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The political integration of armed groups in a changing global security landscape: implications for sustainable peace

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Abstract

This paper discusses the prospects for political integration of armed groups in the context of contemporary dynamics of armed conflict. While the conversion of insurgent movements into political actors is not new, shifting global conflict dynamics are challenging the established liberal peace framework. Drawing on insights from comparative case studies of both negotiated settlements and rebel victories, the paper argues that wartime organisational cohesion, governance capacity, ideology, and external engagement decisively shape prospects for post-war political integration of armed groups. It introduces a novel typology of armed groups prospects and pathways for political integration. The analysis offers policy recommendations tailored to group type and context, situated within contemporary conflict environments marked by fragmentation and internationalisation. Ultimately, the paper argues that sustainable peace requires recognising rebel legacies, supporting incremental reforms, and fostering inclusive governance in the long term.

Introduction

In November 2024, the armed group Hayat-Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) successfully overthrew the sitting Syrian regime in an unexpected move towards Damascus. The HTS's military victory and government takeover have raised questions regarding the transition from armed opposition groups to governments and ruling parties, their capacity and strategy for governance and state-building, and how those impact the prospects for peace and security in Syria and the region. The process of transforming from an armed opposition group to a political party is by no means unique: it is a common feature of war-to-peace transitions across the globe, whether following a negotiated settlement or a rebel victory. Indeed, more than one third of the non-state armed groups that signed peace agreements between 1975–2018 transformed into political parties, exemplified by a diverse range of groups such as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in Kosovo, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador, Sinn Féin / the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines (Söderberg & Katz 2016; Manning & Smith 2016).

To date, the political transformation of armed groups into political parties has commonly been analysed in the context of the liberal peace paradigm, which is characterised by mediated settlements that include provisions for party formation and post-war electoral participation (For example Sindre & Söderström 2016; Söderberg Kovacs & Hatz 2016). However, recent shifts in the global conflict and security landscape, increasingly 'disordered' geopolitics, and the subsequent decline in the prevalence of international peace operations are challenging our once clear-cut expectations about armed groups' pathways towards demilitarisation.

The agenda of this paper is to align contemporary research on armed groups' political integration with the evolving global landscape of conflict and peacemaking, presenting a novel typology of armed groups' integration prospects alongside a series of policy recommendations.

The paper is organised as follows. First, through collating existing research, it identifies conditions for successful political integration of armed groups into political parties. It distinguishes between types of conflict endings, highlighting similarities and differences between negotiated settlements and so-called 'rebel victories'. Second, the paper discusses contemporary conflict and peacemaking dynamics and the challenges linked to supporting

political integration of armed groups. Third, it introduces a novel typology of armed groups, arguing that wartime group characteristics significantly influence the prospects and pathways for political integration. Finally, the paper offers a set of recommendations to chart a path towards demilitarisation and political integration of armed groups.

The paper draws on original research from two of the author's recent projects on the political transformation of armed groups and the impact of former armed groups on post-war politics and peace.[1]

How conflict endings shape post-war political orders

The way that a conflict ends shapes the post-war political order. This section examines two different conflict endings – mediated settlements and rebel victories – and explores the pathways to political integration of armed groups in these different contexts as well as their nuances.

Mediated settlements

The political transformation of armed groups following negotiated peace agreements is typically shaped by compromise, institutional and organisational adaptation, and the challenge of reconciling military identities with civilian politics. When insurgents transition into formal political actors following a negotiated settlement, they must often accept partial integration into pre-existing political systems, agreeing to share power with their former adversaries. This usually follows the ideals of the liberal peace framework and can involve demobilisation, power-sharing agreements, and participation in elections. The process tends to produce hybrid political organisations that are still influenced by wartime military structures and hierarchies but increasingly compelled to adopt civilian party practices, cultivate broader constituencies, and compete within pluralist systems (Ishiyama & Batta 2011; Ishiyama & Marshall 2015; Sindre 2016a). In some instances, these transformations have proven to be fragile, as rebel successor parties have struggled with legitimacy, internal factionalism, or limited capacity to recruit support beyond their wartime base, as exemplified by the RUFP, the party founded on the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Colombia (e.g. Ibáñez & Jäger 2023; Söderberg Kovacs 2021). In other instances, however, rebel group successor parties have proven to be remarkably stable contenders that have contributed to long-term political stability, as exemplified in prominent post-settlement cases such as El Salvador, Mozambique, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Northern Ireland (Manning & Smith 2019).

