Disaggregating Rebellion: Mid-level Commanders in Hierarchical Non-state Armed Organizations[†]

Anastasia Shesterinina[‡]

Abstract

Existing research demonstrates the central role of mid-level commanders as either spoilers or leaders of peace but treats this group as unitary, defined by its communication function in hierarchical non-state armed organizations. Drawing on life history interviews with 'middle managers' (*mandos medios*) of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP), this article explores heterogeneity of mid-level commanders. Individuals follow multiple trajectories into mid-level roles. The nature of their roles depends on their specific position and the needs of the organization. As a result, they develop diverse skills, status, and ties that differently position them for post-war influence, from leading to spoiling peace. These elements underlie a processual approach that focuses on these actors' process of 'becoming,' boundaries of their position, and how their wartime roles fit in their post-war trajectories. A provisional typology drawing on this approach helps better understand mid-level commanders' varied, and contradictory, post-war influence.

Keywords: mid-level commanders, hierarchical non-state armed organizations, analytical framework, processual approach, typology, FARC-EP

[†] This research was funded by the Max Batley Seed Corn Grant in Peace Studies at the University of Sheffield and UK Research and Innovation Future Leaders Fellowship 'Understanding Civil War from Pre- to Post-War Stages: A Comparative Approach' (Grant Reference: MR/T040653/1 and MR/T040653/2; start date 1 January 2021). It would not be possible without the support of Víctor Barrera at CINEP / Programa por la Paz and Corporación Territorio, Paz y Seguridad (CorpoTEPAS). I would like to thank Laura M. Herrera Fernández for research assistance. I am also grateful to participants in the EAFIT seminar on the paper organized by Santiago Sosa and annual meetings of Latin American Peace Science Society, American Political Science Association, British International Studies Association and Conflict Research Society, particularly Willian Reno and Alex Waterman, as well as Kimberly Theidon for helpful comments.
Data Availability Statement: Original materials associated with this paper cannot be shared for ethical reasons. However, I include supplementary materials with a detailed discussion of research methods (Appendix 1), participants in life history (Appendix 2) and semi-structured interviews (Appendix 3), and interview guide (Appendix 4).
[‡] Anastasia Shesterinina is Professor and Chair in Comparative Politics, Director of the Centre for the Comparative Study of Civil War, and UK Research and Innovation Future Leaders Fellow at the Department of Politics, the University of York. She is the author of *Mobilizing in Uncertainty: Collective Identities and War in Abkhazia* (2021, Cornell University Press) and has published in such journals as *American Political Science Review*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *European Journal of International Relations*, and *Review of International Studies*. Email: anastasia.shesterinina@york.ac.uk.

> In the FARC, there are only two categories—base guerrillas and commanders. There is no proper middle level… So what exists is a generic name of 'commander'… whether in a company, a front, or a bloc… [A]t all these levels there are middle managers, there are higher middle managers and other middle and lower middle managers.
>
> —Former FARC-EP commander, 2020

The importance of former mid-level commanders of hierarchical non-state armed organizations has been recognized in research on war-to-peace transitions.[1] These actors have been found to either spoil peace by remobilizing ex-combatants for violence and maintaining authority over civilian communities or advance peace by supporting the social, political, and economic reintegration of ex-combatants. Despite this contradictory influence on peace processes, we know surprisingly little about the different roles mid-level commanders play *during* armed conflict and how these roles shape their post-war influence. Most studies of civil war bypass this intermediary level to go from the top to the bottom in the analysis of hierarchical non-state armed organizations. When mid-level commanders are acknowledged in research on wartime dynamics, they are treated as a homogeneous entity defined either in general, as intermediaries between top leaders and rank-and-file combatants, or in ways that are idiosyncratic to any given study, as actors at the center of violence restraint, for example. What is missing from the literature is conceptualization of mid-level commanders—their

[1] Non-state armed organizations vary in organizational structure (Parkinson and Zaks, 2018). Gutiérrez Sanín and Giustozzi (2010), for example, draw a continuum between more centralized, institutionalized, and hierarchical, army-like organizations, such as the FARC-EP, and those that resemble more decentralized networks, such as the Taliban. Focusing on fragmented civil wars situated toward the latter end of the continuum, Driscoll (2012: 122) finds that 'civil wars since 1945 have rarely featured professional armies with coherent and unified lines of command and control.' However, as Staniland (2012: 2) argues, such command and control are central to armed organizations' cohesion and ability survive. Following Staniland (2012: 26), I assume that in general 'leaders want to build integrated organizations' with robust command and control. Empirically, '[w]hether a hierarchy, a network, or a hybrid of the two, an armed organization almost always has at least a few levels of command and a few functionally differentiated units' (Wood, 2018: 526). I focus on mid-level commanders in non-state armed organizations that are closer to the hierarchical end of the continuum where different levels of command and functional units exist while recognizing that organizational structure varies across such organizations and can change over time.

process of 'becoming,' the boundaries of their position, and how their diverse wartime roles fit in their post-war trajectories.

In this article, I advance an analytical framework for understanding this group. I draw on research on mid-level commanders in civil war, terrorism, and military studies and on middle managers in organization and management studies. Combined, these literatures, which have not been previously brought into conversation, help me develop a processual approach to get at heterogeneity of mid-level commander trajectories in hierarchical non-state armed organizations, particularly rebel organizations, and a provisional typology to analyze this heterogeneity. I illustrate the utility of this framework with 14 life history interviews with former mid-level commanders of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP) and 44 semi-structured interviews with Colombian officials, security personnel, experts, and representatives of international organizations that I collected between 2019 and 2022. These original materials offer a broad range of experiences of ex-combatants of different gender, age, and location at the time of joining the organization, socialization, progression to, and movement between different roles within it, and activities after the signing of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP in 2016. Their first-hand experiences shed light on the category of mid-level commanders from the perspective of the participants themselves and are contextualized with reflections of observers and participants in the Colombian peace process.

This analysis starts from a surprising observation captured in the opening quote that the rank of 'mid-level commander' did not exist as such in the FARC-EP. Yet, commanders and deputies of intermediary structures from squadrons to blocs who were referred to as 'middle managers' (*mandos medios*) were responsible for following the directives of and reporting to the leadership above them in the hierarchy, regulating the life of rank-and-file combatants in their units, and the organization's work with civilian communities and other

actors in their areas of operation. Hence, while a core feature of their role was responsibility for their units, from formal provision of basic necessities and discipline to informal guidance and problem-solving, middle managers also acted as communication channels of the FARC-EP beyond their units. This central position in the organization, connecting the top leadership to the rank-and-file, civilian communities, and extra-organizational actors, is consistent with the findings of existing studies that consider mid-level commanders of rebel groups and other hierarchical armed organizations, such as terrorist groups and state armies.

However, even in the FARC-EP, a hierarchical, army-like organization where the shared rules and lines of command and control could have a homogenizing effect on middle managers, this group was highly heterogenous. Individuals followed different trajectories into middle manager roles based on their gender, age, skills, capacity to learn and follow the rules of the organization, and the conditions that the FARC-EP faced at any given time. They had different, often conflicting, roles in relation to the top leadership, the rank-and-file, civilian communities, and extra-organizational actors, depending on their specific position in the FARC-EP hierarchy, branch, and territory. They also moved in and out of different roles over time. As a result, they developed different skills, status, and ties to top leaders, rank-and-file combatants, civilian communities, and extra-organizational actors—the factors that existing studies identify as central to their post-war influence—and were differently positioned to disarm, keep armed, or rearm their subordinates in the context of the peace process. If a prototypical hierarchical organization, the FARC-EP, exhibited such variation in its middle management, we should expect similar heterogeneity among mid-level commanders of other hierarchical non-state armed organizations, with implications for their post-war influence.

Through this analysis, the article unsettles a category that is problematically invoked as unitary in the literature on mid-level commanders' influence on peace processes. It warns against blanket arguments on 'mid-level commanders' as either spoilers or leaders of peace

and calls for a deeper understanding of the wide range of their roles and responsibilities and their movement across and between mid-level and other roles over time. We cannot assume that if an individual occupied any given mid-level role at any given time, she will be equipped to either lead or spoil peace. How individuals progress to mid-level roles, the scale and nature of their responsibilities, including whether they exercise control over troops and territory, whether their responsibility is primarily of political, social, military, or financial character, and where they operate, matter for the kinds of wartime roles they play and their effects on these actors' skills, status, and ties underpinning their post-war influence. These different experiences make 'the mid-level commander' a heterogenous category. In turn, a processual approach to mid-level commander trajectories that centres how people move in and out of diverse mid-level roles and make sense of these roles is needed to capture heterogeneity of their experiences, or the middle level category 'at work' (Thomas and Linstead, 2002: 87). Whether mid-level commanders are simply communication channels in their organizations, as much of the literature on armed organizations suggests, or agents directing their operations on the ground in ways that can advance or impede the organization's objectives, including its transition to peace, is a complex question that requires an analysis of how individuals become mid-level commanders, experience 'middle-levelness,' and go on to their post-war roles (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020: 125).

