De-Radicalization of Armed Movements*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2021).

Whereas levels of both democratic maturity and professional competence of the security establishments are quite high in Western Europe, Latin American democratic consolidation and security sector reforms are relatively recent. Hence, the lessons learned from Latin American successful (and failed) cases of transformations are highly relevant to the Arab World. Latin America and the Caribbean region offered cases of transformation via different trajectories. Transformations after military defeats include the cases of the Tupamaros in Uruguay and, more generally, the armed Left-wing organisations in Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. This is well-contrasted with the case of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), where the transformation followed a draw, and the case of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua where the transformation into a political party happened after a decisive military victory. The case-studies and experiences in Latin America reflected how a combination of the aforementioned meso- and macro-level variables (i.e. organisational level and state/interstate level) can both initiate and sustain collective transformations to unarmed activism, despite relatively limited wealth and resources in comparison to the Arab World.

Finally, African cases provided cases of successful transformations also under limited resources. Recent development in Ethiopia have shown a trajectory of transformation of former guerrilla organisations to coalition partners; a process that is still on-going with other armed groups. A more successful transformation and a transition to democracy was in South Africa. It is a transformation via a draw and a hurting stalemate.⁽³³⁾ In this case, the charismatic leadership of Nelson Mandela was able to push the transformation and initiate peaceful negotiations, despite the capacity to use arms, internal resistance and even defections within the armed wing of the ANC (Spear of the Nation or MK), and the “war within the war” fought by the ANC and the Zulu Nationalist Inkatha movement.⁽³⁴⁾ Unlike the Arab cases (such as the IG in Egypt and LIFG in Libya), and some of the Latin American cases (such as the M-19 and the FARC in Colombia), the ANC in South Africa was quite successful in electoral politics and managed to win via ballots, not bullets.

Future Research: Scholarly Observations

From the above overview, a few scholarly observations can be deduced. In the Arabic literature, there are very limited academic analytical studies on transformations from armed to unarmed activism. This is despite 12 out of 22 Arab regimes being either at war with components of their own societies, or at war with their Arab neighbours, and that the Arab region has the highest armed conflict ratio per capita in the world,⁽³⁵⁾ and that the highest number of victims of armed conflict and political violence in the world reside in the Arab region.⁽³⁶⁾

33 See for example the original “ripeness” argument after “hurting stalemates” in Africa, in: William Zartman, *Ripe for Resolution: Conflict and Intervention in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

34 Thula Simpson, “The Transformation of the ANC and Its Path to Power (1990-1994),” in: Omar Ashour (ed.), *Bullets to Ballots: Collective De-Radicalization of Armed Movements*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2021).

35 Since 1945 or their independence, 90 percent of all states in the Middle East and the Maghreb have participated in at least one violent conflict. The comparable violence ratio worldwide is 64 percent. See for example: Frank Pfetsch & Christoph Rohloff, *National and International Conflicts, 1945-1995: New Empirical and Theoretical Approaches*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p.77.

36 S. Gates et al., “Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946-2014,” Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), *Conflict Trends*, (January 2016), p. 4; Kendra Dupuy & Siri Aas Rustand. “Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946-2017,” Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), *Conflict Trends*, (January 2016), p. 4.



A second observation is related to the English literature on collective transformations from armed to unarmed activism. The cross-regional, qualitative-comparative dimension is also rare and received relatively little attention. There has been a considerable amount of work on the related but distinct topic reframed in “orthodox” Security Studies as “how terrorism ends.” It overviews a litany of possible reasons that an organization employing terror tactics may forgo political violence.⁽³⁷⁾ Nevertheless, this body of work neither explores what happens when an organization goes beyond armed activism and participates in peaceful activities, nor answers several of the above-mentioned critical research questions.⁽³⁸⁾ The state-centric (or status-quo-centric) assumptions in many of the “orthodox” Security Studies literature block deeper research into the phenomenon of collective transformation. The near-exclusive reliance on secondary sources has a similar effect.

A third observation is the limited interdisciplinary collaboration and approaches in this area of research. This is despite valuable contributions from disciplines and subfields as diverse as Security Studies, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, History, Theology and Religious Studies, Peace Studies, Conflict Studies, Strategic Studies, Military Studies, and Media and Communications.

A fourth observation involves the relatively limited collaboration between scholars, official practitioners, and non-state leaders of these transformations. The ACRPS conference and its research outputs offered and will continue to offer the opportunity to collaborate, as it proved to be invaluable to academics, governmental officials and non-state leaders of the transformations, and has had an overall positive impact on the research agenda.