'Success', then, depends on a number of factors. Traditionally, scholars have emphasised factors linked to the peace agreement itself, such as its inclusiveness and whether it contains provisions for armed groups to join formal politics, as well as the strength of post-conflict

1 The first project is in part funded by the Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) Research Grants (2024–2026) and the second, Post-conflict political parties, was funded by the European Commission (2015–2019). The paper also draws on research findings from the wider research programme of the Politics After War Network (PAW). For a summary of research findings and recommendations on politics of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR), see for instance Cho et al. 2022. For a recent discussion about mediating armed groups' political integration, see Dudouet el al (2025).

institutions (e.g. Podder 2013; Söderberg Kovacs & Hatz 2016). However, recent comparative research on the political transformation of armed groups into political parties places more emphasis on the organisational and ideational foundations of the armed groups as central explanatory factors for their relative electoral successes (e.g. Manning & Smith 2019; Sindre 2016a) and their subsequent contributions to post-war political stability (Manning et. al. 2023; Marshall and Ishiyama 2016). Factors linked to a group's identity and organisational capacity, such as the ideas and ideology underpinning their political project (Curtis & Sindre 2019; Sindre 2019), their wartime administrative experiences (Ishiyama & Marshall 2023), the nature of their support networks, and the degree of their popular legitimacy (e.g. Ibáñez & Jäger 2023; Manning & Smith 2019; Sindre 2024a) significantly influence the likelihood of party formation and post-war electoral success.[2]

In sum, research shows that these factors – along with a group's willingness and capacity to invest in coalition-building and long-term peace rather than rely on coercion – positively impacts an armed group's chance of surviving as a political party in the short to medium term and its ability to contribute positively to political stability in the longer term (Ishiyama & Sindre 2023; Sindre 2024a). In addition, there are indications that the provisions set out in peace agreements to enable the political integration of armed groups can foster trust in democratic institutions and encourage the accountability of all parties involved, though this finding is less clearly articulated and reliant on definitions of democracy (Ishiyama & Sindre 2023; Manning et al. 2023).

Rebel victories

In these cases, victorious movements have transformed into dominant political parties that monopolise authority, centralise decision-making, and institutionalise former rebel command structures into state apparatuses.

In contrast, when armed groups achieve victory on the battlefield, their political transformation is less about accommodation and more about consolidation of power. Although rebel victories are less common than negotiated settlements, when rebels win wars, the victors often become the new state elite, establishing their military organisation as the foundation of post-war state-building and governance (Liu 2024; Lyons 2016a). Because they assume power unilaterally, they are less constrained by pre-existing institutions and more capable of reshaping political order according to their ideological vision or organisational preference (Liu 2024). This can enable strong state-building, as seen in cases such as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in Ethiopia, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in Rwanda, and recently the Taliban in Afghanistan. In these cases, victorious movements have transformed into dominant political parties that monopolise authority, centralise decision-making, and institutionalise former rebel command structures into state apparatuses. Some scholars have highlighted how such transformations often privilege stability and control over pluralism, producing hegemonic regimes instead of competitive democracies (Liu 2025; Lyons 2016b). A legacy of military victory can entrench authoritarian practices, as former rebels in power may equate dissent with renewed rebellion and thus prioritise regime security above political openness. Yet, autocrats also often rely on compromise solutions and the division of power as part of their governance strategies. For instance, after the end of its war in 1991, Ethiopia's ethno-federal system that guaranteed local autonomy was seen by many as a pillar in ensuring political stability in the post-war period (International Crisis Group 2025). Hence, while the trajectory of victorious armed groups often contrasts heavily with groups emerging from