By exploring mid-level commanders' diverse roles in the course of their trajectories, the article contributes to disaggregating rebellion (Parkinson and Zaks, 2018). Specifically, it advances the latest efforts 'to disaggregate the monolithic figures of the "paramilitary" or the "guerrilla" in order to capture the great variations that exist in [these] group[s] with regard to rank, motivations, life projects and experiences of the war' (Theidon, 2007: 75). But it goes further by centering variation *within* different ranks in these organizations, focusing on the middle level. As Wood (2018: 528) notes, having observed variation in unit commanders'

tolerance of rape by the rank-and-file, 'the socialization of commanders merits more research.' While questions of joining and socialization of members of non-state armed organizations in general and their movement between combatant and non-combatant roles have been covered in the literature, this is the first study, to the best of my knowledge, that traces trajectories of mid-level commanders, from heterogenous processes of joining and socialization to progression to and movement between different roles to post-war activities—the main components of the processual approach that I advance. Integrating this approach with existing findings on mid-level commanders, I propose a typology of trajectories that are particularly conducive to different types of post-war influence, from leading to spoiling peace. In these ways, the article shifts our view of mid-level commanders from a single category to a diverse group.

The following sections discuss how the figure of mid-level commanders has been viewed in civil war, terrorism, and military studies. I then draw inspiration from organization and management research on middle managers to outline a processual approach to mid-level commander trajectories in hierarchical non-state armed organizations and introduce a typology of these trajectories. In the remainder of the article, I explore heterogenous trajectories of middle managers of the FARC-EP and draw implications of this heterogeneity for our understanding of this group and its varied, and contradictory, post-war influence.

The influence of mid-level commanders

While the relationship between the top and the bottom of insurgent organizations has received significant attention, intermediary actors who are 'situated between the rank-and-file combatants and the highest military leadership' have not been sufficiently conceptualized in the literature on civil war (Themnér, 2012: 220). Referred to interchangeably as 'mid-level,' 'lower-level,' 'unit,' or 'field commanders,' 'mid-ranking officers,' and 'middle managers,' few studies have focused on these mid-tier actors when considering major wartime outcomes.

In a study of insurgent cohesion, for example, Staniland (2014) bypasses this tier, differentiating between the central and local levels of armed organizations that are linked by pre-existing social ties among and between insurgent leaders and communities. Because the study focuses on pre-war roots of armed organizations, it is previously politicized individuals who connect leaders to one another and people in the communities who connect leaders to communities rather than positions within the organization. Hence, the middle level of armed organizations is not sufficiently explored. Hoover Green (2016: 629) looks at commanders and combatants in analyzing violence restraint but treats 'commanders' as a single category and 'simplifies the relationships between "commanders" and combatants, eliminating the mediating role of mid-level officers.' Weinstein (2007) similarly collapses the space between commanders and combatants in explaining variation in patterns of violence against civilians.

Insurgent leaders and foot soldiers are rarely directly related, however, which makes mid-tier actors connecting these and other layers of armed organizations central to how these organizations operate in practice, with implications for their cohesion, violent behaviors, and other wartime and post-war outcomes. As Daly (2014: 336) argues in a study of middle managers after *La Violencia* in Colombia, '[a]n organizationally disaggregated approach, which opens the black box and different ranks of the armed actors, is needed to deepen our understanding of war recurrence.' This speaks to the recent trend in civil war studies of disaggregating militant and rebel organizations into their 'constituent elements' to understand their internal workings and effects of organizational structure on various outcomes of interest (Parkinson and Zaks, 2018: 272). I turn our attention to disaggregation within different ranks, particularly within the broad category of mid-level commanders.

Most studies that look specifically at mid-level commanders do so in the post-war context and highlight these actors' roles as spoilers of peace (Theidon, 2016), intermediaries between the spoiler elite and ex-combatants (Themnér, 2011), and strongmen (Driscoll, 2012)

exercising varying degrees of political authority over their former subordinates and civilian communities (Martin et al., 2021). Ex-mid-level commanders are placed among spoilers because of their role in rearmament after the signing of peace agreements (Theidon, 2016). While armed group leaders negotiate these agreements, mid-level commanders lack a special status in the equation and receive the same benefits as rank-and-file combatants (Stankovic, 2015). They can 'feel that they are not adequately compensated in peace settlements… [and] defect from the agreement by inciting violence' (Johnston, 2008: 137). But in the sense of the term introduced by Stedman (1997: 5), 'spoilers' are elites 'who believe that peace emerging from negotiations threatens their power' and use patronage resources to wield violence. Few ex-mid-level commanders have such resources, but they have the skills, status, and ties to both elites and ex-combatants necessary to remobilize ex-combatants in pursuit of violent elite agendas (Themnér, 2011). This intermediary role points to a crucial mechanism of violence in post-war societies where ex-combatants lack resources and leadership to organize and rearm themselves, but elites and ex-mid-level commanders provide these, respectively. It also suggests why ex-combatants rely on ex-mid-level commanders for access to lucrative opportunities, such as drug trade, where these actors often keep foot (Driscoll, 2012; Nussio and Howe, 2016).

Still, relationships between ex-mid-level commanders and ex-combatants go beyond participation in violence and illegal economic activities. The same ties to ex-mid-level commanders that enable these activities also offer ex-combatants access to legal and semi-legal employment and support networks amid post-war marginalization (Utas, 2005). Sharif (2022), for example, finds ex-mid-level commanders to be leaders in ex-combatants' socio-economic reintegration. These actors, moreover, engage in remobilization of ex-combatants for political purposes, such as electoral campaigning (Christensen and Utas, 2008). Likewise, ex-mid-level commanders' authority over communities extends beyond violence and ranges

from predation to benevolent warlordism to state capture to rebels-into-statesmen (Martin et al., 2021). Yet, even when they are incorporated into the state, these actors can be purged from ruling coalitions through divide-and-rule tactics of state leaders (Driscoll, 2012). Their different post-war strategies also respond to security conditions in the localities where they operate (Brewer-Osorio, 2024).

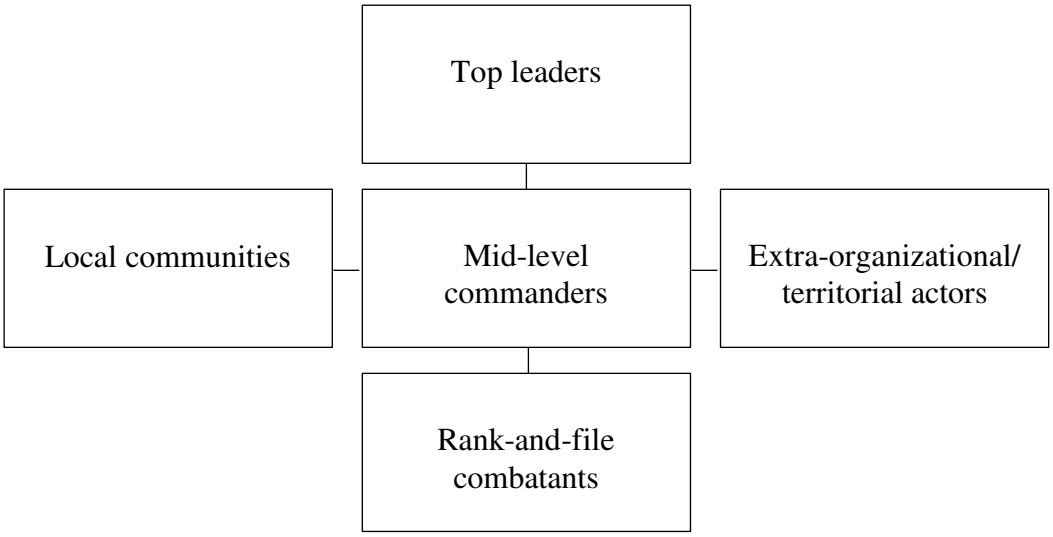
This literature shows that ex-mid-level commanders play important, and varied, roles from spoiling to leading peace processes and that their post-war influence can change over time. It traces this influence to 'the "highly specialized training and knowledge," operational and tactical experience, and the direct contact with and loyalty of the foot soldiers' that mid-level commanders enjoy during war (Daly, 2014: 336); leadership skills, social status, and ties to ex-combatants and elites that they sustain after war (Themnér, 2011); and political capital and ties to communities that stem from the quality of wartime governance they provided (Martin, 2021). Different ties that mid-level commanders develop are found to be crucial for their participation in post-war violence, socio-economic reintegration, and political activities. But what is particular about mid-level commanders' wartime position that enables these ties?

Mid-level commanders as central nodes in hierarchical non-state armed organizations

Existing research indicates that mid-level commanders occupy a central place in hierarchical non-state armed organizations (see Figure 1 below). Relations within these organizations are 'constituted by a chain of command where the content of relations includes a top-down flow of orders through ranked positions' (Parkinson and Zaks, 2018: 274). Mid-level commanders are the connecting node in this top-down flow of orders. They also provide bottom-up communication in the organization. The former is possible because mid-level commanders do not make decisions about the strategic direction of the organization but are linked to top leaders who do. They have access to information that rank-and-file members do

not and pass this information to the rank-and-file. In turn, top leaders are not directly connected to the rank-and-file. Mid-level commanders feed information about these members back to top leaders. The command-and-control chain, therefore, involves a two-way 'vertical communication network; downward (directing subordinates) and upward (reporting to management)' (Haer, 2015: 48).

