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The Role of Former Combatants in Preventing Youth Involvement in Terrorism in Northern Ireland: A Framework for Assessing Former Islamic State Combatants

The article engages with emerging debates on the potential role returning Islamic State fighters may have in preventing violence and whether non-violent radical ideology acts as a conveyor-belt or firewall to violence. Rather than focusing on former combatant ideologies, it demonstrates how framing processes – not ideology per se – are more salient indicators of whether former combatants will act as conveyor-belts or firewalls to violence. The analytical framework developed for analysing framing processes is then applied to the case of Northern Ireland. It argues that ideology shapes and constrains the type of anti-violence framing which may emerge, which provides a middle ground between the two perspectives in the literature. Furthermore, the article highlights the importance of network structures, incentives and opportunities insofar as these can shape anti-violence framing and improve resonance among audience. While recognising the differences between cases, the framework is then used to argue that former Islamic State combatants can play a preventative role depending on whether their anti-violence framing is based on durable structural conditions, de-glamourises violence and is supported by networks which incentivise its diffusion - not on whether they have denounced their ideology.

The number of Europeans who have travelled to join Islamic State and the (potential) number of fighters returning to their home countries has prompted two interlinked debates on former combatants and returning foreign fighters. The first debate has focused on whether Islamic State fighters pose a threat upon their return and the second debate has focused on how to reintegrate former combatants to reduce the risk of recidivism and utilise them in preventing others from joining Islamic State.[1] In terms of whether they pose a threat, the emerging research is demonstrating that former combatants should not be solely securitised and thus allowed to return: past empirical data demonstrates that returning foreign fighters are less likely to engage in violence upon their return on the whole[2] and that they can provide a valuable source of intelligence in an area where European governments are weak.[3] In addition, most incidents of "Islamic State-inspired terrorism" has been carried out by people who have stayed in Europe

and not foreign fighters,[4] which further underpins the case that returning foreign fighters are not the main source of threat but can either play a role in spreading radical ideas,[5] or conversely, they may in fact be a solution to preventing terrorism within Europe or Europeans travelling to join Islamic State.[6] Thus the debate is gradually shifting toward how to best reintegrate former combatants through a number of pathways – such as imprisonment, psychological care and community services.[7] The one underexplored pathway[8] this article focuses on is through utilising former Islamic State combatants (or defectors) to prevent others from engaging in such activity, such as amplifying defector narratives.[9] However this argument that former combatants can be used as a 'firewall' – preventing others from engaging in violence - is problematised by the 'conveyor-belt' perspective, which has highlighted how Islamist ideology can act as a 'conveyor-belt' to engaging in violence.[10] Thus even if returning foreign fighters oppose violence, they can encourage others to engage in violence by holding on to a radical ideology – indeed, this perspective is enshrined in UK counter-terrorism strategy. This article engages with and reconciles these two debates by developing a framework to explore what role former combatants and their narratives can play in preventing others engaging in violence.

Most research informing this debate has drawn on cases throughout Europe, but the following article draws upon research on the role of former combatants in Northern Ireland to develop a framework which could be applied to Islamists. The Northern Irish context is explored primarily because of a) the vibrant number of former combatant organisations who profess to be non-violent but still ideologically committed to their original goals, b) former combatants have been involved in conflict transformation work for a longer period, learning and adapting as they engage with young people, and c) how the state in Northern Ireland engaged with this constituency more openly than the approach with Islamists under the current incarnation of Prevent. Former combatants in the Northern Irish context refer to those who were members of paramilitary organisations such as the Provisional IRA, the Irish National Liberation Army or the Ulster Defence Association. Often, 'former' can be quite ambiguously applied considering how many of these organisations continue to exist as informal social networks but nevertheless this constituency is perceived to have been involved in the conflict as combatants. While this article is not intended as a comparative study – recognising the obvious differences with Islamic State former combatants - the contribution stems from how the Northern Irish context corroborates and challenges some of the concepts and assumptions that underpin the 'British debate'. The approach utilised in the paper explain processes which are by and large applicable in a number of cases and are more effective at highlighting nuanced

differences in them – hence why the application of social movement theories has not been restricted to one type of movement.

The first section of the article contextualises the debate in the literature on former combatants more broadly, and then expands upon the 'conveyor-belt' perspective which problematizes the utilisation of former combatants. Then, the article outlines the framing approach it adopts to engage with these two debates, which is applied to the Northern Ireland case in two empirical sections. The first main argument critiques the notion of the 'conveyor-belt perspective', highlighting the processes and constraints former combatants face in constructing and re-constructing anti-violence narratives. The second main argument focuses on the preventative role of former combatants in Northern Ireland, demonstrating how anti-violence narratives were diffused through networks which helped them to resonate with young people. The framework developed to inform this argument is then advanced to identify what role former Islamic State combatants may have in preventing violence and whether or not they can or should be utilised.

Former Combatants: Reintegration and Utilisation

The prospect of the Europeans who joined Islamic State returning has prompted a range of differing initiatives on how to respond to returning former combatants, as outlined above. One emerging perspective has emphasised how former combatants can play a preventative role too, with former MI5 and MI6 chief, Richard Barrett, arguing that they can help explain 'why going to fight abroad is a bad idea' and that ex-extremists are often the most successful at 'undermining the terrorist narrative'. The ability to use extremists who 'renounce violence' and are 'genuinely remorseful', according to this perspective, can provide a credible and persuasive message to stop the flow of people engaging in IS-related terrorism.[11] Neumann argues that Islamic State defector narratives can encourage others to leave the group and deter others from joining on the basis of their experience and credibility. Subsequently, he recommends that the UK government needs to provide defectors the opportunity to speak out, assist them in their resettlement, and to remove legal disincentives that prevent them going public.[12] These arguments have a precedent more broadly: research in conflict studies has shown that former combatants can have a role in preventing violence. While this research has focused on re-integrating (former) combatants back into society within which they were militarily active, the fluid conflict boundaries for IS fighters weakens the distinction between internal former

combatants and external former combatants. Furthermore, as will be shown, the blurred distinction between former combatants and active combatants – whether at least in the mind of the individuals themselves – in the cases looked at in conflict studies and potentially for some returning Islamic State combatants,[13] further underlines the benefit of drawing on literature on former combatants even if the term conflict does not necessarily apply to the UK experience.