A fifth observation is the necessity of critical reviews of the already existing literature, with revisions and updates of the datasets.⁽³⁹⁾ Informed reflections on state-centric directions presented in the literature, coupled with critiques of replicated knowledge which decontextualizes or otherwise removes security crises from their historical contexts (ahistoricizing) are also necessary to move forward with this research agenda.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The same criticism should be applied to the over-reliance on secondary or unoriginal sources of knowledge. Scholars in this area of research should refrain from the singular focus on superficial, short-term “problem-solving” approaches, which has characterized some of the existing literature.

37 See for example: Audrey Kurth Cronin, “How Al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups,” *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 1 (Summer 2006); Audrey Kurth Cronin, “Historical Patterns in Ending Terrorism,” in: *Ending Terrorism: Lessons for Defeating al-Qaeda, The Adelphi Papers*, vol. 47, no. 394, (November 2007); United States Institute of Peace, “How Terrorism Ends,” *Policy Brief* (May 1999); Martha Crenshaw, “Why Violence Is Rejected or Renounced: A Case Study of Oppositional Terrorism” in: Thomas Gregor, (ed.), *A Natural History of Peace* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996); Jones. & Libicki; Jeffrey Ian Ross & Ted Robert Gurr, “Why Terrorism Subsides: A Comparative Study of Canada and the United States,” *Comparative Politics*, vol. 21, no. 4 (July 1989).

38 Such as “what the conditions for initiating the transitions?” “what are the conditions for sustaining it?” “what are the different trajectories of moving away from armed action?” “does the transformation happen after a military victory, a military defeat, or a draw in an armed conflict between an insurgent group(s) and an incumbent authority(ies)?”

39 For example, some of the existing datasets are over a decade old. And the data within them needs to be revised (including names, dates, some of the classifications/typologies due to changes, and some of the terms used).

40 The two issues of ‘Decontextualizing’ and ‘Ahistoricizing’ and their impacts on analytical rigour and policy implications are highlighted by Azmi Bishara: “The problems arise when analysis of these trends ignores the differences in historical circumstances in which terrorist groups—whether Muslim, Jewish or Christian—are born (for example, contrast the difference in growing ethno-religious chauvinism among the society of an occupying power and the reality of life under occupation)” See: Azim Bishara, “What defines Terrorism? The Identity of the Victim or that of the Victimizer?” Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, *Research Papers* (December 2017), p. 18.

A final observation involves a few hypothesis-engendering research questions that still merit revisiting and further research investigation. Most of the works concentrated on how such transformations happen and why they happen, with a focus on either a single case-study or on a comparative approach in one particular region. However, a differentiation between initiating the transitions and sustaining them, as well as the conditions for their endurance merit more investigation. Also, the different trajectories taken after moving away from armed action has also been underexplored.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Transformation processes and “de-radicalisation” programs have been used as an integral part of counter-terrorism and security strategies in several Arab countries. For example, Saudi Arabia,⁽⁴¹⁾ Iraq,⁽⁴²⁾ and Yemen⁽⁴³⁾ employed structured prison programs under the control of the state/authorities in which interactions between prisoners and religious/spiritual leaders and civil society members were introduced. Selective inducements were also employed under state-control to support the “deradicalization” and the abandonment of political violence by selected individuals. These programs employed varying types and levels of socioeconomic incentives, psychological therapy, theological and religious guidance, and sports and arts therapy. But the results in the Arab World were meagre, if not farcical.

In the Iraqi context, ISIL was ultimately the product. The program failed to reduce its recruitment, rise, and risk potentials. In the Saudi context, tens of the graduates of the Saudi “*Munasaha*” program joined al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen and became leading commanders.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The problem was not with the programs *per se*.⁽⁴⁵⁾ It was the unreformed and sustained repressive, corrupt and sectarian socio-political environment in which these programs and the individuals benefiting from them were embedded in. As a result, the rates of success (and failure) were highly contested, mainly due to macro-level structural challenges and inhospitable environments. So far, there is no consensus on how to measure the success of these programs, although it is more feasible to measure collective transformations (organisations and factions), than individual ones.

Additionally, the sustainability of these programs as well as transformation processes – without a thorough process of political and security reform and transitional justice – is questionable. Regardless of the approach taken to explain transformations towards unarmed politics, a consensus among

41 Christopher Boucek, “Saudi Arabia’s ‘Soft’ Counterterrorism Strategy: Prevention, Rehabilitation and Aftercare,” *Carnegie Papers*, no. 97 (September 2008).