Figure 1. Mid-level commanders in hierarchical non-state armed organizations



The central role of mid-level commanders in this communication network supports the everyday functioning of rebel groups and other hierarchical armed organizations, from terrorist groups to state armies. In the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Wood (2009: 151) finds that provision of information by field commanders to high levels of the organization was key to maintaining discipline. Similarly, in Al Qaeda, middle managers are 'the only members of the group who are connected to *both* grass-roots and top leadership… forging linkages as well as facilitating the flow of information, resources, skills, and strategic direction between [them]' (Neumann et al., 2011: 829, emphasis in original). From the perspective of the top leadership, they 'turn its strategy into practice' by acting as a direct link to foot soldiers; from the perspective of foot soldiers, they are 'the most senior Al Qaeda associates they will have come across… [B]eing connected to the top leadership, [they] offer

strategic direction' (Neumann et al., 2011: 82). In a seminal study of the Wehrmacht in World War II, Shils and Janowitz (1948: 197-298) also find that '[o]nly seldom did a line soldier see his battalion commander,' instead, mid-level commanders were 'the agents on whom the individual soldier depend[ed] in his relationships with the rest of the army… They [had] charge of his safety, and they [were] the channels through which flow[ed] food, equipment, and other types of supplies.'

This connecting position of mid-level commanders reduces the distance between the top and the bottom of rebel groups that scholars of civil war have emphasized in explaining subordination of individual units to larger organizations (Gates, 2002; Johnson, 2008). By virtue of this position, these actors are critical for the development of both primary group cohesion, or horizontal bonding among rank-and-file combatants and vertical bonding between these combatants and their commanders in the context of their immediate unit, and secondary group cohesion, or bonding between these groups and their next higher units and the overall organization (Siebold, 2007). As Siebold (2011: 456) explains the role of these actors in creating cohesion in state armies, 'the group leaders are responsible for establishing effective social relationships with their group members.' Due to their proximity to the rank-and-file, these actors socialize and oversee fighters in the organization. They also have informal relations with their subordinates, serving as 'fatherly' figures for rank-and-file combatants (Shils and Janowitz, 1948: 297). These bonds make mid-level commanders central to implementing military goals of the organization (Siebold, 2011: 456). Hence, bypassing this layer risks omitting a connecting mechanism in studies of cohesion, violence, and other organizational outcomes. As Daly (2012) shows in Colombia, insurgency is likely to recur where militants have pre-existing ties to ex-combatants. Mid-level commanders play a connecting role in this process (Daly, 2014).

Mid-level commanders' role in their organizations, however, does not lie only in forging bonds to direct foot soldiers toward military goals set by top leaders. Where rebel groups govern populations, the relations of mid-level commanders reach beyond the top leadership and rank-and-file membership of the organization to local communities (Martin, 2021). Arjona (2016) documents numerous ways in which mid-level commanders directly engaged with communities, from mediating disputes to administering justice, in establishing and running the institutions of FARC-EP governance. An important component of this work was generating revenue for the organization, where a mid-level commander '[was] somewhat autonomous and [was] usually responsible for financing the operations of his or her own group, but ha[d] to follow the guidelines set by the national leaders' (Arjona, 2016: 97). Along with directing their subordinates in the military realm, some mid-level commanders, thus, have considerable influence in political and economic operations of their organizations.

Yet, the bonds that facilitate execution of group missions can also undermine the organization's military operations: 'if a group develops its own goals inconsistent with higher level goals' due to strong primary but not secondary group cohesion, 'that becomes a leadership issue that must be addressed' (Siebold, 2011: 456). As Kasfir (2015: 33) argues, 'the conditions of guerrilla war make it difficult for leaders to maintain control over their rebel commanders, who may have their own ideas about governance or encounter unexpected problems as they enter new terrain.' Mid-level commanders with space for discretion have the capacity to maintain cohesion or fragment their organizations and this depends on specific relations they develop with local actors, 'from elected officials to militia commanders; state authorities, including military officers; religious leaders,' and others (Thurston, 2020: 16).

One reason for these divergent outcomes offered in military sociology are extra-organizational relations that mid-level commanders develop in addition to their relations with rebel groups' top leaders, rank-and-file combatants, and civilian communities. As Verweijen

(2018: 635) finds, commanders of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo 'solicit protection from powerful patrons who can influence the military leadership and military justice system' in the context where soldiers face poor service conditions and engage in revenue generation through petty trade and illegal taxation while higher echelons enrich themselves. Parts of this revenue are transmitted up the chain of command to prevent the loss of much needed, even if precarious, jobs. But these patronage networks undermine primary and secondary group cohesion and operational effectiveness of the organization.

Extra-organizational relations include not only elite patronage but also other state and non-state, including international, actors. Mampilly (2011: 150-152) points out that mid-level commanders appointed by the high command of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLM/A) to lead military and civilian affairs at the regional level during the war in South Sudan siphoned humanitarian aid intended for communities by controlling aid distribution, taxing foreign agency personnel, and using humanitarian supplies, vehicles, and technology for personal and military purposes. Engagement with other non-state armed groups and state and state-funded forces, such as paramilitaries, similarly falls within the remit of mid-level commanders' roles. Staniland (2012: 252), for instance, observes 'local deal-cutting with mid-level commanders' of the Taliban by the United Front/Northern Alliance, which shaped the local political order that emerged in the initial period of the Taliban's rise in Afghanistan.

These relations with the top and the bottom of their organizations as well as with local communities and extra-organizational actors position mid-level commanders as central nodes in hierarchical non-state armed organizations. This central position enables the ties that studies of mid-level commanders' post-war influence highlight and helps understand how mid-level commanders 'attain an important amount of social, economic and political power' (Themnér, 2012: 210). What, then, shapes mid-level commanders' varied influence?

Heterogeneity of mid-level commander experiences

Existing research sheds light on the multi-directional relations mid-level commanders develop during war and their sustained post-war ties to ex-combatants, civilian communities, and elites. It characterizes these actors as having unique skills and status that differentiate them from both top commanders and rank-and-file combatants. By drawing connections between their wartime and post-war roles, it advances our understanding of these actors' influence, be it as spoilers or leaders in the peace process. Nevertheless, it defines their wartime roles broadly by their central position in armed organizations without considering distinctions in how mid-level commanders join their organizations, progress within them, and act in these roles. As a result, mid-level commanders are in general presented as a unitary group in the literature. Figure 1 (above) offers a static snapshot of the category, summarizing the prevalent view of mid-level commanders as communication channels in armed organizations. Individuals who occupied mid-level roles at one point or another during their time in the organization are assumed to have developed the skills, status, and ties that enable their post-war influence.

A closer look at this group suggests major differences in their experiences, however. Individuals follow different trajectories into, in, and out of diverse mid-level commander roles and this shapes the skills, status, and ties they forge over time in their organizations. A processual approach is needed to capture the dynamism of mid-level commander experiences and, thereby, their heterogeneity. This requires a shift from categorical analysis, that is, from 'the mid-level commander' as a category discussed in the previous section, to the examination of a range of individual experiences as they unfold within this group. These experiences can then be aggregated into patterns that are meaningful for understanding mid-level commanders' varied, and contradictory, influence.

A processual approach to mid-level commander trajectories

Research on civil war identifies key components of a processual approach to individual trajectories in armed organizations (for a review, see Shesterinina, 2022). These trajectories set off with the process of *joining*, which combines individuals' various backgrounds and prior experiences with recruitment strategies of armed organizations. Once in the organization, individuals undergo the processes of formal and informal *socialization* into the rules and norms of the organization and where relevant *progression* within it. While only a small proportion of members move beyond the rank-and-file, members can shift between different, for example, combatant and non-combatant, roles. These aspects of individual trajectories to a large extent depend on the structure, institutionalization, and needs of the organization at any given time. For instance, fewer opportunities for progression and *movement between different roles* exist in combat-centric organizations that focus on fighting and resource acquisition in fulfilment of that goal than in diversified organizations that have political, social, military, and financial branches (Zaks, 2017). These structures and institutions are not fixed and change as organizations adapt to the evolving needs of armed conflict. War-to-peace transitions in particular impact individual trajectories in armed organizations through disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration and resistance to these and other associated processes as individuals go on to their *post-war roles*. These basic elements of the processual approach to individual trajectories in armed organizations that is rooted in civil war studies allow us to map different experiences of members of non-state armed organizations in general. Recent studies that have adopted a processual lens have demonstrated its value for our understanding of such outcomes as ex-combatant engagement in party politics (Söderström, 2020) and social work (Boulanger Martel, 2022).

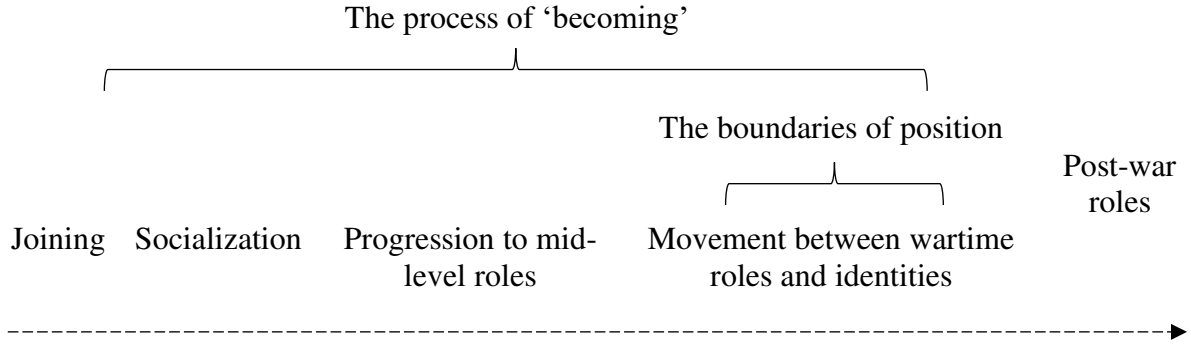
Research on middle managers in organization and management studies helps extend this approach to mid-level commanders in particular. Debates in this literature have shifted

from understanding middle managers in light of their 'central position in organizational hierarchies' to appreciating their 'contradictory subject positions' (Harding, 2014: 1214). In answering the question 'who is the middle manager,' this literature has highlighted that middle managers at the same time are controlled by and resist senior management as well as control and are resisted by junior staff (Harding, 2014: 1231). Instead of passive transmitters between senior managers and junior staff, they can, therefore, be seen as active mediators who interpret and implement strategic plans in ways that make everyday operations of the organization not a top-down but a bottom-up, 'emergent and unpredictable process,' where middle managers reshape, obstruct, and resist senior directives, whether intentionally or not (Balogun and Johnson, 2005: 1574).