The successful demobilisation, repatriation, resettlement and reintegration of former combatants is crucial in post-conflict reconstruction and reducing the risk of re-engagement in violence.[14] In addition to being an object of prevention themselves, former combatants have played a much more active role too. Building on their experience and past connections, former combatants in Northern Ireland have a privileged role in engaging with paramilitaries and encouraging their involvement in conflict transformation efforts, such as restorative justice, discouraging youth recruitment or de-militarising communities.[15] Former combatants have also played a role in reducing inter-communal violence in areas where policing may have less penetration and they have actively sought to dispel potentially inflammatory rumours by establishing local intra-community networks.[16] Furthermore, as will be explored in this paper in more depth, recent research shows how former combatants have engaged in dialogue with young people to demystify conflict in both Serbia and Northern Ireland with positive results.[17]

However, given one of the key benefits of utilising former combatants is that they often play a gatekeeper role in their communities, there is a risk that utilising them reinforces their power and influence, which may not be entirely welcomed by the community, and that it undermines democracy and state legitimacy.[18] Furthermore, the utilisation of former combatants can often be emotionally difficult for victims in the conflict, especially when they have been a part of early release from prison or a reintegration programme is perceived to provide benefits.[19] Perhaps more problematic in the case of former combatants from Islamic State returning to the UK, former combatants involved in transitions away from violence often do so without the dropping of key ideological goals and interpretations and/or it is difficult to ascertain whether their changed motivations are genuine or not.[20] Indeed, it is at this juncture where the debate on the role of former combatants intersects with that on the role of those holding non-violent radical/extreme ideologies acting as a factor which causes others to engage in terrorism and political violence. This raises the question of whether utilising former combatants would be counter-productive even if they oppose violence, as they can inadvertently encourage people they engage with to support violence.

Former Combatants, Prevent and Radicalisation: Conveyor-belt or Firewall?

Schmid identifies an emerging 'British debate' at an academic and policy level on whether non-violent extreme ideology acts as a conveyor-belt to or a firewall against violent radicalisation. The pre-2010 Prevent strategy was guided by the view within government and the police force that 'only non-violent radicals – otherwise known as political Islamists – possess the necessary "street-cred" to control young angry Muslims'.[21] One of the most notable examples was the utilisation of Islamists and Salafists in London to challenge the violent extremists who had previously dominated the Finsbury Park mosque and in Brixton.[22] Other aspects of the approach funded organisations such as STREET, which consisted of ex-Jihadists at a community level. Since a change in government since 2010, this perspective has been critiqued, prompting the development of the new Prevent strategy.

Much of the criticism of using non-violent radicals as a preventative mechanism is based on perceived problems of intersectionality. Maher and Frampton's criticism is based on their view that utilising non-violent radicals as part of Prevent empowered reactionaries within the Muslim community who indoctrinate young people with an ideology of hostility to Western values – as stated above, this is a similar criticism made against empowering former combatants in conflict transformation. At a practical level, the policy had been criticised for embracing sectarian partners, some of whom 'preached an incendiary message against the West, women and homosexuals'.[23] Maher and Frampton question who constitutes a real community leader, challenging the notion that the only community gatekeepers who have credibility and legitimacy are non-violent radicals. Other criticisms from this perspective are also based on efficacy as a preventative mechanism, where non-violent radical ideology is argued to in fact be a conveyor belt to terrorism, with Maher and Frampton arguing that the links between non-violent and violent extremism were underplayed in official security reports. Furthermore, the former Dutch Deputy National Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism stated that "for most of the known Dutch terrorists, the non-violent variety of Salafism was the first step towards acceptance of jihadists Salafism",[24] despite Salafist groups in the UK and Netherlands being vocally opposed to the use of violence.[25] Thus, the UK government's Prevent strategy has shifted to reflect this conveyor-belt perspective, which can be summed up as: 'intervention providers must not have extremist beliefs' and yet' 'they must have credibility' and be 'able to reach and relate to' those who are thought to be moving towards terrorism.[26]

Yet despite the UK government adopting the conveyor-belt perspective, the debate is by no means settled, with Horgan arguing that 'the idea that the adoption of radical ideas causes terrorism is perhaps the greatest myth alive today in terrorism research'.[27] Neumann's call for utilising defector narratives is made in the context of acknowledging that they have not abandoned their ideas that led them to join – yet this point is not reconciled with Maher and Frampton's on the conveyor-belt effect.[28] Furthermore, Richards questions the (lack of) evidence on 'how effective 'non-extremist' interveners are in comparison to 'extremist' ones, and to what extent, if at all, the exclusion of the latter helps or hinders what should surely be the primary goal of counterterrorism – preventing acts of terrorism'.[29] While this debate has primarily focused on the influence of groups and individuals within the UK, it is also highly pertinent with regard to returning former combatants and any potential preventative role they may play, or that is missed out.

