



Goodbye is the hardest part: why is ending violence so difficult for non-state armed groups?

October 9, 2025, Analysis / Armed Groups / Generating Respect for IHL / Identity / IHL / Influencing Behaviour in Armed Conflict / Protracted Conflict / Social Inclusion / Special Themes / Topics

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For groups involved in long-running non-international armed conflicts, the decision to end the use of violence poses significant challenges – even when it is no longer recognized to be an “effective” means of achieving organizational objectives.

In this post, independent researcher Dr Thomas Evans argues that exploring the cultural perspectives, influences, and identities within non-state armed groups and their members is vital to understanding the continued usage of, and disengagement from, political violence.

Editor's note: The views expressed in this post are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the ICRC.

ICRC Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog · Goodbye is the hardest part: why is ending violence so difficult for non-state armed groups?

From *Islamist groups in south Thailand*, to the *Naxalite-Maoist insurgency in eastern India*, despite seemingly little chance of organizational objectives being achieved through violent means, non-state armed groups often find it difficult to give up the gun. Even in instances where groups do leave violence behind, there remains the strong risk of organizational splinters, with those opposed to the decision forming new groups which may continue to use armed action.

To unpack the challenges of, and solutions for, disengagement among non-state armed groups, we must consider the cultural influences which underpin how members understand themselves and their organizations.

Leaving violence behind

In the past decade, the world has witnessed a remarkably sudden end to a number of long-running, seemingly intractable, non-international armed conflicts.

In 2017, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People's Army (FARC-EP) ceased over 53 years of armed action against the Colombian State – reforming as the political party *Commons*. Just one year later, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) *disbanded* after almost 60 years of violence against the Spanish State in its efforts to create an independent Basque country. The same year, Óglaigh na hÉireann (ONH), a post-conflict armed group active in Northern Ireland since 2009, *enacted its own ceasefire*. While, most recently, on 12th May 2025, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) announced that it was in the process of *formally disbanding* its organizational structures – ending a conflict against the Turkish State it has been engaged in for 47 years.

What explains these decisions to abandon the use of violence? The primary academic model of collective disengagement and demobilization from violence by non-state armed actors largely focuses on the *push and pull factors* around strategic choices. When violence appears to no longer be advantageous or sustainable, groups actively choose to either change direction (such as shifting into different political forms), or *collapse*.

Certainly, environmental pressures (such as state repression, broader changes in a socio-political environment, and alienation amongst their constituent support), and internal challenges (for example, a failure to recruit new members, and individual disengagement and demobilization) can produce incentives for change.

And yet the four cases described above pose a problem for this model. These groups continued to use violence well after the freezing of their respective conflicts, and markers of decline – such as reduced organizational capacity and size – had long been apparent. Moreover, the decisions to renounce violence among the *FARC-EP* and *ONH* have produced organizational splinters who remain engaged in, or supportive of, state-directed violence contrary to the arguments made by their former leaderships that violence is no longer a viable path for the achievement of political objectives.

This suggests that leaving violence behind is a harder task to explain than being the outcome of purely cost-benefit decisions. Instead, in analysing why groups choose to give up strategic directions (and sometimes collapse their own

organizations), and how and why members accept this, we need to look at the cultural dynamics present at play which may help or hinder collective disengagement.

Culture, identity, and organizational choices

Understanding collective disengagement from violence requires a detailed consideration of how groups make strategic choices in general.

Among political groups – from social movements to political parties – the strategies and tactical choices these organizations make *reflects existing identities* held by members. These collective identities hold important frameworks and cultural understandings which prohibit or facilitate particular forms of behaviour. They are also multifaceted. Members can understand their group to have its own specific *organizational identity* (how we as an organization see ourselves and do things), a broader *movement identity* (how we as ideological adherents to a specific system see ourselves and do things), and a broader *social identity* (how we as a wider group of people see ourselves and do things).