2 See the special issue of Government and Opposition co-edited by Devon Curtis and Gyda M. Sindre (2019) for conceptual discussion and a collection of case studies on the role of armed groups' ideologies in shaping their post-war state-building practices: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/information/what-happens-to-ideas-and-ideology-in-armed-groups-turned-political-parties. For an overview of these findings and policy recommendations, see also the Joint Research Brief Series by PAW, FBA, and UNDPO/OROLSI/DDR: https://fba.se/en/about-fba/publications/the-political-dynamics-of-ddr-key-research-findings/

negotiated peace – where the pursuit of compromise and legitimacy fosters more pluralistic political engagement – sustaining post-war settlements nonetheless can require rebel victors themselves to make careful accommodations through power sharing and compromise.

However, post-war political stability following rebel victory is by no means a uniform outcome. Ethiopia's post-war stability was disrupted by war between the federal and Tigray governments in 2020 followed by renewed tensions with neighbouring Eritrea (International Crisis Group 2025). Other regimes have also proven to be prone to internal dissent and civil wars, as exemplified by the experience of governments formed by rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (1996–1997), Libya (2011), the Central African Republic (2003 and 2012), and Afghanistan in the 1990s (Lyons 2016c, Young & Florea 2025). In the DRC and Libya, although insurgent groups succeeded in toppling the incumbent regimes, these were the result of short-lived wars over large swathes of territory that were fought by weakly organised insurgent groups whose victories were enabled with substantial external backing (Lyons 2016c). In contrast to the well organised and centralised insurgencies in Ethiopia and Rwanda, these rebel victors took power without having developed cohesive leadership structures or the administrative capacity that might otherwise have emerged through more sustained wartime governance, leaving them weak and internally divided once in control. Additional legacies such as 'residual threats' from the previous regime (Young & Florea 2025: 3) and the presence of competing insurgent groups and militias (Florea 2018) pose additional challenges to rebel victors who then struggle to achieve territorial sovereignty.

Nuances

What this tells us is that the distinction between negotiated and military outcomes is not necessarily clear-cut. There are also several cases in which armed groups, after entering politics through negotiated settlements, go on to win elections and consolidate themselves as ruling elites, blurring the line between compromise and dominance. In these cases, the armed groups emerge as victors with international support as an enabling factor in securing political rather than military victories (Sindre 2024b). In places like South Africa, Kosovo, and Timor-Leste, rebel organisations successfully converted their wartime legitimacy and mobilisational capacity into electoral strength, allowing them to dominate post-conflict politics (Sindre 2024b). Their credentials as resistance actors, coupled with strong nationalist or liberation narratives, provided a durable political brand that resonated with broader constituencies. Unlike groups forced into marginal participation, these movements – such as the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the Kosovo Liberation Army's (KLA) political successors in Kosovo, and the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Fretilin) in Timor-Leste – secured electoral mandates that empowered them to shape new state institutions from within.

In Bangsamoro (Philippines) and Aceh (Indonesia), peace agreements institutionalised forms of territorial power sharing that have enabled former insurgents to govern semi-autonomous provinces.

In fact, similar dynamics can be observed where negotiated settlements cement arrangements of regional autonomy, thus significantly restructuring power at the subregional level. Such regional autonomy arrangements can produce territorially concentrated elite power, with ex-rebel groups becoming dominant political actors in subnational regions rather than at the national level (Sindre 2024a). In Bangsamoro (Philippines) and Aceh (Indonesia), peace agreements institutionalised forms of territorial power sharing that have enabled former insurgents to govern semi-autonomous provinces. In those cases, the political inclusion of armed groups was tied to regional state-building, with ex-rebels becoming entrenched subnational elites, manoeuvring between the established political elites at national and regional

levels while exercising significant authority over the post-war political order (Söderberg Kovacs 2021; Sindre 2023).[3]