Therefore, one perspective in the debate – when applied to the role of former combatants – emphasises their ideological commitment being problematic insofar as it can act as a conveyor-belt for others to engage in violence and can challenge the state in non-violent ways; enshrined in UK policy. Thus, utilising former combatants would be problematic and risky, or at least former combatants would be unable to access resources under Prevent. The other perspective places greater value on their narratives, which could allow a greater role for utilising former combatants, yet the nature this would take is unclear. For example, a more minimalist utilisation of narratives (i.e. dependent on ideological change) by the government may lack the same credibility and penetration to the 'hard to reach areas' where people are more likely to be attracted to Islamic State, and as stated above, a maximalist utilisation of narratives in-person (i.e. no focus on ideological change) is restricted by Prevent legislation. To overcome some of these tensions, the article approaches this debate from the perspective of framing, which places greater emphasis on the processes by which narratives – or frames – are diffused by actors and what factors ensure they resonate with a target audience. In other words, a framing approach can provide new insights into the potential role of former combatants in constructing anti-violence narratives that are accepted.

A Framing Approach

While Schmid focuses on ideology,[30] Richards focuses on attitudes toward violence as opposed to ideology,[31] and Neumann highlights how the narratives of Islamic State defectors

could play a preventative role,[32] the following article takes a framing approach. A frame denotes a schema of interpretation which functions to organise experience and guide action, whether individual or collective.[33] The elements of a frame include social goals, norms, and beliefs of the perceived influence or expected sanctions.[34] The added theoretical value of approaching this problem from a framing approach is its emphasis on the social process by which framings a) are constructed in relation to ideology and political opportunity structures and b) how they resonate with target audiences. The framing approach traces processes of interaction between ideas, their (re)construction and their reception, which encapsulates the causal influence more accurately and with greater nuance. Firstly, a group's framing of violence is shaped and constrained by its ideology and pre-existing belief systems. Crucially however, rather than viewing this process as being deterministic, the framing approach provides greater agency, showing how actors can construct meaning and representations of violence in a creative way. Thus, a key aspect of using the framing approach is identifying and explaining the processes of change (i.e. how and why representations of violence develop over time), rather than assuming that certain ideologies will determine behaviour uniformly and consistently. Secondly, the framing approach provides a better account of the causal role of framings of ideology by focusing on the social processes whereby a frame resonates with an audience. The article's exposition of what ensures frame resonance provides a contribution to emerging research on counter-narratives[35] by placing greater attention on audience attitudes and structural factors which make a framing – or narrative – persuasive.

To that effect, the article identifies 1) how former combatants frame violence and 2) the extent to which a target audience accepts and adopts this frame, and more interestingly, how they (mis)interpret it. The article argues that there are three factors which are important for a frame resonating with a target audience: credibility, network linkages and narrative fidelity.[36] In order for a frame to resonate with an audience, those articulating the frame must be perceived to have credibility, determined by the status and expertise of the articulator,[37] and since this has been highlighted as important in the former combatant debate, [38] the article focuses on under-explored aspects of frame resonance. In the framing literature, linkages to spread a frame are taken as a given, but the illicit nature of groups engaged in terrorism has an impact upon the shape and dynamics of networks that link the movement together – thus, the type of network linkages are also important for frame resonance as a category of analysis in its own right as they can shape and amplify framing processes. Narrative fidelity refers to the extent a frame resonates with the targets' pre-existing attitudinal, ideological and cultural

beliefs.[39] As will be shown, the need to maintain narrative fidelity constrains and shapes how actors frame violence, thus providing a degree of structure to framings that a focus on narratives may not highlight and does not necessarily fit within categories of ideology. Consequently, the article identifies framing types, which it theorises have different risks of functioning as a conveyor-belt or firewall. Two frame types are explored: 1) opportunity-based framings – when violence is de-legitimised or opposed for tactical reasons or efficacy; and 2) (conditional) structurally-based framings – when violence is de-legitimised or opposed because the initial motivations or causes have experienced a durable change; This does not preclude the existence of (unconditional) morally-based framings, which has similarities with Schmid's observation of 'not-violent ideologies',[40] however these tend to be minority framings by former combatants.[41] The article also highlights the use of bridging frames, which are situated between two dominant framings and seek to link actor's beliefs from one to the other.

In summary, a framing approach provides an original contribution to this emerging debate insofar as it occupies an intermediary position between approaches that take ideology and narratives as units of analysis, explaining the interaction between the two and the role of structure and agency in this process. This approach can help inform debates on what role former combatants can play in preventing violence; to that effect, the article applies it to the case of Northern Ireland to illustrate the approach as a framework for further analysis. The paper then utilises this framework to discuss the contested role returning Islamic State combatants can play.

Conveyor-Belt or Firewall: Developing a Framework from the Provisional IRA's Disengagement

One potential obstacle for utilising former combatants to prevent violence is that their sustained ideological commitment may encourage others to engage in violence, even if this was not the intention of the former combatant. A key problem with the conveyor belt perspective is that it underplays the extent to which organisations will not want young members to leave to join violent radical groups and, especially insofar as it challenges their claims to radicalism and threatens their interests. The challenge that groups have is to construct a frame which resonates with young members to maintain their participation and prevent involvement in violence. Subsequently, when a group's framing is having a conveyor-belt effect, they can reflect upon this and engage in a process of frame reconstruction. There are a number of

difficulties in this process, namely that they will need to maintain narrative fidelity to their pre-existing frame – this can be problematic insofar as a group will be limited in how it opposes violence in order to maintain a logical coherence to its ideology and identity. Yet the constraints in the extent a group opposes violence, however small, can still be effective in resonating with young people where ideological consistency needs to be maintained. The contribution to the framing approach in this point is twofold: it breaks up ideological boxes which guide counterterrorism, and it outlines the processes of change which can inform intervention.