Because of this agentic capacity, in the 'processual view' advanced in this research, middle managers constitute and reconstitute their identity in a continuous process of 'becoming,' drawing on formal and informal discourses to legitimize their shifting roles (Thomas and Linstead, 2002: 75). They do so by moving between their contradictory subject positions in what is called 'boundary work,' or 'dynamic positioning at and across' boundaries between structures within and beyond their organizations, for example, 'between ranks and across professional logics' (Azambuja et al., 2023: 1820, 1822). This is further complicated by 'a large variety of middle managers from first line supervisors… to very senior managers' that are included in this category (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020: 125). The boundaries that middle managers with these distinct roles negotiate differ dramatically, which matters for how and in relation to whom their 'middle-levelness' is experienced (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020: 125). These experiences—*the processes of 'becoming'* and navigating *the boundaries of their position*—frame the processes of joining, socialization, progression to, and movement between different wartime and post-war roles stemming from civil war studies in ways that are specific to the middle level.

Combined, these literatures offer analytical tools necessary to get at mid-level commander trajectories. Figure 2 (below) summarizes the resulting analytical framework for mapping these trajectories. Since not all members of armed organizations become mid-level commanders, the framework is applicable only to those who come to occupy mid-level roles at one point or another during their time in the organization. It can inform our understanding of why some individuals become mid-level commanders whereas others do not with a focus on the joining, socialization, and progression elements of the process of 'becoming' mid-level commanders. Yet, its goal for the purposes of this study is to capture mid-level commanders' broader trajectories. Some aspects of the framework may, as a result, appear linear (i.e. from joining to socialization to progression; from wartime to post-war roles). However, it is not assumed that these elements of the framework will be followed in the outlined order. For example, socialization can in part take place *before* joining, especially in contexts where armed organizations are embedded in the communities from which they draw their membership. The emphasis on movement between wartime roles and identities highlights the non-linearity of the framework. Consequently, it is also not assumed that once an individual becomes a mid-level commander, she remains one for the duration of her trajectory in the organization. Instead, the very recognition of this movement is a core feature of analysis that the framework calls for. Overall, the framework should be viewed as a general guide for mapping mid-level commander trajectories whose elements can unfold as outlined or not depending on the particular circumstances of the individual and the organization at any given time.

Figure 2. A processual approach to mid-level commander trajectories



A typology of mid-level commander trajectories

Mapping individual trajectories from mid-level commanders' process of 'becoming' within the organization to their post-war roles allows us to identify not only heterogeneity of their experiences but also differences within this cohort that are meaningful for post-war outcomes. Individuals do not obtain special skills, status, and ties simply by virtue of their central position in the organization. They become mid-level commanders in different ways and, thus, differ in their skills and status. For example, in contexts where commanders are targeted by counterinsurgency, 'young replacement commanders d[o] not usually have the same skills as their predecessors' (Giustozzi, 2012: 39). The ties they can develop are also contingent on the centralization and diversification of the organization and the specific position in the hierarchy and character of mid-level commander roles that stem from these aspects of the organizational structure. These roles range '[f]rom the squad leader to the front commander,' or 'from supervision of fewer than five fellow fighters to command over several hundred in a particular area' (Giustozzi, 2012: 54; Zyck, 2009: 121). Some organizations 'operate almost exclusively in combat-oriented domains and go to extreme lengths to stay hidden and keep civilians at bay,' which prevents the development of mid-level commander ties to communities; others 'diversify into a variety of non-combat domains such as civilian administration and ideological dissemination,' which enables such ties (Zaks, 2017: 40-41). Mid-to-high-level commanders who move up the organizational hierarchy while 'extract[ing]

criminal rents' pose particular danger if they recidivate, being 'the nodes in the criminal networks'—the extra-organizational ties that underpin their influence (Nussio, 2018: 143). Finally, local dynamics condition these ties and their effects on mid-level commanders' post-war influence (Brewer-Osorio, 2024). In their areas of operation, mid-level commanders manage complex relationships with their superiors, subordinates, and other constituencies 'that are inherently in tension' and generate alliances that can advance organizational goals but also challenge the organization depending on local dynamics (Thurston, 2020: 8).

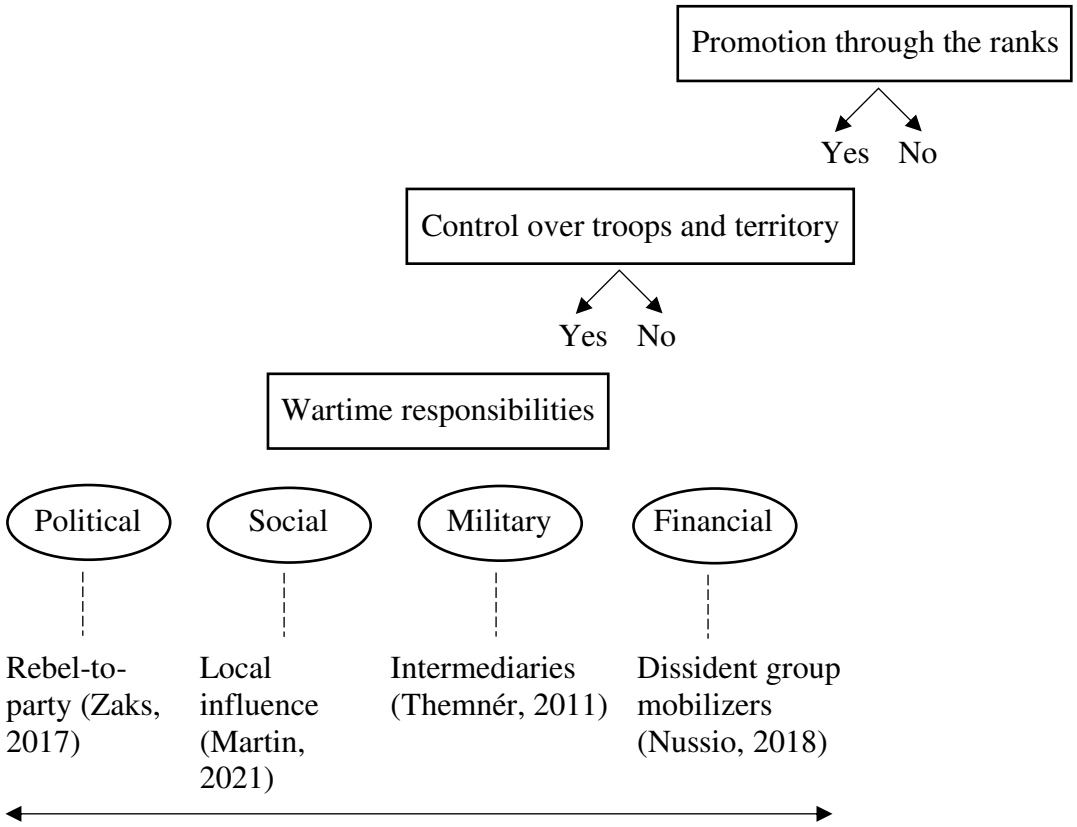
Hence, who 'the mid-level commander' is, whether a mediator transmitting directives down and feeding implementation up the organization or an agent interpreting, shaping, and even obstructing strategic plans, is not a straightforward question as she is likely to occupy and move between different roles. While her typical path along the ranks involves taking on 'increasingly responsible positions,' not all mid-level commanders develop 'portable skills' that enable them to maintain influence when their organizations transform (Grzymała-Busse, 2002: 65). Because a large variety of mid-level commanders exists between top leaders and the rank-and-file, each role's 'middle-levelness' should be defined relationally—in relation to a given constellation of superiors, subordinates, and other constituencies (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020: 125). Acting as both superiors and subordinates at any given level of the organization, mid-level commanders cross boundaries between ranks, organizational branches, and internal and external constituencies based on their shifting position within and beyond the organization. Due to these 'blurred boundaries around the "middle",' mid-level commanders, as middle managers more generally, are best conceptualized not as 'a single, univocal, homogenous entity' but rather as 'a diverse and fragmented cohort' (Thomas and Linstead, 2002: 73, 89).

Individuals' background and conditions of entry into the armed organization, their experience advancing to mid-level commander roles (i.e. ranked v. accelerated promotion),

the specific position they occupy within the middle level (e.g. mid-level commanders of squadrons v. fronts), organizational branches (i.e. political, social, military v. financial), and areas of operation (e.g. militarily strategic v. criminal hub), and their movement within and beyond the middle level over time all shape wartime relations mid-level commanders develop and post-war influence they are able to wield as a result. Analyzing heterogeneity of mid-level commanders' roles, and relations associated with them, can, thus, help better understand their different post-war trajectories.