This trajectory demonstrates that negotiated settlements do not necessarily result in fragile or subordinate ex-rebel parties; under certain conditions they can become hegemonic political forces – whether nationally or regionally – with legitimacy rooted in their wartime achievements and legacies on the one hand and post-war electoral or institutional arrangements on the other. Where agreements have been negotiated in the context of the liberal peace paradigm, political integration is premised upon the armed groups transforming into political parties and doing well in elections, which means power is consolidated through mobilising supporters in electoral competition (Ishiyama & Marshall 2015; Suazo 2013). However, electoral politics is but one defining feature of post-war political orders. As the discussion highlights, rebel victors that take power militarily are also reliant on expanding support bases through accommodating political rivals, navigating competing power dynamics.

What often unites 'rebel political victors' (Sindre 2024a) is not a history of sustained territorial control but rather the development of unified leadership structures, effective political machinery, and a strong diplomatic presence. Examples such as Fretilin in Timor-Leste and the KLA in Kosovo illustrate this dynamic: despite relatively limited military capacity on the ground, both movements cultivated clandestine networks, transnational political organisations, and leaderships capable of mobilising international recognition and support.

In sum, what we can deduct from the broad comparative research in this field is that, across mediated settlements and so-called 'rebel victories', successful cases of 'rebel-to-party transformation' and their post-war political integration highlight that the internal characteristics of armed groups – ranging from organisational cohesion to external diplomatic engagement – play a decisive role in shaping their ability to transition into legitimate political actors after conflict.

Political integration in the changing landscape of conflict and peacemaking

One significant trend in contemporary conflict dynamics is the frequent involvement of highly fluid, decentralised, and fragmented actors with shifting alliances. This creates a challenging environment for peacemaking, which has traditionally been framed around seeking settlements between one armed group and the state. Notable contexts in which multiple armed groups are involved in civil wars are Myanmar, Syria, the Central African Republic, Nigeria, Sudan, and the DRC. Across the Sahel, armed conflict involves numerous jihadist factions, local militias, and self-defence groups that operate with overlapping but competing agendas. In Mali and Burkina Faso, alliances between groups linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have repeatedly splintered, while local militias pursue their own community-based objectives, often mobilising around jihadist agendas (e.g. Cline 2023; Ibrahim 2025).

3 This is distinctly different from power-sharing arrangements in such places as Northern Ireland, where the peace settlement to a large degree cemented wartime sectarian divisions.

In Myanmar, the 2021 military coup triggered an escalation of armed resistance, with dozens of local People's Defence Forces (PDFs) emerging alongside long-standing ethnic resistance organisations (EROs), creating a fragmented armed landscape with limited political co-ordination (Centre on Armed Groups 2025).[4] Such fragmentation not only complicates peace negotiations but can also obstruct the political transformation of armed groups into coherent actors capable of meaningful participation in governance or integration into state institutions.[5]

A second development that complicates conflict resolution in general, and prospects for political integration specifically, is the increasing internationalisation of armed conflicts, in which domestic disputes travel across borders and draw in regional and global powers, transposing otherwise local wars onto an increasingly fragmented geopolitical arena (Dudouet et al. 2025). For example, even though the insurgents in Yemen propagate clearly articulated domestic concerns, the civil war has become a proxy battlefield between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Similarly in Libya, rival factions have been supported by Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia, embedding the conflict in broader regional rivalries.[6] In the Sahel, too, intra-state conflicts have increasingly attracted external intervention, as exemplified by the involvement of Russian private military companies that are impacting the trajectory of local wars and strengthening jihadist networks. These external actors provide resources and political backing to armed groups or state forces, with their presence often entrenches divisions and prolongs violence. Research also finds that the more an Islamist armed group has established formal allegiance with any global jihadist network, the harder it becomes to reach political settlement (Drevon 2024; Dudouet et al. 2025). For local armed movements, internationalisation complicates the prospects of reaching political settlement and envisioning pathways for political inclusion. External sponsorship can also harden the positions of an armed group, making political settlements less likely, while any shifts in the agendas of foreign sponsors can further undermine the frameworks that are supportive for armed groups' integration into political processes.