Firstly, in the case of Northern Ireland, the ideological distinction is often made between physical force republicanism and constitutional republicanism/nationalism, which broadly masks on to the violent/non-violent radical ideology cleavage with regard to Islamists. Yet subordinate to republican ideology are multiple framings of violence which cross-cut the violent/non-violent dichotomy [42] – it is this nuance and pluralism of framings which problematise using ideological criteria to identify which one poses a risk of acting as a conveyor belt, because it obfuscates the differences. Thus, rather than using ideological criteria imposed top-down, identifying the framing processes provides a better indicator of whether a group's ideology may have a conveyor-belt effect or not. Secondly, while framings of violence generally coalesce around specific organisations, as will be shown, the process of frame construction for the Provisional IRA meant at times there were multiple co-existing (and competing) frames in the earlier stages of the process, which later developed into a more dominant framing of violence. Furthermore, as former combatant networks developed to break down traditional organisational boundaries, it became possible to identify a frame diffusing to constitute a broader, shared understanding within society. To make this point, the article firstly outlines the trajectory of how violence was framed (in the context of stopping/preventing it) within the Provisional IRA as it embarked on the peace process, from the late 1980s to the 2000s; it then assesses the extent to which these multiple framings had a conveyor-belt dynamic for young people.

As Sinn Fein and the Provisional IRA moved away from using violence toward a political strategy, the movement sought to reframe violence (or armed struggle) over the period of the late 1980s to 2000s. Over this period, two new framings of violence were constructed: a conditional structure-based framing (the master frame), and a modification of the traditional opportunity-based framing which functioned as a bridging frame). These two frames began to gradually develop in the prisons in the 1980s where the move away from using violence was justified because of the diminishing utility of violence and on the basis that the social and

political conditions had changed (or at least, were in the process of changing). However in the early stages of the new master frame's construction, this frame did not resonate with swathes of the movement, therefore a bridging frame was constructed – epitomised by the Tactical Use of Armed Struggle slogan prevalent at the time. TUAS framed disengagement as a piecemeal process to extract concessions which can be reversed whenever one wanted, thus making the move away from violence seem disingenuous to outsiders. Thus, while some Provisional IRA members framed violence tactically, it provided a bridge to the condition-based framing because it extended traditional Republican framings by accepting the process of concession-making. Furthermore, organisational commitment (i.e. norms and incentives associated with being part of a social network) and the time lapse in the peace process worked to make reversal difficult.[43] The bridging frame a) structured members' transition from the traditional frame to accepting the master frame and b) by accepting it, it actually made disengagement difficult to reverse, meaning its significance gradually faded, or in other cases, disillusioned activists found it difficult to reintegrate with (dissident) groups who maintained adherence to traditional Republican framings of violence.[44] Thus, throughout the Provisional IRA's shift toward ending violence multiple framings of violence and disengagement were constructed, coalescing into a frame that opposed violence contingent on structural conditions – these did not correspond solely with Republican ideology and neither could they be simply reduced to narratives.

Thus today, the master frame within this movement bases anti-violence on structural conditions – namely, that there is a political route to a united Ireland and that the Catholic population have equality because of the new political system. Frame transformation was achieved by amplifying inequality and social exclusion in the 1960s as the justification for violence, rather than British imperialism or partition (which had always been the motivation of Republicanism, not inequality).[45] In other words, in this new master frame from the 1980s onwards, the justification and de-legitimisation of violence was temporally split (as opposed to being geographically-based): violence in the past conditions was necessary and legitimate; violence in the present conditions is unnecessary, illegitimate and irrational. This particular framing of violence was utilised because the 1990s cohort of the movement had shared experiences of the 1960s civil rights movement, it allowed them to maintain narrative fidelity to Republicanism and enabled them to make claims to credibility based on their experience during the conflict.[46] However, the adoption of this frame disincentives the de-legitimisation of past violence because the credibility of the frame and its articulators is based upon past violence. While this framing is based on structural conditions, as opposed to solely moral

values for example, it leads some to argue that in the context of Islamists, despite being non-violent, it can lead to support for violence. This does suggest that former combatant conditional framings in contexts such as Northern Ireland may be less likely to slip back into supporting violence due to relatively durable and stable structures, whereas for Islamists, the structural conditions for opposing violence may be more varied and unstable.

The application of a framing approach above has underlined the point that within a group, especially one making the transition from violent to non-violent, there can be multiple framings of violence which differ in terms of how to de/legitimise violence. Returning to the conveyor-belt argument, rather than identifying which ideology encourages terrorism, a framing approach provides greater nuance because it highlights how the competing narratives are structured in relation to ideology and provides a means of analysing different risks of recidivism within each of them. This can be seen in how young people interpret the master frame outlined above – while it was used to justify the Provisional IRA's move away from violence, the frame did not resonate with the same effect with younger people. Thus, what may be described as a non-violent (radical) ideology had both the effect of preventing violence and encouraging violence for different audiences, which emphasises the importance of the framing process beyond ideology or narratives on their own. As mentioned above, the dominant frame currently used by former combatants, especially from the Provisional IRA, was based on structural conditions, as exemplified by a quote from a former Provisional IRA combatant who works with young people:

> *The thing young people throw back at you is 'you done it, you fought the Brits and you did this and you did that'. And I say, 'yep, in them circumstances, where I was* growing up, the influences, the politics of the day and all of that stuff, that all *influenced me to respond in a certain way'. The next big question is, 'would you go back to it?' 'If I lived in the circumstances then, I would go back to it because* it is justified, because nobody has the right to treat me or my family like a second-*class citizen'…nobody has a right to deny me a job or treat me like dirt like the Orange Order or the Unionists did, and nobody again will, because what we've done is stop that, we have cut that off. Didn't achieve a united Ireland.* Still not *going to stop trying to achieve that, but it stopped that happening again….we have* created a level playing field to talk...[47]