Building on these processual observations and existing findings on mid-level commanders' post-war influence surveyed in the previous sections, a provisional typology below (see Figure 3) charts crucial distinctions in mid-level commander trajectories for our understanding of their varying post-war roles. I develop the typology with the processual approach in mind but view the processual approach as a tool to get at heterogenous mid-level commander trajectories and the typology as a way to capture those aspects of mid-level commander trajectories that can generate different post-war outcomes. The typology maps onto yet simplifies the elements of processual approach to mid-level commander trajectories outlined above in order to aggregate individual experiences into patterns that are meaningful for post-war outcomes. It draws attention to those mid-level commanders whose wartime roles and responsibilities are particularly conducive to different outcomes with the recognition that these outcomes are likely to be driven by a range of dynamics that are external to mid-level roles, such as geography (Daly, 2012) and local security conditions (Brewer-Osorio, 2024). Instead of determining which individuals will follow a given path, the purpose of the typology is to suggest how mid-level commanders' wartime experiences fit into their post-war trajectories. Hence, I present these links in a provisional manner and call for further research into these outcomes using the analytical tools advanced here.

Figure 3. A typology of mid-level commander trajectories



The typology starts with a key distinction in *promotion* to mid-level roles. This starting point of the typology speaks to the basic aspect of 'becoming' mid-level commanders in the processual approach, that is, how individuals progress to mid-level roles. Promotion can be in line with the rules and norms of the organization. For example, individuals can move up the hierarchical structure based on their performance and other qualities that the organization requires for progression. This path to progression is likely to involve socialization specific to mid-level roles that facilitates the development of skills necessary for individuals to operate in these roles. Alternatively, individuals can bypass this due process and be promoted to mid-level roles having skipped the typical steps in the organizational hierarchy or start in these roles at the point of joining. Such accelerated promotion is likely to take place due to organizational needs, for instance, the gap in mid-level cadres created by the targeting of commanders in counterinsurgency. Promotion according to the rules and

norms of the organization is important not only for mid-level commanders' skills but also their standing among and ties to the rank-and-file. Shortcuts to promotion can be viewed negatively among the rank-and-file in organizations that socialize their members into their rules and norms, including how promotion should take place. In contrast, promotion through the ranks (or the equivalent, depending on the organization) enables individuals to demonstrate capacity, that she indeed exceeded in one role to be able to move up to another and can, therefore, act as a capable leader in the future. It also facilitates the development of ties within the organization as individuals are exposed to top leaders and the rank-and-file in their various mid-level roles over time. As a result, we should expect those individuals who follow due process of promotion to be better positioned to wield post-war influence among their core constituency, the rank-and-file, than those who do not. Since we are interested in the trajectories that are particularly conductive to post-war influence, the typology proceeds from ranked promotion.

The next parts of the typology capture mid-level commanders' experiences while in their wartime roles that feed into different types of post-war trajectories. The scale and nature of their responsibilities—whether they occupy roles that enable them to exercise control over troops and territory and are primarily involved in the political, social, military, or financial work of the organization—and the associated movement between various roles over time correspond to the boundaries of mid-level position in the processual approach. Because these boundaries reflect how mid-level commanders navigate their relations within and beyond the organization, these parts of the typology also point to the specific ties that individuals can forge in their roles. *Control over troops and territory*, which is more likely for mid-to-high than low-level commanders, is a core condition for mid-level commanders to develop multi-directional ties with top leaders, rank-and-file combatants, communities, and extra-organizational actors. Without such ties, as existing research shows, it is unlikely that mid-

level commanders will wield post-war influence. Prolonged control is particularly conducive to the development of these ties as mid-level commanders can become embedded in the territories where they operate for long periods of time. In addition, control serves as a proxy for discretion in mid-level commanders' operations that enables mid-level commanders to implement but also impede the implementation of organizational goals. Indeed, Staniland (2014: 31) acknowledges 'commanders of factions who act autonomously' as a detriment to local control by top leaders and their inability to build integrated armed organizations. Such autonomy in mid-level commanders' activities and relations with the rank-and-file, communities, and extra-organizational actors contributes to their capacity to exercise post-war influence by drawing on these ties. This is why the typology proceeds from control over troops and territories.

Mid-level commanders' ties and, thereby, post-war influence are also shaped by *the nature of their responsibilities*. While individual mid-level commanders can have multiple responsibilities across organizational branches, depending on their specific position, and can move between roles with different responsibilities, disaggregating responsibilities into political, social, military, and financial helps identify those responsibilities that are particularly conducive to different post-war outcomes. Political and social responsibilities are more likely to feed into post-war leadership. Where political, or in Zaks' (2017: 2) terminology 'proto-party,' structures exist, mid-level commanders with experience in these structures are likely to be well positioned to exercise political leadership, for example, by participating in their organizations' transition into political parties in *rebel-to-party* post-war trajectories.[2] In turn, those with rebel governance responsibilities and community ties that stem from these responsibilities are likely to have continued *local influence*, or social

[2] While Zaks (2017) does not focus on mid-level commanders, I draw implications from this study for this group.

leadership, whether as part of the political parties that their organizations transform into or not (Martin, 2021).

Military and financial responsibilities, in contrast, are more likely to be associated with spoiling outcomes. A crucial distinction should be made between individuals who join other groups for post-war violence and those who mobilize their own. While all mid-level commanders can become 'joiners,' not all have the capacity to become 'mobilizers,' whether in fulfilment of elite agendas or their own. Mid-level commanders with any of the discussed characteristics can recidivate by joining groups led by others. Yet, to be able to mobilize others into their own groups, based on the discussion above, their path should be that of progression over time, which creates the conditions for them to be known as capable commanders. The scale of their responsibility should include control over troops and territory, which enables ties to not only the rank-and-file but also community and extra-organizational actors necessary for their autonomous activities. Finally, the nature of their responsibilities should include resource acquisition, which facilitates their capacity to fund their activities. Following Themnér (2011), those mid-level commanders who do not have access to resources are likely to act as *intermediaries* between the spoiler elites who do and ex-combatants. Mid-level commanders with military but not financial responsibilities are more likely to follow such intermediary trajectories. On the other hand, those with financial experience and networks are particularly likely to have the capacity (and skills, standing, and ties) to mobilize others into their own groups or in fulfilment of their own agendas in *dissident group mobilizer* trajectories (Nussio, 2018).

The final part of the typology, therefore, is a continuum of post-war trajectories that various wartime mid-level roles feed into. While this continuum does not cover all possible post-war outcomes, it captures trajectories from political to social leadership to intermediary to dissident group mobilizer, from less likely to more likely to mobilize others for violence,

or, in other words, from leading to spoiling peace processes. It, thus, draws preliminary links between mid-level commanders' heterogenous wartime experiences and their varied, and contradictory, post-war trajectories. In this way, the processual approach to mid-level commander trajectories feeds the typology of post-war outcomes advanced in this article.

Mid-level commander trajectories in the FARC-EP

Experiences of mid-level commanders in a prototypical hierarchical non-state armed organization offer an illustration of the analytical framework developed above. As Gutiérrez Sanín and Giustozzi (2010: 845) find, over time the FARC-EP became an army that had a clear line of command, implemented army-like discipline through a system of training and socialization based on formal rules, and was 'conceived of by its members as an organization.'[3] First-hand accounts of former middle managers of the FARC-EP complicate the undifferentiated view of mid-level commanders from the perspective of the participants themselves, with implications for other rebel armies, such as the LTTE in Sri Lanka or the SPLM/A in South Sudan. In the remainder of the article, I draw on life histories with research participants of varied gender, age, location, and specific roles in the FARC-EP to outline different trajectories from joining to post-peace agreement activities and contextualize these first-hand accounts with select expert interviews and secondary materials.[4]

Joining

The first part of the interview on joining the FARC-EP helped me get at the conditions in which ex-combatants grew up, their access to education, and early political activity. It pointed to different levels of embeddedness of the FARC-EP and other armed organizations in their communities and different forms of violence these communities, the ex-

[3] On FARC-EP evolution, see, for example, Arango (2016).

[4] See supplementary materials for a detailed discussion of research methods (Appendix 1), participants in life history (Appendix 2) and semi-structured interviews (Appendix 3), and life history interview guide that operationalizes my processual approach (Appendix 4). I quote life history and semi-structured interviews as LHI# and SI#, respectively.

combatants themselves, and their families experienced from the paramilitaries and the Colombian army and police, among other actors. All participants spoke of inequality and repression, including threats of violence and targeted killings.

This part of the interview demonstrated that most research participants came from a rural, peasant, and poor background, with some exceptions of those who grew up in cities or well-off families. Yet, growing up in cities did not necessarily translate into economic opportunities. Some were displaced from their places of origin and others grew up in slums, for example, on the outskirts of Bogotá. All participants, despite differences in background, had access to at least some education, either public or private. Over a half attended primary school and went on to high school. Some started university studies and a minority completed their university degrees. Most report being influenced by parents, schoolteachers, and university professors and independent reading of left-wing ideological writings.

While studying, the majority of research participants engaged in activism. Most participated in the activities of the Colombian Communist Youth (JUCO) and other student initiatives. Some continued into the Colombian Communist Party (PCC). For the latter, the transition from first-hand experience or observation of poverty and violence in the country to student mobilization to political party to guerrilla was 'natural' (LHI8). Others saw few options other than joining guerrillas due to domestic abuse, the desire to escape hierarchical norms of peasant life—these motivations prevailed among women—and perceived or known threat of violence from the state. Access to basic needs in the FARC-EP, independence, and contribution to social change were also among the motivations to join.