Non-state armed actors are no different. They are also comprised of members who hold multiple identities. Indeed, when explaining why an individual would look to join a costly group engaged in risky political action, academics have emphasized the importance of framing and selling identity to prospective and existing adherents – positioning themselves as *the vehicles for enacting these identities*.

Likewise, in conflict settings, organizational leaderships must be able to frame violence as both legitimate (through appealing to these identities) and as the required method for realizing these identities. Here, groups can position contemporary violence within a longer history of violent struggle, and/or argue that violence is a method of redressing oppression for a wider group that adherents identify with.

Herein lies the problem for those looking to pivot their organizations away from violence. Even if leaderships or factions within groups understand and recognize pressures for abandoning armed action, successfully implementing collective disengagement from violence requires reversing the same arguments made to sustain their groups.

Consensus building and disengagement

Convincing members to cross formerly inviolable “red lines” is not only challenging but is also dangerous for both the organization (through the production of splits and splinters), and leaderships (through internal contestation for power).

Those pushing for change must therefore carefully build internal consensus around the idea that retreat from violence does not constitute a failure or abandonment of an existing identity and political struggle, but is rather a continuation of both.

This is a difficult tightrope to walk. In cases of long-term, intractable conflict in particular, violence can find itself positioned as a core component of “resistance”. As groups become more isolated, and as more moderate members move away, the most committed and doctrinally “purist” can remain. Among groups which stress emotional ties and total commitment, the reduction of outside socialization can make *both individual and collective demobilization particularly challenging*.

One example of consensus building and the challenges of doing so can be found in the example of the Provisional Movement’s attempt to sell collective disengagement during the Northern Irish Peace Process of the 1990s.

With its political wing of Sinn Féin, and its paramilitary arm of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), the Provisional Movement emerged from a much longer history of Irish nationalism and *Irish republicanism*, as well as the

specific *sectarian violence* emerging out of the efforts by the Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR) minority to increase their civil, economic, and political rights.

From inception, violence was positioned as a central part of both its strategy for protecting the CNR community and achieving a united, Independent Ireland – a position which hardened as British troops increasingly moved from a peacekeeping to *an anti-insurgency role* and the killings of CNR civilians in *Derry/Londonderry* and *Belfast*.

But, in their efforts to *justify the PIRA's use of violence to both potential supporters and adherents*, violence was also argued to be both a central component of what it meant to be an Irish republican – with the Movement's leadership drawing upon previously (then) unpopular and failed attempts to overthrow British rule – and as a method of achieving agency for those within the CNR population.

When the leadership of the Provisional Movement entered negotiations with the British government in the late 1980s and early 1990s over ending the stalemate of the conflict of “the Troubles”, they therefore faced the challenge of reversing these positions and central arguments made over the legitimacy of violence.

To sell this to a membership which had undertaken decades of costly sacrifices, the Provisional Movement's leadership sought to manage internal dissent and gain consensus around a reframing of violence. Violence was repositioned as *a tactical consideration* useful for getting the British to the negotiating table. Under this argument, abandoning violence was not an admission of defeat, but a new stage of the republican struggle. To facilitate such change, members were redirected to *extra-legal policing*, non-violent community activism through its *existing system of community groups*, and political activism *through Sinn Féin*.

While overwhelmingly successful, the case of the Provisional IRA's disengagement also demonstrates the difficulties with ending political violence which is firmly rooted and framed as central to an existing collective identity. The decision to firstly enact a ceasefire and enter into power sharing, and then dismantling armed structures and decommissioning weapons, produced *multiple splinter groups* (including by dissenting members at a high-level of the Provisional Movement) which *continued and continue to use* state-directed violence.

Facilitating offramps

Ultimately, the decision to abandon or continue violence is a long process, requiring organizations and their members to build consensus around both the recognition to leave violence behind, and how to actually do this in practice. And even when individuals or wider structures decide to disengage and demobilize, reintegration relies not only on government facilitation but community acceptance – a recurrent theme found throughout the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research's (UNIDIR) *Managing Exits from Armed Conflict* (MEAC) programme's cases on former combatants and their dependents in contexts from *Iraq* to *Colombia*.