Here we see the unique conditions of the 1960s being amplified as justifying violence – as opposed to Irish disunity and the British presence, which was how it was justified at the time. It maintains narrative fidelity by continuing to state the goals of Irish unity but it detaches violence as the means of achieving it by breaking the causal link between it, attaching it to structural conditions of inequality, which can now be claimed to have been removed through the movement's agency. Since logically it holds that violence in certain conditions is justified, it may be perceived to legitimise violence, and it is at this point that the diffusion of the frame to the younger generation has been problematic, because they could not relate to the experiences of former combatants and the older generation. Indeed, the former combatants began to recognise that what was a means to de-legitimise violence in the current context was having the opposite effect, thus potentially challenging their organisational goals of moving away from violence and gathering the support of young people. Former combatants in Northern Ireland accept that they have played a role in young people being attracted to violent groups however this should be seen in the context of limited inter-generational dialogue on the conflict within society more generally.[48] This serves "to further confuse young men's understanding of whether their society is at peace or preparing for war".[49] Despite being born after the ceasefires, young people spoke articulately of how the conflict was remembered and glorified by members of their communities: these members were viewed as heroes who defended and died for their beliefs, gaining respect, fear and status in their communities.[50] When former combatants engage with young people there is a tendency for them to talk about humorous stories or the 'good times' from their past involvement in the armed struggle and in prison.[51] One former INLA member commented further on this trend:

> *Some young people do believe they've missed out on the conflict, for whatever* reason. Part of that is we have recognised that the way we talk about the past in some social setting, you are talking about things and you make it sound adventurous, you make it sound fun and stuff like that. So young people are getting *this image in their head that it is some sort of adventure…we didn't realise it when* you were talking about the past that you were talking about it in a way that made it sound adventurous, which especially to young men would have been attractive. *That's why all armies recruit young men; they don't recruit forty year old men.*[52]

Therefore, in addition to receiving mixed messages from former combatants who are opposed to armed struggle, the combination of limited active framing of violence through social networks and a competitive framing environment encouraged attitudes supportive of violence among some young people. However Republican or Loyalist non-violent ideology is not acting as a conveyor belt toward violent radicalisation, rather it was the limited framing of experiences of violence. Building upon Morrison's argument that ideology is not the sole driver of youth recruitment, there exists a situation whereby young people perceive personal and social incentives such as status to become involved in violent activism,[53] and former combatants have played a role in this insofar as they glamourised violence. Of course, the framing that former combatants used incentivised the glamourisation of violence or their experiences in prisons because it was partly where they derived their credibility and legitimacy, or because it increased social bonds.[54] Yet it is important to underline how this was not necessarily intended, as is the case in the Islamist context, but more a result of young people having no reference point to understand the anti-violence framing that guided an end to the conflict. The mixed combination of glamourising conflict and the failure for some young people to buy in to the changed structural conditions provided motivation for them to continue supporting violence.

In sum, it is not the (radical) ideology which solely functions as a conveyor belt, and not even if it can be identified as violent or non-violent; in the Northern Irish case a framing was meant as non-violent was open to misinterpretation or did not resonate because of the lack of a reference point. Yet the article shows that the key to identifying when ideology may function as a conveyor belt is in the process of interplay between ideology and framings of violence. But it also shows how this is dynamic rather than static – actors can engage in processes of reframing, building upon and reinterpreting the ideology to discourage violence. This suggests that expecting former combatants to denounce violence regardless of conditions and to become pacifists may be unrealistic, especially if this is to be done on a large scale and to have credibility with young people. Of course, the entire point of the framing approach, as shown above by identifying the different types of framings, is that multiple framings with different degrees of conditionality can resonate with a wide range of audiences. In the case of former combatants who hold on to an Islamist ideology, it should not be taken as a given that such an ideology will inevitably have a conveyor-belt effect, and in fact doing so limits the scope of frame transformation which can better counter support for violence. The framing approach also

suggests that providing the space for reflection is important for former combatants but this is underpinned by having an organisational structure, interests, and processes of interaction with young people, which is explored further in the following section.

Former Combatants, Preventing Violence and Frame Resonance: the Importance of Network Linkages

The following section shows how former combatants sought to transform their framing of violence again, but aiming this at young people. However, given the focus on frame resonance, the section explores the network linkages that existed between former combatants and young people. Former combatants in Northern Ireland operate in a structure where the development of network linkages with young people is much more open than for Islamist groups, but more importantly, it provides greater incentives and means of facilitating former combatants to play a positive role in communities. Thus, before exploring the framing processes former combatants engaged young people with and the extent to which these resonated, the article outlines the structural context in which former combatants could develop network linkages. Once again, the article contends that network linkages are not only a means of communicating a frame, but also facilitate the development of interests, social norms and incentives which help a frame to resonate.

Just as groups with non-violent extremist ideologies are excluded from securing Prevent funding in the current UK context, similar arrangements were instituted in 1985 by the British government (the Hurd criteria) for funding allocation to community groups in Northern Ireland. Secretary of State Hurd stated that it was not in the interest of the public to aid groups that had sufficiently close links to paramilitary organisations because it would help further their standing in communities and further the goals of paramilitaries. [55] However by the 1990s, this legislation was quietly dropped, which has facilitated the proliferation of a range of community groups and projects which include paramilitaries and former combatants.[56] Unlike in the UK Prevent programme where projects were government-funded, much of the funding which former combatants accessed was through European Union Peace funding, and later from the Northern Irish assembly. The means of monitoring groups also has separation from the state in the Northern Irish context. Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland is responsible for reviewing these groups when deciding whether to grant them accreditation, which allows them to access funding from the Northern Irish government and the European Union. The assessment

is not judged on predetermined ideological grounds but based on a review of the organisation's activities, with pragmatism guiding border-line cases.[57] Furthermore, a key condition of the funding was it had a cross-community function, which at the very least helped to augment the development of networks between groups, such as the Prison to Peace programme. As will be explored below, a key feature of programmes such as the Prison to Peace school network was it incentivised participation and moderation, as it could filter out certain views deemed not suitable to the project. Thus, the structure in which former combatants operated – namely, by not pursuing a conveyor-belt logic – has been a key factor in allowing for anti-violence framings to emerge and resonate with young audiences.