With these and other motivations in mind, the joining process in the first instance involved seeking out or being approached by a member of the FARC-EP to propose entry into the organization. Two pathways were reported by those who sought entry. In the first, the FARC-EP had been present in the participant's community to the extent that knowledge of

who was a guerrilla was a given. Their relatives (siblings, uncles, etc.) were often in the FARC-EP and contact with guerrillas was commonplace. In fact, three participants reported making a pact with their siblings for some to join the FARC-EP while others stayed with their parents. Alternatively, participants sought introduction to a FARC-EP member through their student networks, including fellow students, educators, or JUCO members with contacts in the FARC-EP. In both cases, those seeking to join were known directly or indirectly to someone in the FARC-EP and this facilitated their entry. In the second scenario, FARC-EP members approached them, for example, to be part of clandestine urban activities.

As contact was made, most were given an option to leave after familiarizing themselves with the rules of the organization and before joining for life. Gutiérrez Sanín (2008: 17) highlights this 'lifelong commitment' as a core characteristic of the FARC-EP. Some reported that their friends and relatives with whom they planned to join the guerrilla left at this stage for different, including family, reasons.

Socialization

Once in the organization, participants went through a process of socialization, which was the focus of the second part of the interview. Differences in this process were identified before and during the expansion of the FARC-EP in the 1990s and after the intensification of counterinsurgency in the 2000s. Typically, one took a political-military course upon entry, which included ideological studies and physical training appropriate for rural and urban units. All studied the FARC-EP Statute, regulations, and rules of command, which was intended to standardize conduct.[5] 'This gave us all, regardless of whether it was in the north, south, or west, the same standards' (LI2). With the organization's expansion in the 1990s, the training structure remained but some reported wanting political preparation of guerrillas who joined in greater numbers at that time. Others did not receive basic training at all, having joined during

[5] 'The Statute is the line for where you were going, the regulation is the one that forces that line to be fulfilled, and the rules are what enforces that' (LHI2). See also Beltrán (2008).

the period of intensified counterinsurgency known as Plan Colombia, and learned from individuals with experience and by observing fellow rank-and-file combatants and fulfilling incremental tasks.

All were assigned tasks, from guard, cooking, and cleaning duties to more specialized finance, radio, and nursing work to political and organizational functions and, in this sample, ultimately commander roles. Further training was necessary for some of these tasks, including for assuming commander responsibilities. 'You receive many courses that serve you in the war. After that, you take command courses' (LI10). In fact, as basic training became unavailable to some participants in the 2000s, greater attention was required to training commanders due to 'the need to generate cadres' in the context of increased targeting of this group by the Colombian armed forces (LHI12). However, tasks varied based on participants' background. For example, men with prior skills gained through higher education or work experience, including in economics, were assigned to finance. Women, especially those who struggled with physical exercises, were given radio or nursing duties. 'I was very clumsy in the subject of exercises… [and so] I was in communication activities' (LHI14).

What the first and second parts of the interview make evident, combined, is that men and women who became middle managers in the FARC-EP followed different paths into the organization and experienced training and early tasks in the organization differently. Accordingly, they progressed to middle manager roles differently. Yet, they viewed these roles similarly through the lens of responsibility. The third part of the interview centered on participants' personal experience, including defining qualities of middle manager roles as prescribed by the organization and from their own perspective.

Progression to middle manager roles

Following the entry course, progression to middle manager roles in principle involved two years of training, observing FARC-EP standards, and performing assigned tasks. A man

who joined an urban unit in Atlántico brought the FARC-EP Statute to the interview to illustrate. 'The requirements to be commander are to have military capacity and gift of command, more than two years in the FARC-EP [to] demonstrate certain political and military merits and gain experience, know how to read and write. Then you rise in your discipline, behavior' (LHI1). 'Behavior was the first thing to be commander,' a woman from a rural unit in Antioquia confirms, 'One had a resume and they were watching. If a person did not have many sanctions, did good things, contributed, then the front direction would evaluate [promotion]' (LHI4). 'This was a very pragmatic organization that [promoted] people according to their conditions and abilities,' an intelligence member from the Middle Magdalena Bloc clarifies, 'You became a commander not because you were recommended or were a very special person, but because of your practical work… You carried out small tasks that added up' (LHI8). Hence, 'if for two years you fully complied with everything that was stipulated, then you could be promoted to the first ladder of command' (LHI2).

However, the tasks individuals carried out varied, as I demonstrated in the discussion of socialization above. Their initial skillset was diverse as a result. Furthermore, not all combatants with two years of experience in the FARC-EP progressed to middle manager roles. Those who did not fulfil their tasks or were sanctioned for not respecting the rules of the organization, including in their conduct with superiors, other combatants, and civilian communities, did not in general progress. 'Either they were struggling or during the two years they made mistakes or weren't loyal or were lazy or there were doubts about them because the enemy also infiltrated us' (LHI2). 'There were also some who were sanctioned for treating the troops badly, for not solving the problems of the guerrilla' (LH7).

Still, even those with sanctions progressed, especially in the 2000s, when FARC-EP commanders were systematically targeted, as confirmed by military officials involved in Plan Colombia (SI36/SI42). 'They court-martialed but didn't kill me because everyone knew I was

a hard-working, [even if] undisciplined, man,' a rank-and-file combatant who was promoted over a decade after joining the FARC-EP recalls, 'Then they began giving me responsibilities' (LH13). Avoiding the same mistakes, engaging in 'good' behavior, and self-criticism were among the ways to repair from sanctions, according to participants.

The starting middle manager role after two years in the organization was typically squadron deputy. But some progressed earlier. A man who joined the FARC-EP in 2000 explains that 'worsening confrontation that took place when Plan Colombia was launched [and] the need to put people who already had a minimum of experience at the head of certain tasks accelerated [promotion]' (LHI12). Others did not progress after two years even if they met all requirements because of the needs of the organization. 'I did my guerrilla course but because they needed a doctor, I had to work in that field for 15 years,' a medic notes (LHI1).

Equally, not all middle managers started as squadron deputies. The aforementioned court-martialed combatant was made deputy of a guerrilla, a higher unit in the FARC-EP structure. Men and women also viewed themselves as middle managers even if they were not hierarchically recognized when their roles 'involved a lot of responsibility,' such as undertaking commander functions when commanders were away without the associated deputy role (what they called *cajonero*) or engaging in political organization of communities (LHI12/LH14). 'In the FARC-EP, there were no ranks as in the army (major, colonel, general)… You did not advance in the ranks, what you did were roles,' a long-term FARC-EP member concludes as a result (LHI8). Most moved in and out of middle manager roles, demonstrating that 'there were no lifetime commanders, you had to permanently behave to justify that role' (LHI3). And few sought it out because of responsibility that it involved.

Thus, there was variation in progression and starting middle manager roles based on the differences in background and fulfilment of tasks, specific position in the organizational

structure, and the conditions the organization faced at any given time. But what differentiated these roles from those of base guerrillas was responsibility for others.

Increasing responsibility

'Responsibility of being a commander is huge. Without being a commander, you didn't have that responsibility for anything,' participants told me (LHI4). In fact, 'responsibility' is the highest frequency term in my interviews. All research participants use it (e.g. 'I was given responsibility' (LHI9)) to explain what it meant to become a middle manager. The term captures both the intrinsic understanding of their role and external expectations about it. When assigned the role of squadron commander, a woman vividly illustrates, 'I gave birth to a baby and left that responsibility as a mother—I left the baby with my mother—to continue with military responsibility… Everyone knew [about the baby] but they expected me to exercise my [*mando medio*] responsibility when I arrived' (LHI4). The salience of this participant's identity as a FARC-EP member in general and a middle manager in particular, with the responsibilities that this entailed, trumped that as a mother.

Responsibility not only defined middle manager roles from the perspective of those involved, but it also increased as people went up the FARC-EP chain of command.[6] 'Every time you rose, you had many more responsibilities,' even members with a relatively short experience in the organization remember (LHI11). This chain of command followed 'the organic structure, the way the FARC-EP was organized, and the hierarchical structure, the way of command. The organic structure went from squadrons, guerrillas, companies, columns, fronts, blocs to the Central High Command and the Secretariat; the hierarchical from squadron deputy [and] commander to guerrilla deputy [and] commander, [etc.]' (LHI2). Some observers differentiate between low-, mid-, and high-level commanders in the FARC-EP (SI32). But ex-middle managers insist that 'at all these levels there [we]re middle

[6] On FARC-EP structure, see Ferro Medina and Uribe Ramón (2002), among others.

managers' (LHI8). For example, 'in a front, the front direction were top commanders and those lower were middle managers. In a bloc, bloc bosses were superiors and for them front commanders were middle managers. In the Secretariat, they were superiors but bloc and front commanders were middle managers' (LHI9). 'I, as front commander, was middle manager in the context of all FARC-EP at the national level,' one participant illustrates (LHI8).

As one moved up the hierarchical structure, the basic change was in the number of people one was in charge of. 'After you became a middle manager, you became responsible for any number of staff' (LHI5). 'Squadron commander and deputy were responsible for 12 men and women, guerrilla for 24 because two squadrons made up a guerrilla, and so on' (LHI10). 'The urban part was divided in half. In every squadron we had responsibility for six' (LHI3). Responsibility also increased substantively. A front commander, for example, 'had 10 responsibilities—organizational, education, health, training, finance, [etc.]' (LHI7). A front direction included 'a front commander, deputy, third, fourth, and fifth, and four alternates—nine in total—and apart from that… squadron commanders. So my responsibility was that those 10 responsibilities were carried out and to call each responsible to account,' a former front commander in the Eastern Bloc clarifies (LHI7).