42 Jeffrey Azarva, “Is U.S. Detention Policy in Iraq Working?” *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 1 (Winter 2009); Amit R. Paley, “In Iraq, ‘A Prison Full of Innocent Men,’” *Washington Post*, 6/12/2008.

43 Christopher Boucek et al., “Opening Up the Jihadi Debate: Yemen’s Committee for Dialogue,” in: Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan (eds.), *Leaving Terrorism Behind* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

44 Marisa L. Porges, “The Saudi Deradicalization Experiment, Expert Brief,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 22/1/2010.

45 The Saudi Programme specifically was highly problematic from the beginning, in comparison to European, and Latin American Programs. This is partly due to the strong emphasis on sectarian (*Wahabbi*) interpretations of Islamic texts to stress the religious authority of the king, the inferiority of the “others” (including non-Sunnis and non-Muslims), and the other elements.

scholars and experts has developed: the processes are extremely context-sensitive. In other words, in a political context where authoritarian repression, military coups, civil wars, and other forms of political violence and social instability are the common features, sustained political violence will be the likely outcome – both on organisational and individual levels. Attempted processes and programs of transformations are more likely to fail or collapse in the short to mid-term.

The “Arab Spring” has provided scholars and practitioners with several important lessons about how changes within the socio-political environment can affect transformations towards unarmed activism. The success of mainly unarmed civil resistance tactics in bringing down two authoritarian regimes in Tunisia (2010, 2011) and Egypt (2011) has briefly undermined the rationale arguing that armed action is the most effective (and, in some ideologies, the most legitimate) means for social and political change. However, the transformation of the nature of the uprisings in Libya and Syria in 2011 and onward, and the regional developments in Iraq (during and after April 2013) and in Egypt (during and after July 2013) have led to different conclusions: soft power and civil resistance tactics have their limits and, to pursue real change, hard power is necessary. In such an environment, radicalization, recruitment and ideological frames supportive of armed action are more likely to grow, survive and expand. Still, a few critical policy implications and recommendations can be offered to stakeholders and end-users.

In the Short-Term (1-to-3-year range):

Establish a Forum on Transformations to Peaceful Activism (TPA).

The forum would aim to garner both practical lessons learned and state-of-the-art scholarship about transformations to peaceful activism on a regional and global scale. It would gather academics, officials, practitioners and leaders of the transformations to share experiences from different standpoints. The Forum would be held on an annual basis in Doha. The Forum will also act as a brainstorming hub on future scenarios, trajectories, initiations, and the sustainability of transformation processes to unarmed activism, with annual forecasts and policy implications and recommendations based on a global, comparative and critical perspectives.

Protect and Preserve Strategic Gains.

In the Arab World, almost all of the once-armed large groups upheld their transformation from armed to unarmed activism during the brief period of the “Arab Spring.”⁽⁴⁶⁾ This should not be taken for granted and should certainly be treated as a strategic gain that could cause “domino effects” on both national and regional levels.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Like the Colombian cases (from the M-19 to the FARC) and

46 See the above-mentioned cases of the IG and LIFG.

47 That is, one successfully transformed organisation could influence or act as a model for an armed organisation and encourage them to abandon political violence. On the “domino effects,” see: Omar Ashour, “De-Radicalization of Jihad? The Impact of Egyptian Islamist Revisionists on Al-Qaeda,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 2, no. 5 (2008), accessed on 12/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2UkdAiX>; Mathew Charles in Santa María de la Loma de Bicordó, “Farc Deal Opens Path for Colombia’s Other Rebels: ‘The Future has to be about War’,” *The Guardian*, 7/1/2018, accessed on 12/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2CFGzD>; Gordon Clubb & Marina Tapley, “Conceptualising De-radicalisation and Former Combatant Re-integration in Nigeria,” *Third World Quarterly* (April 2018), accessed on 12/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2AYfaOD>

other Latin American ones, lessons learned through research and practice should be upheld to promote sustainability and continuity, and to avoid recidivism. This can be structured via the above-mentioned Forum.

Promote National Reconciliations.