In constructing a new framing for the younger generation, former combatants were constrained insofar as they could not de-legitimise past violence otherwise it would undermine their credibility and it would have been disingenuous to their beliefs. In other words, the ability to denounce violence is shaped and constrained by radical ideology to an extent, but as shown above, there is greater flexibility in amplifying certain aspects of an ideology in order to reframe violence. However for former combatants in Northern Ireland, past violence during the height of the conflict has continued to be legitimised, but the main innovation to this frame when interacting with young people now is to actively de-glamourise this experience and to make clearer how the structural conditions have changed (rather than taking this as experientially evident). Thus, according to Lesley Emerson, the narratives used by the former combatants do not delegitimise violence in the past.[58] When young people ask if the former combatant would do it again, they say 'yes'; the circumstances were entirely different then. The narratives are trying to emphasise the differences between then and now, which is built on identifying conditions like the presence of the army on the streets or how suspicion was a big factor that differentiated the context from now, and that now there is no need for violence.[59] A former INLA member demonstrates how this attempt to reframe violence for young people has been taken on by a broader range of former combatants too:

> When we recognised that that was part of the images that we were putting in *people's heads, along with the UDA over in the west Shankill area, in Highfield,* we got involved in a project that brought young people from their community and *our community. And we brought them into the prison…and stuff like that, and we* sat with them beforehand. We had meetings, workshops, and all we would have

talked about was the impact that prison had on you, the bad times in prison, the impact it had on your family - what it did to your family, and stuff like that. Try to counterbalance the narrative that we had been giving.[60]

One of the most important aspects of this re-framing exercise was its active, organised nature, whereby former combatants actively diffused it to young people through their own organisational networks, intra-community networks, and in a school setting. Reflecting a broader openness that exists in Northern Ireland,[61] one Sinn Fein youth member spoke about the accessibility to former combatants:

…[G]roups like Coiste will have events that we are invited to and young people go and speak to them. It's not just within Sinn Fein, it's a Republican thing. You can come in and talk to them, you can talk about stories in the past, you can talk about the future, you can talk about how they can go around the city in Unionist outreach.[62]

In each of these environments, the former combatants have been successful in relaying the de-glamourising frame. Crucially, in interviews with young Sinn Fein members, this framing of violence has resonated successfully. In the following quote, one youth member frames the past use of violence as a sacrifice made for their generation, and how the stories associated with glamourisation reinforce the respect for the sacrifice former combatants have made:

As young Republicans, we would have more respect for those dead and alive who devoted their lives to achieve a united Ireland and achieve where we are today, you know, living in a society that is equal for Catholics and Nationalists to live in. To *be honest, I love sitting down and listening to the stories, like the 'Great Escape'* and loads of different things. And you just sit in admiration you know. Yes, we would all be devoted Republicans, but they gave so much and to have them spend

life in jail as well. And they did it for us; they did it for this generation to live in a peaceful society.[63]

The quote above also further underlines the importance of narrative fidelity, whereby the framing enables the maintenance of a credible Republican identity by linking back to Republican traditions in the conflict, albeit with greater emphasis on Catholic discrimination in the 1960s and underplaying the British state as key part of being Republican. Other interviews further emphasised how young people interpreted the anti-violence frame. Their integration into Republican networks and regular interaction with former combatants helped them to draw a distinction between the positive stories of the past but how this was often to mask the hardship of being involved in violence. By seeing the use of violence as not being glamorous, but as a sacrifice, which increases their motivation to maintain the peace process and oppose the use of violence: "t*here is a peace process now and… after the stories they tell us and what they had to go through, and if that's good enough for them, then it's good enough for every one of us sitting in this room".*[64]

Reflecting that those who were at risk of engaging in violence would not necessarily be involved in groups such as Sinn Fein, former combatants have been engaging with young people in the community and in schools. For example, one former combatant youth worker discussed events he organised which allowed young people to meet former British soldiers and PSNI officers. At the meeting with the PSNI, the 102 young people from both communities who had attended reported a substantial increase in respect of police. At such events, former combatants challenged young people on attacking police and have sought to help the PSNI improve policing with young people to prevent them pushing them toward dissident groups.[65] The Prisoner to Peace project – a consortium of former combatant groups and other community partners – has had particular success within schools.[66]

The project, led by Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, involved a number of ex-prisoner organisations such as Coiste na n-larchimi, Teach na Failte, Lisburn Prisoners' Support Project, An Eochair, and EPIC. These organisations represent, respectively, the Provisional IRA, the INLA, the UDA and Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), the Official IRA, and the UVF. The format of the intervention involved visits by former combatants into the classroom and a teaching guide which presented their narratives, which encapsulates the framings of violence set out above – emphasising structural conditions and de-glamourisation.