These higher commanders were considered middle managers but 'were senior commanders for us in practice,' participants say (LHI1). This is why many do not view bloc and those front commanders who were part of the Central High Command that included 31 members as middle managers. When asked, 'when did you stop being a middle manager?,' one participant exemplifies, 'when I became a member of the Central High Command' (LH12). This organ, from which seven Secretariat members came, operated at the national level and was responsible for the strategic direction of the FARC-EP. Instead, 'middle managers were the ones who were in the region… Since we were in the region, we were the link between the national and the regional, and the base and the communities' (LH1).

Hence, middle managers' responsibilities, and the skills and status they developed by undertaking these responsibilities, varied widely depending on the scale and nature of their units, for example, whether squadron or front, rural or urban units, and units with specialized tasks, such as the guard of the Secretariat members. The boundaries of their position were defined relationally and changed as they moved across the organizational structure and undertook specific responsibilities in any given role. The content of their relations, or 'social linkages' through which information, orders, resources, and personal attachments flow, with their superiors and subordinates and others in their areas of operation also varied, as did the ties that they established as a result (Parkinson and Zaks, 2018: 274).

Middle managers' relations

Starting with the base, middle managers had formal and informal relations with, and associated responsibilities to, their units. The former included providing basic necessities, such as 'supplies, medicines, armaments' (LHI5); regulating everyday life, including 'wake-up, training schedule' (LHI14), that is, 'the everyday thing that one does in the camp' (LHI6); ensuring discipline through training and socializing, or 'forming,' guerrillas and 'imposing sanctions' (LHI12); and performing collective tasks—'exploring a territory, going to a fight' (LHI8). All this was to fulfil the strategic direction of the FARC-EP as 'transmission of command between the direction of the organization and the rank-and-file' (LHI3).

Informal relations and responsibilities, in turn, involved 'knowing everything about your people and solving their problems' (LHI5), from being sick to losing relatives to love affairs. Thus, 'the commander was like a father. One lost affection for your blood family, and that affection was replaced with affection for comrades' (LHI2). Such family-like relations underpinned social bonding within units (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008, 26). Once they no longer had these relations with the base, research participants no longer saw themselves as middle managers. 'The radio consumed me all day and I did not have time to be with people, to

watch their day-to-day life. So that made me no longer a commander,' a woman who moved between squadron commander and *radista* roles explains (LHI10).

As regional actors, middle managers also had relations with the communities, from ensuring internal 'respect for the civilian population' (LHI5) to carrying out specific tasks associated with their roles—recruitment, taxation, and others.[7] 'In the territory, it was the responsibility of middle managers to guarantee that everything flowed from here to there and from there to here' (LHI12). Some tasks, for example, political education and organization, stemmed from the broader social transformation goals of the FARC-EP. 'Being a social transformer, we had to go out to the population to do FARC-EP work with Community Action Boards, the Bolivarian movement, the political movement' (LHI7).

Middle manager responsibilities in the territories, furthermore, involved interaction with local elites, armed groups, and other actors. One participant acted as a 'mediator' in a coca growing community in Caquetá, for example: 'We charged a tax [on coca] as we did on all the main economic activities in the region. When drug traffickers arrived, we taxed them to come in. Then the community would sell their coca but we harmonized that, creating protocols for drug traffickers not to cheat' (LHI12). In a situation 'when a drug trafficking group was threatening the territory, you intervened and made a decision,' this former middle manager goes on, because 'on a day-to-day basis you could not always have access to what a higher commander would say' (LHI12). Hence, middle managers exercised discretion in these relations. In turn, 'everything that occurred… in the territory influenc[ed] the role played by each of the commanders'—whether conflicts broke out, new actors sought to establish presence there, or the strategic importance of the territory changed (LHI12).

Varied responsibilities middle managers had in relation to rank-and-file combatants, communities, and other actors positioned them as a vital layer in the daily activities of the

[7] See Arjona (2016) for a comprehensive account, including violence against communities.

FARC-EP, linking these activities of the organization to the top leadership. 'I always had communication with high-ranking commanders' (LHI14), participants recall, 'one's duty was to report on the entire operation of the unit'—the state of and performance in the unit and the territory,—'all this was transmitted' (LHI12). As a result, FARC-EP middle managers have been referred to as the 'transmission belt' between those who made strategic decisions and those who executed them (Arias et al., 2010: 8).

Yet, individuals did not have equal weight in this transmission system. While some middle managers were in charge of extra-organizational relations in their areas of operation, with the discretion in decision-making that this afforded, others' responsibility focused on the daily functioning of units, limiting their relations to those with combatants, yet others worked with communities but were not connected to the rank-and-file in ways that would enable the development of ties with combatants, which the literature on mid-level commanders assumes. These different wartime roles and responsibilities fed into their post-war trajectories.

Post-war trajectories

Due to their multi-directional relations, research participants described themselves as 'neurotransmitters' in the peace process (LHI12). They attributed their roles in negotiations, disarmament, and reintegration to their prior experiences in the organization (Shesterinina, 2020). Many continued playing a central communication role in the organization during the Colombian government-FARC-EP negotiations that began in 2012, transmitting decisions made by the top leadership in Havana to the rank-and-file and communities. 'What was going on in Havana was coming to us point by point,' one participant explains, 'that was the topic of pedagogy, not only with the boys, but also in meetings with the community' (LHI2). These study circles were held even among imprisoned FARC-EP members (LHI3).

A crucial part of this role was gauging and reporting perspectives of the base on the agreement. 'They shared fears, disagreements with me, but I tried to convince them' (LHI1).

A woman clarifies: ‘we lay down arms and what’s going to happen? How will we live [and] defend ourselves? That was the general fear’ (LHI4). Also ‘people worried because of the history of [failed peace] processes’ and ‘all of that was being reported through the mechanism we had’ (LHI5). ‘That’s how we were linked in the dialogues’ (LHI6). Some middle managers were then ‘elected by the troops to represent them at the 10th Conference’ of 2016 where the FARC-EP endorsed the agreement (LHI2).

In the disarmament process after the signing of the agreement in 2016, some middle managers linked not only the top to the bottom of the FARC-EP but also to actors external to their organization and area of operations. To comply with the agreement, they explained to their units as commanders ‘what the laying down of arms meant, what its role was, and implemented the process through subordination’ (LHI7). As a result, one commander reports that in his front ‘no one defected from the FARC before the signing of the agreement, we all got [to the disarmament zones], we disarmed, and in fact there are no dissidents from there’ (LHI2). Those in the tripartite Monitoring and Verification Mechanism ‘checked together with other organizations (the army, police, and the UN) that [their leaders’ direction] was being fulfilled’ and coordinated movement of those disarming with these actors (LHI5). They also fed back to the FARC-EP leadership whether ‘the government was complying’ and how to improve ex-combatant security (LHI5).

However, their roles extended beyond this transmission function. Multi-directional relations of middle managers who occupied positions as not only subordinates to those above them in the hierarchy and superiors in their units but also authority figures in their areas of operation entailed initiative, including over whom to sanction among their rank-and-file subordinates, how to address problems that arose in the communities, which alliances to form with extra-organizational actors, and whether to break away from their organization. These relations enabled some middle managers to support their units through the peace process and

gave others the ability to form dissident groups before the peace agreement was signed or rearm after (Álvarez Vanegas et al., 2018). Still, not all developed the ability to disarm, keep armed, or rearm their units. As an underground party militant explains, '[many] middle managers were very disorganized, and thanks to the bad decisions made by many middle managers of the FARC, the organization also lost [presence] in many places' (LHI11).

Analyzing which position in the organizational structure (whether deputy or commander of squadron or higher level of the FARC-EP), branch of the organization (whether urban or rural, primarily political, social, military, or financial, and specialized, such as mobile or guard, units), and territory (whether central to military operations or criminal activities) that middle managers were responsible for can help better understand the kinds of skills, status, and ties they developed during armed conflict and how these shaped their post-war influence in different ways. In other words, we must disaggregate the category of 'mid-level commander' to appreciate varied relations these actors establish and their implications for peace processes. The typology advanced above offers an early step in this direction.

Indeed, individuals in the sample whose promotion was accelerated due to the shortage of mid-level cadres and who did not occupy mid-to-high-level roles did not follow the political or social leadership or intermediary or dissident group mobilizer trajectories (e.g. LH12). In turn, those who were involved in the political and social work of the organization have taken on key roles in the rebel-to-party transition (e.g. LH5/LH7/LH14) and have maintained local influence in their communities (e.g. LH2/LH4/LH9). Other paths were observed as well, which were not theorized here (e.g. withdrawal from political or social leadership due to age, family, or health constraints (e.g. LH1)). None of the participants in this study followed post-war trajectories closer to the spoiler end of the continuum. However, existing research on the FARC-EP dissidents suggests that while great variation exists among former members of the organization who rejected the peace process before, during, or after

the signing of the peace agreement, some mid-level commanders with military experience acted as intermediaries, mobilizing the rank-and-file into the armed groups led by others, whereas others mobilized their own dissident groups, which joined larger formations, including Estado Mayor Central, drawing on their prior control over troops and territory and financial, particularly drug trafficking, know-how (Preciado et al., 2023). Further research is needed into the wartime roles and responsibilities underpinning these post-war trajectories.