In the Sahel, too, intra-state conflicts have increasingly attracted external intervention, as exemplified by the involvement of Russian private military companies that are impacting the trajectory of local wars and strengthening jihadist networks.

Considerations and implications for reaching peaceful political settlements

The combined effect of fragmentation of non-state armed groups, internationalisation of intra-state conflicts, and a significantly restructured geopolitical context has contributed to a marked decline in the prospects of reaching negotiated settlements. In contexts such as Myanmar and Mali, the sheer number and diversity of armed actors make it exceedingly difficult to bring all relevant stakeholders to the negotiating table, let alone forge a unified agreement that addresses their divergent interests. At the same time, the involvement of powerful external actors in places such as Yemen, Libya, and the wider Sahel introduces geopolitical rivalries that further complicate compromise. Peace processes are no longer just about reconciling domestic factions but also require navigating the strategic interests of regional and global powers, which often pull in multiple and sometimes opposing directions. As a result, peace negotiations that previously would have aimed to reach comprehensive agreements increasingly struggle to gain traction or durability, with agreements either collapsing prematurely or excluding key actors whose buy-in is essential for lasting peace (Farquhar et.al, 2024). At the same time, the international apparatus that to date has

4 For an analysis of the escalation of conflict and manifestation of EROs in Myanmar after 2011 and prior to the military coup in 2021, see also Brenner (2021).
5 For a more detailed analysis of these dynamics, see Dudouet et al. (2025).
6 For detailed analysis, see for instance Global Conflict Tracker (2025), see also Hellmüller and Salaymeh (2021).

underpinned international peacebuilding is slowly being eroded (e.g. Whitfield 2024). Seen together, these dynamics signal a problematic trend in which armed conflicts are becoming increasingly more protracted, less amenable to reaching inclusive political settlements, and more likely to relapse even after partial accords are reached.[7]

A common key characteristic of a fragmented conflict landscape that impacts pathways towards peace is that the central state (or regime) is either considerably weakened or at the verge of collapse and thereby only one of many stakeholders to the conflict. Outcomes may therefore be strongly reliant on who essentially 'wins' the war. In many conflict contexts, sustained armed mobilisation by multiple – sometimes competing – armed groups significantly restructures state power, providing space for alternative governing models. These dynamics not only shape the prospects for reaching a political settlement but are also central to the type of political settlement that is feasible. If one armed group emerges as dominant, as in the case of the HTS in Syria, which succeeded with their military and (possibly) their political campaign, the premise of peace is also reliant both on the ability and willingness of the victor to negotiate and compromise with competing armed groups and authorities, and for the armed groups compromise around new political settlements.

Where armed groups have successfully taken control of specific territories and governed for sustained periods of time, any new political settlement will be shaped by this new configuration. When outlining the scope for political settlements in such instances, it is essential to ascertain the diverse logics underpinning rebel governance practices. In some types of conflict, the territory under armed groups' control may correspond to an 'ethnic' or regional homeland, as with the Kurds in Syria (i.e. the Party of Democratic Union (PYD) in Rojava) and EROs in Myanmar. In such instances, territorial acquisition is also an extension of their political project of seeking regional autonomy.

In other contexts, armed groups may not seek the autonomy of an ethnic homeland but rather to attain territorial strongholds as a result of strategic calculations of how to wrest control from government forces. The pro-democracy rebels in Myanmar, such as the PDFs and the allied National Unity Government (NUG), are rooted in a popular anti-regime front that aims to take power at the centre and then take the lead in reconciling a new federal structure. In such a situation, relations between armed groups is a key factor: armed groups operating in the same region are not necessarily in direct confrontation with each other. Some will strategise to build alliances, whether as a result of strategic political calculations or battlefield logics, while others become embedded in coalitions. Still others may become displaced or eradicated from a region as a result of intergroup fighting. These are patterns recently observed in Syria, as the HTS rose to power through securing alliances with groups previously seen as competitors (Drevon 2024). Such developments signal the importance of assessing intergroup relations as well as intra-group dynamics when seeking political settlement. In this landscape, it is important to assess the characteristics of an armed group when considering pathways and opportunities for political settlement that involve its political integration and position after the war.[8]

The next section presents a typology of armed groups that takes into account the integration prospects of armed groups.