The Prison to Peace school programme involved 864 young people aged 14-17 years old, most from 14 post-primary school settings across Northern Ireland. Schools selected in the programme were broadly representative, from urban, rural, mixed schools, Catholic schools, in rich and poor areas.[67]

A review of the programme has shown that it has boosted young people's understanding of the peace process, opposition to violence, increased inter-generational dialogue, and in one reported incident, discouraged one student who was supportive of paramilitary activity. McEvoy's study argued that greater experience of the conflict among young people meant they were more inclined to be involved in peacebuilding,[68] and the school programme helps to expand this beyond areas such as West Belfast which McEvoy's research was based on. Greater support for the peace process through more experience with the conflict is important because of the degree of investment in the process among young people, and perception of political efficacy, will influence whether they will use the ballot box or whether they will turn to violence (political or otherwise).[69] In addition to increasing their knowledge of the conflict, the narrative fidelity to 'being Loyalist and Republican', which is maintained through the disengagement frame, resonates with the identities of the students:

> The findings from the project suggest that children are responding positvely. They are coming out more hopeful and more confident about the peace process because of the discussion with combatants. The reason why is the children can see that they are still Loyalists and Republicans despite opposing violence. They also recognise that you can still maintain the same goals of the identity. It is more realistic because the project acknowledges identities and perspectives, rather than trying to impose a middle-*class 'Northern Irish' identity on somewhere it doesn't exist. The current* school policy legitimises some political identities and delegitimises others - Loyalists and Republicans are portrayed as sectarian, which marginalises the working class.[70]

The programme recently released a report which reviewed the effects of the Prison to Peace programme on the attitudes of young people. The findings of the study compares the schools pre-test and post-test with a control group which was not involved in the programme. The programme led to a ten percent increase in those who believed there will be a permanent

peace in Northern Ireland. Crucially, the programme also led to an increase in trust for the police by 10% among the students involved in the programme, while the control group experienced a small decline in trust. The programme results show that young people in the programme have a much greater understanding of the causes of the conflict, which resonates with the Provisional IRA's disengagement frame's emphasis on civil rights (3.3% to 10% increase) and disagreement over politics and national identity (11.6% to 22.5%), while blaming the other side for causing the conflict declined from 15.3 to 7.1%. Finally, the report shows that students in the programme are more likely to support non-violence and the qualitative feedback corroborates the argument that exposure to former combatants' de-glamourising their own involvement led young people to understand the consequences of becoming involved in dissident groups.[71]

To conclude, the framing approach has been applied to show the process by which groups draw upon ideology to construct representations of violence. In this case, former combatants recognised how the manner in which they had framed violence in the post-conflict context did not communicate well with the younger generation. Indeed, this is a problem that Islamist groups who oppose violence face too, yet the article has shown that it is not about the extent a group's ideology is radical, extreme or overlaps with the ideology of violent groups, but rather it depends on the extent their framing of violence resonates with young people. The former combatants in the Northern Irish context were particularly adept at transforming their frame for the younger audiences, amplifying further the structural conditions that had changed (albeit in a different way from how this was presented to their own members in the early 1990s) and by actively de-glamourising violence. Attempts by the former combatants, the project or indeed even the government, to actively de-legitimise the use of violence in the past would have removed the credibility that helped the frame to resonate. Crucially, successful frame resonance was facilitated by an environment which allowed network linkages to develop, however these were not necessarily the same as allowing groups to operate as normal (i.e. with organisational interests at heart). Instead, the accreditation process, funding, and the shape of projects incentivised a managed dialogue between former combatants and young people which aided the framing process and subsequent changes in attitudes toward violence.

Discussion: The Role of Former Combatants in Preventing Violence

The article focused on a) what role do former combatants have in preventing terrorism in terms of challenging its ideology and narratives; and b) on the question of whether non-violent radical/extreme ideology causes terrorism. Former combatants have played a role in preventing violence in a number of ways: from working within their own constituency to reduce the risk of recidivism, to actively preventing violence erupting on the street. The article has focused on their preventative role in terms of ideology and in discouraging young people from adopting attitudes which may facilitate their involvement in violence. Yet the article has been situated from the start in a wider debate that revolves around the extent non-violent radical ideology can actually cause terrorism. Indeed, such assumptions that those who hold an Islamist ideology should not be utilised to prevent terrorism has significant implications considering the prospect of over hundreds of former Islamic State combatants returning to the UK. While the article has recognised how the differences in these two contexts also reflects in how the role of these former combatants will be different, at the core of the article has been an aim to not overplay the differences by focusing too much on a static, politicised notion of 'extreme/radical' ideology. Furthermore, rather than using categories of 'extreme/radical' ideology to identify whether a group will have a conveyor-belt effect, the article emphasises how it is the framing process – or the lack thereof – which is more salient.

The article has focused on the importance of two dimensions of the framing process which are important for shaping the extent a group's ideology will act as a firewall or conveyor-belt to violence. First is how a group frames violence and how this resonates and is interpreted by different audiences rather than the ideology per se – the need to maintain narrative fidelity leads to the construction of different frame types, which provides the conveyor belt-firewall dynamic. Second is the shape of network linkages between the groups and their audience and the time and space groups have to reconstruct framings, and also the incentives they have to do so.