There is an existing, concerted effort by academics and humanitarians to recontextualize the cultural components of non-state armed actor behaviour in the context of *international humanitarian law* (IHL). The International Committee of the Red Cross, through publications such as the *Roots of Restraint in War* and the *Roots of Behaviour in War* documents, and the MEAC's *Conflict Exits Assessment Framework*, has emphasized both the need to identify and map internal dynamics within groups, and the importance of *local culture, ethics, and religion*, and the need to reduce association with those still engaged in violence through expanding social-ties. While programmes such as the *Beyond Compliance Consortium* (a partnership of universities and humanitarian and human rights organizations), the *Generating Respect Project*, the *From Words to Deeds Research Project*, and the *Ritualising Protection Project* have all emphasized the need to develop humanitarian norms through relevant cultural frames.

While this work focuses on building compliance for IHL rather than disengagement and demobilization among armed non-state groups, which is a decision which can only be made by members of these organizations themselves, such a focus on the macro-, meso-, and micro-areas in which identities can be built can provide an insight into how norms around the continued use of violence can shift, even when there are scarce organizational methods of doing so. The importance of [civilian ties on nudging actor behaviour](#) and understandings (including through family members and wider societal actors such as religious bodies and figures) can not only help with IHL compliance, but also with disengagement processes where they have been decided upon.

Such an understanding of intra-organizational dynamics and perspectives can also facilitate reintegration and demobilization processes following disengagement from violence. In processes of collective transition, groups often position non-violent political and social engagement as an expression of identity moving forward. This is made easier for groups who are already engaged in some form of non-violent activism or governance, and whose identity is closely built around liberation doctrines, as seen with the [FARC-EP's transition](#) both collectively and in the encouragement of members into agricultural cooperative movements. [Existing counter-extremism programmes focused at individual de-radicalization](#) also focus on [providing alternative identities or transforming existing identities into more peaceful forms](#) as a core method of disengagement. It is a task which requires time, and must be seen by groups and the members within them as genuine, a process in which using interlocutors who have formerly been within either the same movement or similar ones and who have since disengaged – [a method already used in mediation practices](#) – offers one avenue to do so.

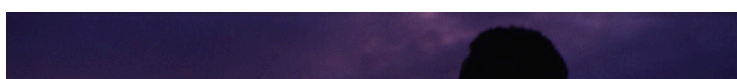
The identities that members of non-state armed groups hold are central to both mobilization into, and disengagement out of, political violence. Such identities can be “sticky” in preventing moves away from violence, but they can also be drawn upon to facilitate the end of armed campaigns and transitional processes for both organizations and the individuals which comprise them. Exploring where these identities are held (at the organizational, wider-structural, and individual levels) can only be done on a case-to-case basis, and by closely engaging with groups, their members, their families, and the communities that they are situated within.

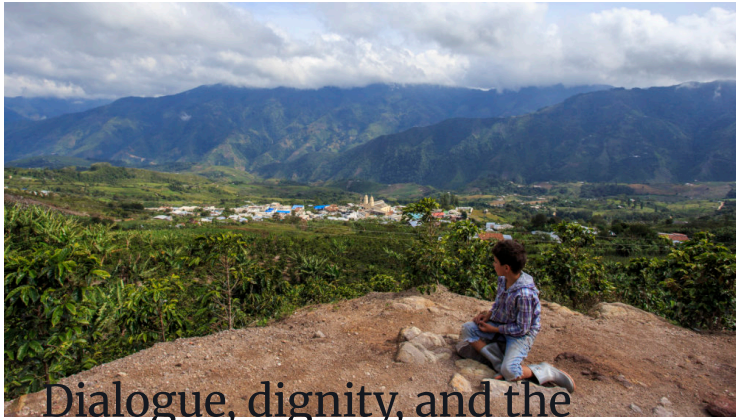
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