7 For discussion on changing global orders and the decline in liberal peace frameworks, see for instance Holm (2025), which is also linked to broader debates about 'illiberal peace'.

8 Insights based on primary interviews conducted by the author with Myanmar civil society activists, PDF members in exile, and Syrian civil society groups, October 2024 and May 2025.

Typology of armed groups and their prospects for political integration

From the above discussion, we can identify some core traits that influence the likelihood of political integration, here presented as a typology. Categorising armed groups by their core characteristics, likelihood for successful political integration, and participation in peace processes, the typology distinguishes between four archetypes of armed groups: reformist movements, proto-state actors, opportunistic groups, and ideologically radical groups. Importantly, the categories are not mutually exclusive but serve the purpose of identifying main characteristics. The discussion below outlines the key traits of each and considers the nuances that need to be taken into consideration in deploying this typology. While a typology such as this will never capture the full reality on the ground and an armed group may fit several categories, it is meant to be a tool for researchers and policymakers to distinguish between groups and their potential likelihood of and pathways towards political integration. In order to illustrate its relevance to present-day peacemaking, the typology includes examples of contemporary armed groups in each category.

Reformist movements are characterised by moderate ideological goals, broad-based support, and demonstrated willingness to engage in formal political processes. These groups often actively seek inclusion in governance structures and possess a relatively clear political agenda. The reformist agenda can encompass a broad range of demands, but its core trait is that it is not premised upon seeking exclusionary political order. It is often formulated as seeking regime change and is anchored in popular legitimacy. Prominent contemporary examples of reformist movements include the People's Defence Forces (PDFs) in Myanmar that have strong links to the country's pro-democracy movement, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) in Northern Mali, an armed group that explicitly rejects Islamist rule and advocates for a secular political order opposing jihadist groups in the region, and the Sudan's People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-North) that has positioned itself as part of a broader Sudanese pro-democracy movement. Their history of constructive participation in peace talks, whether at international or local levels, alongside efforts at building alliances with broader civic movements, make reformist movements highly viable candidates for negotiated political integration that can play a constructive role in long-term peacebuilding. Although at times organised as military organisations with sustained fighting capabilities, they also display traits resembling social and political movements or parties.

Proto-state actors operate with substantial territorial control and governance capacity. They often fulfil state-like functions, administer services, and command some level of local legitimacy. However, their strategic participation in peace talks varies, driven in part by their bargaining power and desire for formal recognition. Their political aspirations are tied to their political goals. For instance, proto-state actors that mobilise around a regional or ethnic identity, such as the PYD in the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria in Rojava, will be more likely to seek political settlements that preserve their hold on power. These actors pose complex challenges, as their political integration often requires constitutional or power-sharing changes that alter the existing state structure while maintaining their own hold on power. Proto-state actors will choose to seek political settlements on the basis of battleground logic and their own territorial and political achievements.

Opportunistic militias include loosely organised, often predatory actors with fluctuating alliances and minimal ideological commitments. While these groups typically lack long-term political goals, they may be co-opted or demobilised through localised security arrangements or disarmament programmes. Examples include the Janjaweed in Sudan, Dozo groups in Mali and Burkina Faso, and various tribal and paramilitary forces in Yemen and Colombia respectively.

Ideologically radical groups – such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and certain splinters of Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) – espouse rigid ideological positions and frequently engage in indiscriminate violence, especially after joining transnational jihadist networks that does not allow the armed group's local leadership on the inside of its power structures. There are often weak links between these groups and local communities. These groups generally reject negotiations to reach political settlements and tend to be excluded from peace processes due to proscription regulations. Their integration prospects are relatively low, at least at group level, and policy efforts typically focus on containment, counter-terrorism, and deradicalisation rather than political inclusion.