Frame Types and Narrative Fidelity

One lesson from Northern Ireland is that framing of violence is often conditional, just as Schmid argues that it is with Islamists. Importantly, conditional framings of violence are much more nuanced and varied, and viewing them as homogenously dangerous – as the conveyor-belt perspective does - can obfuscate the differences which can be crucial for producing the firewall effect as opposed to the conveyor-belt effect. Indeed, this is the main

contribution of applying a framing approach – it can open up the ideological box to analyse how different Islamist groups frame violence and which frame type can best play a preventative role. The main difference between the Islamist context and the Northern Irish context is that the conditional framing of violence is based on relatively durable, geographically defined structures (i.e. the changing political, social and economic conditions in Northern Ireland) whereas for Islamists there is much greater heterogeneity in terms of structural conditions which may or may not legitimise violence (i.e. Palestine, Syria and Iraq). In this sense, conditional framings that oppose violence in Northern Ireland have much less complexity or competition, and young people's experience of the social environment in Northern Ireland provide credibility to framings that violence has little utility in the context. Therefore, more pragmatic framings of anti-violence in this context will be less likely to produce a conveyor-belt effect, and where it does, de-glamorisation has been the primary goal of frame transformation rather than trying to de-legitimise the use of violence on a moral basis. Applying this to Islamists, pragmatic framings of anti-violence (such as by the Dutch Salafists) may tend to function more greatly as a conveyor-belt because the basis of conditionality is structurally more diverse and unstable. Implicitly recognising this, one senior British counter-terrorism official commented how he was content with young people to discuss the use of violence as a legitimate means in the Palestinian context, for as long as they de-legitimised it in the British context. Even when this may threaten UK interests abroad, or there is a prospect of returning fighters, it still remains unclear the extent this conditionality broadens (i.e. returnees viewing the UK as a legitimate target) and it only underlines the need to strengthen framings of violence which oppose violence in the UK context to increase resilience to frame competition.

Network Linkages, Space and Incentives

While the article highlights systematic attempts by networks and organisations to reframe violence to prevent youth involvement, the process of frame transformation was not inevitable. As it has been stated, organisational interests – promoting their (non-violent) objectives, recruiting new members and competing with rivals – incentivises groups to reflect on how violence is framed, yet there must be broader incentives that ensure re-framing is anti-violence and that it resonates. Frame transformation emerged as a result of interaction between former combatants and young people, time to reflect on what worked and what did not, and funding which facilitated and incentivised groups/individuals to engage in such activities.

In discussing what role former combatants from Islamic State could play, it has been mentioned they may have a role in de-glamorising violence, yet it is unclear by what means this would be done. The findings of this article would emphasise the need for some organisational or network structure to best utilise this potential role with incentivising sources of funding and monitoring/accreditation – as shown in the Northern Irish case. However, the way in which Prevent is currently set up to emphasise the expression of a top-down state/government identity, whereas in Northern Ireland the only stipulation in this regard was that projects were cross-community based, thus strengthening alternative Republican/Loyalist identities reflected which existed at the community level. A wide range of studies have shown that programmes focused on building value complexity among individuals, which seeks to promote an understanding in how others prioritise different human values (such as equality, tradition, security), can be successful in reducing support for violence.[72] In a less coherent manner, former combatant activities in Northern Ireland have had a similar effect of helping communities understand the value priorities of the 'other', and the former combatant networks have been pivotal in this regard. Thus, Prevent in its current form limits the processes by which former combatants played an active role in Northern Ireland.

The aim of the article has been to build upon theories and empirical cases to contribute to debates on preventing Islamic State-inspired terrorism by utilising former combatants – in this sense, it has provided a framework of analysis to challenge some key assumptions in the literature. Nevertheless, there are clear limitations to this article insofar as there are limited data specifically on former Islamic State combatants and that Northern Ireland is no substitute, yet this does not undermine the validity and rigour of the findings since the focus here is on the processes.

The utilisation of Islamic State former combatants may be criticised because, in contrast to the Northern Irish case, there is a lack of supply and demand – a lack of supply of former combatants to be effective in preventing terrorism, and a lack of demand from local Muslim community leaders who may fear they (and their less radical views and understandings of Islam) may be challenged. Unlike Northern Irish former combatants who have already established themselves in local networks, Islamic State former combatants would be returning to pre-existing community networks which would most likely resist them. However, once again it is the process of former combatant experiences – i.e. the causal influence of network types – rather than the content of the two cases, where the article draws lessons. In cases where there is community push-back against reintegrating former combatants, the risk is that it strengthens

former combatant networks, as often happens – in this scenario, the article's conclusions would emphasise the importance of co-opting such networks to target individuals in communities that the pre-established community networks have difficulty penetrating. Finally, in terms of there being a lack of supply of former combatants to be effective at prevention, this point actually strengthens the article's argument. If the conveyor-belt perspective is the frame of reference of utilising former combatants, the supply would be much lower given the tendency of former combatants to maintain their (extreme) views. Utilising former combatants on the basis of their anti-violence frames is what increases the potential supply of former combatants who can play a role in preventing terrorism.

Conclusion

In Northern Ireland, former combatants have played an important role and with signs of success, as shown in the Prison to Peace intervention in schools. However, the radicalness or extremeness of their ideology was not necessarily the main indicator of whether or not they would be successful. Instead, a more crucial factor in shaping the extent former combatants would function as a firewall against violence was how they framed violence. Ideology does play a role insofar as the framings build upon and maintain narrative fidelity, but it underplays how framings can be transformed to be developed into a preventative mechanism that resonates with young people. Former combatants realised their conditional framing did not resonate with young people and therefore developed this framing to include elements that de-glamourised violence, yet never de-legitimising it. Furthermore, former combatants existed in an environment which incentivised frame reconstruction and frame diffusion to young people, especially in areas such as schools where other sections of society had not effectively framed violence. Returning former combatants from Islamic State present an opportunity in a preventative capacity, offering a means to challenge the ideologies and narratives that motivate violence. However, the current Prevent strategy's focus on intersectionality – promoting 'British values' such as gender equality – limits the scope for developing and utilising and wider range of anti-violence framings which will resonate with young people. Finally, it is unclear the extent former Islamic State combatants will have a similar network and incentive structure as that which existed in Northern Ireland, where funding has less government control, the conditions are more pragmatic, and there exists cross-cutting networks between a range of Republican and Loyalists.

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Notes

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