Popular support for national reconciliation, compromise, inclusion, and general de-escalation is crucial for supporting transformations to unarmed activism. Qatari foreign policy has already been engaged in promoting national reconciliations, most notably in Sudan, Yemen, Lebanon, Afghanistan and elsewhere. This should continue and perhaps widened in other countries. And it should take into account that popular support for national reconciliations is a variable. It can be diminished by demagogues, warlords, state and non-state violent extremists, hysteric media, and regressive education. But it can certainly be enhanced partly by investing in a responsible, aware elite, progressive education, free media, and strategy to deal with spoilers.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Support Media and Education Reforms.

A free media that promotes reconciliation, compromise, inclusion, and general de-escalation is essential to support transitions to unarmed activism, as opposed to a sensationalist media that promotes social and sectarian extreme polarization. The same applies to education where there is a need to promote the importance of national peace and supremacy of reconciliation via elementary, secondary and higher education. Essential elements of reformist curricula should include the de-glorification of various forms of political violence (including military coups, state repression, civil wars, and both state- and non-state terrorism), promotion of non-violent conflict resolution mechanisms. It should foster respect and celebrate diversity and difference of opinion with an emphasis on human security, and its importance to state, regional and international security.⁽⁴⁹⁾

In the Mid- and Long-Term (5-to-10-year range)

Security sector reform (SSR) is a key variable.

It was clear that transitions from armed to unarmed activism are less likely to be **sustained** unless there is a thorough process of reforming the security sector.⁽⁵⁰⁾ The reform process should entail changing the standard operating procedures (SOPs), training and education curricula, leadership

48 On Spoilers, see: Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Autumn 1997), pp. 5 - 53.

49 United Nations Development Programme "Threats to Human Security Impede Development in the Arab Countries," *United Nations*, 21/7/2009, accessed on 12/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2ro1Z5h>; Simone Young, "Order From Chaos: Why human security is national security for Small Island Developing States," *Brookings*, 12/6/2017, accessed on 12/12/2018, at: <https://brook.gs/2UhrVNe>

50 Youssef Chaitani, Omar Ashour & Vito Intini "An Overview of the Arab Security Sector amidst Political Transitions: Reflections on Legacies, Functions and Perceptions," United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Africa (New York: 2013); Omar Ashour, "Security Sector Reform and the Arab Spring," *SETA*, 11/11/2014, accessed on 12/12/2018, at: <https://bit.ly/2rm9gTI>; Şāyigh, Yazīd, "Missed Opportunity: The Politics of Police Reform in Egypt and Tunisia," *Carnegie Paper* (March 2015).



and promotion criteria, as well as oversight and accountability by elected and judicial institutions, and partly by civil society organisations. The violations of the security sector, and the lack of accountability to address such violations, have been a major contributor to sparking and sustaining violent extremism. This is becoming less of a hypothesis, and more of a sustained conclusion.

Balance civil-military relations (CMR).

This implication is directly derived from the above-mentioned SSR one. Reconfiguring and rebalancing civil-military relations in such a way that armed state institutions become more accountable to elected and judicial authorities.⁽⁵¹⁾ The supremacy of the armed over the elected and the judicial/constitutional has created a political context in which bullets are more significant than ballots and laws as methods for attaining and remaining in political power. Compared to arms and coups, votes, constitutions, good governance and socio-economic achievements are by far secondary means to attain or remain in power. And in several Arab countries, they are relegated to simply a cosmetic casing.

Demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) is costly but worth the investment.

A final recommendation is about DDR. The politicization of such a process and its failure in Libya and Yemen in the aftermath of the Libyan and Yemeni revolutions have led to the rise of multiple armed state and non-state actors, unbounded by any constitutional or legal frameworks. That phenomenon facilitated the necessary resources and logistics to warlords, violent extremists, ethnic, regional and sectarian armed entrepreneurs, and the likes. DDR is an integral part of any transformation to unarmed activism and it is inherently connected to SSR and CMR. Most armed non-state actors in post-conflict environments will refuse to disband and demobilize if there is no mutual trust or guarantees with the official armed institutions and armed state actors. This is especially the case when the latter has been traditionally above oversight, accountability and law. But DDR is worth the investment, as the ultimate success or failure of transformations can depend on it.

⁵¹ See for example: Azmi Bishara, *"The Army and Political Power in the Arab Context: Theoretical Problems,"* Doha, Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2017; Omar Ashour, "Collusion to Collision: Islamist-Military Relations in Egypt," *Brookings Papers*, no. 14, 5/3/2015, pp. 1-50, accessed on 12/12/2018, at: <https://goo.gl/9gxKxt>; Zoltan Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why* (Princeton: Princeton University press, 2016).