Nuances: Importantly, these categories are not rigid, as there is often overlap between group types. Reformist movements may evolve into proto-state actors as they establish territorial control and governance if the opportunity arises, for instance following advances on the battlefield or the withdrawal of state forces from regions. This was the case with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and the PYD in Rojava in Syria. Likewise, some proto-state actors can display radical ideological traits, such as ISIS during its territorial peak and the Taliban after its successful return to state control in Afghanistan in 2021. Even opportunistic militias can adopt ideological language or engage in governance if incentivised. Understanding these fluid boundaries is essential to avoid oversimplification and adapt policy responses as the groups evolve.

Table 1: Typology of armed groups and integration prospects

Group Type	Core Traits	Integration Prospects	Participation in Peace Talks	Examples
Reformist movements	Moderate ideology, broad popular support, sustained political engagement, organisationally diverse	High	Regular and constructive participation	PDFs / NUG (Myanmar), SPLM-N, al-Hilou faction (Sudan) MNLA (Tuareg, Sahel)
Proto-state actor	Holds territorial control, sustained governance, ideologically committed, centralised organisation Popular legitimacy reliant on type of governance	Medium to high	Often selective or strategic participation	PYD Rojava (Syria), Houthis (Yemen), Hezbollah (Lebanon), Arakan Army (AA) and Kachin Independence Army (KIA) (Myanmar)
Opportunistic militias	Shifting alliances, predatory behaviour, low ideology, fragmented organisational structure	Low	May be included in local agreements or disarmament deals	Sudanese Janjaweed, Dozo groups/militias (Mali / Burkina Faso), Colombian paramilitaries
Ideologically radical	Rigid ideology, indiscriminate violence, little local support, dispersed ideology	Very low	Typically excluded or reject participation	ISIS/Daesh, AQAP (Yemen), JNIM splinters (Sahel), ISIS-GS (Sahel)

9 Note that this is a descriptive typology that treats core traits as the primary analytical dimension from which both integration prospects and participation in peace talks are derived. Core traits are relatively stable characteristics of armed groups that condition their potential for integration into political structures. Groups may engage in negotiations without necessarily possessing high integration prospects and vice versa.

Recommendations to support the political integration of armed groups

...whether an armed group enters politics through a negotiated settlement, outright military victory, or a hybrid pathway, its prospects for sustainable political transformation are heavily shaped by its wartime characteristics, organisational capacity, and legitimacy among prospective constituents.

The political integration of armed groups remains one of the most complex yet decisive elements in how post-war political orders are shaped. As this discussion paper has demonstrated, whether an armed group enters politics through a negotiated settlement, outright military victory, or a hybrid pathway, its prospects for sustainable political transformation are heavily shaped by its wartime characteristics, organisational capacity, and legitimacy among prospective constituents. As research has highlighted, achieving enduring stability requires armed actors to transform wartime authority into inclusive political legitimacy. The experience of groups ranging from the ANC in South Africa to the RPF in Rwanda underscores both the opportunities and perils of such transformations: while some cases demonstrate that rebel movements can become stable state-builders, others reveal how authoritarian legacies or weak institutionalisation can entrench or renew conflict.

Contemporary conflict environments complicate these processes further. The fragmentation of armed movements, internationalisation of wars, and decline of prospects for mediated peace processes weaken the traditional frameworks for political integration. In contexts such as Myanmar and the Sahel, the coexistence of multiple armed actors and external patrons generates fluid and unstable political orders in which integration is less about formal settlements and more about ongoing negotiation, accommodation, or exclusion. This marks a departure from the liberal peace paradigm that dominated much of the post-Cold War era and calls for a recalibration of scholarly and policy approaches alike. It also highlights that while wartime victories may provide an armed group with immediate political authority, the sustainability of its rule depends on its capacity to manage coalitions, accommodate rivals, and engage with wider populations.

Ultimately, despite the unravelling of familiar frameworks, it is still possible to discern specific mechanisms that can revitalise opportunities for peace. As is well documented, armed groups' successful pathways towards peace will not emerge from one-size-fits-all prescriptions but rather from carefully tailored strategies that account for their ideological, organisational, and relational characteristics, as well as the broader (geo)political environment in which they operate. Supporting transitions from armed struggle to political participation requires balancing pragmatism with principles – engaging even difficult actors, when necessary, while simultaneously upholding norms of inclusivity, accountability, and human rights.

Syria is a highly relevant case in point: the HTS takeover illustrates both the risks and opportunities of rebel victory. While the HTS's governance capacity and consolidation of power may enable a functioning post-war political order, it will be its ability to adapt ideological orientation, secure popular and broad-based political legitimacy, and engage with rival actors – some of whom remain armed – that will determine whether Syria moves towards peace or prolonged instability. In this regard, several lessons can be learned from previous historical cases of victors' peace, especially those in which the armed groups sustained political victories. Importantly, it is unrealistic to expect a group such as the HTS to transform immediately into a pluralist political actor. What we know from comparative research on armed groups' political integration over time, is that support for incremental reform can be an important avenue. In cases of rebel victories, this could include expanding civilian representation in local governance, introducing gradual security sector reforms, and enabling limited political competition at municipal levels. In conclusion, deducting from the typology and discussion,

the following policy recommendations can help both international and local peacebuilding practitioners to support the political integration of armed groups:

1. **Differentiate engagement strategies by group type**
    - Develop policy responses tailored to the type of armed group (reformist, proto-state, ideological, opportunistic). For instance, reformist groups may benefit from institutional inclusion and electoral support, while proto-state actors may require negotiated autonomy or federal arrangements. Radical ideological groups may demand containment, while opportunistic militias may be co-opted through local security or economic incentives.

2. **Encourage and facilitate broad-based movements and coalition-building**
    - Encourage political settlements and governance structures that are inclusive of multiple actors, including the armed groups themselves.
    - Work with armed groups to identify bridge-builders, i.e. those actors likely to seek to build coalitions and alliances and engage with competing factions.

3. **Identify and address specific wartime governance legacies of the armed groups**
    - Recognise and engage with wartime governance practices of armed groups rather than attempting to erase them. Where feasible, integrate existing administrative structures into formal institutions, especially at sub-regional levels, to avoid governance vacuums.

4. **Differentiate between agendas of international actors and the armed groups themselves**
    - As international involvement can be temporary, lay the groundwork for longer-term engagement through connecting with armed actors on the ground.

5. **Strengthen local peace infrastructure, including those of armed groups**
    - Build capacity for local mediation, reconciliation, and community-based governance initiatives to complement national-level political integration and prevent relapse into conflict.
    - Recognise capacity within armed groups to lead peace efforts – such as political offices, allied social and political groups, and diplomatic fronts – and support these actors' initiatives.

6. **Adopt a long-term, sequenced approach**
    - Recognise that political integration is a gradual process. Support incremental measures – such as local ceasefires, joint governance arrangements, and phased demobilisation – before expecting full party institutionalisation. Support armed groups' political integration as part of general demobilisation efforts.

Abbreviations

AA – Arakan Army (Myanmar)

ANC – African National Congress

AQAP – Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

DDR – disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration

DRC – Democratic Republic of Congo

EPRDF – Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democracy Front

ERO – ethnic resistance organisation (Myanmar)

FARC – Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

FMLN – Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (El Salvador)

Fretilin – Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (Timor Leste)

HTS – Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

IRA – Irish Republican Army

ISIS – Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

ISIS GS – Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

JNIM – Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin

KIA – Kachin Independence Army (Myanmar)

KLA – Kosovo Liberation Army (Kosovo)

MILF – Moro Islamic Liberation Front

MNLA – National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Tuareg – Sahel)

NUG – National Unity Government (Myanmar)

PYD – Party of Democratic Union (Rojava, Syria)

SPLM-N – Sudan People's Liberation Movement – North

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