Implications

This article advanced an analytical framework for mapping mid-level commander trajectories in hierarchical non-state armed organizations, particularly rebel organizations. It shifted our understanding of mid-level commanders from a unitary category to a diverse group using a processual approach that captures heterogeneity of their experiences and a provisional typology that analyzes this heterogeneity. Applying this framework to the experiences of former *mandos medios* of the FARC-EP has implications for future research on this group and its varied influence on peace processes. Such research is critical in light of ongoing and historical demobilization efforts where mid-level commanders pose a unique challenge, as in the recent demobilization of the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO) officers who did not demobilize or remobilized after the signing of the 1992 peace agreement in Mozambique (for a discussion, see Wiegink, 2024).

Starting from the process of 'becoming' mid-level commanders, this analysis shows that it was not pre-existing status, for example, coming from a family known for its commitment to, or ties to the leadership of, the FARC-EP, as an expert from the Special Jurisdiction for Peace suggested (SI40), or merit-based advancement up the hierarchy, as one former *mando medio* argued (LH1). Instead, it involved a complex combination of individual background (e.g. pre-existing skills), performance in the organization (i.e. successfully fulfilling incremental tasks), perception by those above in the hierarchy (including suspicions

of infiltration into the organization), and organizational needs (i.e. shortage of mid-level commanders) and gaps in certain domains where individuals had skills (e.g. medical) at any given time. These differences formed the basis of diverse skills, status, and ties that individuals developed in the course of their trajectories. They point to the need to broaden the scope of analysis of this group from those individuals who in fact came to occupy mid-level roles to the broader membership of the organization from which mid-level commanders emerge and poses the question for future research of why some individuals become mid-level commanders whereas others do not.

This analysis also demonstrates that while mid-level commander trajectories were in important ways shaped by organizational dynamics, particularly, institutions of socialization and rules and norms of progression, as previous research stresses (Wood, 2018), the effects of these structures on individual trajectories are not uniform since organizations transform over time. Hence, while commander-specific socialization mechanisms existed in the FARC-EP, they were not available to all cohorts of *mandos medios*, some of whom not only did not receive commander training but were also promoted in an expedited manner, bypassing the steps typically involved in promotion. This had implications for how they acted in these roles, how they were viewed by their various constituencies, and the authority they could wield as a result. This points to the need to further investigate how individual and organizational dynamics intersect in shaping mid-level commander trajectories in the changing context of armed conflict.

Finally, the study outlines the types of responsibilities that are particularly conducive to major post-war outcomes highlighted in existing research. Experiences in the FARC-EP illustrate that not all *mandos medios* had the full range of political, social, military, and financial responsibilities, as did front commanders, for example. Instead, individuals had different responsibilities, which fed into their post-war trajectories. For example, those

involved in the political work of the organization were well positioned to undertake political party roles after the signing of the peace agreement. While individuals with any of these responsibilities could recidivate, as studies of FARC-EP dissidents find (Preciado et al., 2023), the difference between joining and mobilizing others into existing or new dissident groups, and the responsibilities this article suggests are associated with these outcomes, can help further disaggregate and examine mid-level commanders' roles on the spoiling end of the post-war continuum.

Individuals also moved between mid-level roles characterized first and foremost by the responsibility for others and those that did not involve such responsibility. This raises questions of time and quality of activities for future studies of mid-level commanders. The typology advanced in this article proposes prolonged control over troops and territory as fundamental to the development of mid-level commanders' skills, standing, and multi-directional ties underpinning their post-war influence. Future research should explore how time spent in any given role, including whether mid-level roles are undertaken over time or at the time of war-to-peace transitions, combinations of different responsibilities, for example, political and financial, and specific activities as part of these responsibilities shape these outcomes. One implication of this study is that individuals with all these responsibilities deserve particular attention as they are likely to have developed the skills, standing, and ties to undertake any of these post-war trajectories, especially when they operate on the ground rather than in the central decision-making bodies of the organization. Within the FARC-EP, post-war influence of *mandos medios* of urban and specialized units also merits further research.

Overall, this article showed that mid-level commanders act not simply as communication channels in their organizations but can also exercise various levels of autonomy, including in their communication function, for example, misleading the rank-and-

file as to the details of peace agreements (Mitton, 2008). FARC-EP *mandos medios* indeed performed the transmission function that existing research emphasizes (Arias et al., 2010). Yet, they also undertook political and social leadership and intermediary and dissident group mobilizer trajectories drawing on their distinct prior experiences. The main implication of this study for future research and policy, therefore, is to approach mid-level commanders not as a blanket category that requires special treatment in peace processes but a diverse group whose different trajectories feed into their varied influence on peace processes in systematic ways. The analytical tools advanced in this study can help researchers and policymakers develop a more informed understanding of this heterogeneity across armed conflicts and hierarchical non-state armed organizations involved in them. Methodologically, the life history interview strategy underlying this study can be adopted in future research to tap into this heterogeneity through lived experiences of former mid-level commanders themselves, from joining their organizations, to socialization, progression to, and movement between different roles, to post-war activities.

References

Álvarez Vanegas E, Pardo Calderón D, Cajiao Vélez A (2018) *Trayectorias y Dinámicas Territoriales de las Disidencias de las FARC*. Bogotá: Fundación Ideas para la Paz.

Arango C (2016) *FARC. Veinte Años de Marquetalia a La Uribe*. Bogotá: Ediciones Aurora.

Arias GI, Herrera N, Prieto CA (2010) *Mandos Medios de las FARC y su Proceso de Desmovilización en el Conflicto Colombiano*. Bogotá: Fundación Ideas para la Paz.

Arjona A (2016) *Rebelocracy: Social Order in the Colombian Civil War*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Azambuja R, Islam G, Ancelin-Bourguignon A (2023) Walling in and walling out: Middle managers' boundary work. *Journal of Management Studies* 60 (1): 1819-1854.

Balogun J, Johnson G (2005) From intended strategies to unintended outcomes: The impact of change recipient sensemaking. *Organization Studies* 26 (11): 1573-1601.

Beltrán A (2008) FARC-EP: Una reflexión sobre su organización política y militar. Carlos Medina Gallego (coord.) *FARC-EP. Temas y Problemas Nacionales, 1958-2008*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional-UNIJUS, 72-101.

Boulanger Martel SP (2022) ¡Zapatero, a tus zapatos! Explaining the social engagement of M-19 ex-combatants in education and social work institutions in Colombia. *Third World Quarterly* 43 (4): 760-778.

Brewer-Osorio S (2024) From spoilers to builders: Collective reintegration, leadership, and peace in Colombia. *Conflict, Security & Development* 24 (2): 79-110.

Christensen MM, Utas M (2008) Mercenaries of democracy: The 'Politricks' of remobilized combatants in the 2007 general elections, Sierra Leone. *African Affairs* 107 (429): 515-539.

Daly SZ (2012) Organizational legacies of violence: Conditions favoring insurgency onset in Colombia, 1964–1984. *Journal of Peace Research* 49 (3): 473-491.

--- (2014) The dark side of power-sharing: Middle managers and civil war recurrence. *Comparative Politics* 46 (3): 333-353.

Driscoll J (2012) Commitment problems or bidding wars? Rebel fragmentation as peace building. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (1): 118-149.

Ferro Medina JG, Uribe Ramón G (2002) *El Orden de la Guerra. Las FARC-EP: Entre la Organización y la Política*. Bogotá: Centro Editorial Javeriana.

Gates S (2002) Recruitment and allegiance: The microfoundations of rebellion. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46 (1): 111-130.

Giustozzi A (2012) Taliban networks in Afghanistan. *CIWAG Case Studies* 8. Accessed 27 Nov 2023 <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/ciwag-case-studies/8>.

Gjerde S, Alvesson M (2020) Sandwiched: Exploring role and identity of middle managers in the genuine middle. *Human Relations* 73 (1): 124-151.

Grzymała-Busse AM (2002) *Redeeming the Communist Past: The Regeneration of Communist Parties in East Central Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Gutiérrez Sanín F (2008) Telling the difference: Guerrillas and paramilitaries in the Colombian war. *Politics & Society* 36 (1): 3-34.

Gutiérrez Sanín F, Giustozzi A (2010) Networks and armies: Structuring rebellion in Colombia and Afghanistan. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33 (9): 836-853.

Haer R (2015) *Armed Group Structure and Violence in Civil Wars: The Organizational Dynamics of Civilian Killing*. Oxon: Routledge.

Harding N, Lee H, Ford J (2014) Who is 'the middle manager'? *Human Relations* 67 (10): 1213-1237.

Hoover Green A (2016) The commander's dilemma: Creating and controlling armed group violence. *Journal of Peace Research* 53 (5): 619-632.

Johnston P (2008) The geography of insurgent organization and its consequences for civil wars: Evidence from Liberia and Sierra Leone. *Security Studies* 17 (1): 107-137.

Kasfir N (2015) Constructing a field of inquiry: Definitions, scope, patterns, order, causes. In: Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir & Zachariah Cherian Mampilly (eds) *Rebel Governance in Civil War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 21-47.

Mampilly ZC (2011) *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Martin PA (2021) Commander-community ties after civil war. *Journal of Peace Research* 58 (4): 778-793.

Martin PA, Piccolino G, Speight JS (2021) Ex-rebel authority after civil war: Theory and evidence from Côte d'Ivoire. *Comparative Politics* 53 (2): 209-232.

Mitton K (2008) Engaging disengagement: The political reintegration of Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front. *Conflict, Security & Development* 8 (2): 193-222.

Neumann P, Evans R, Pantucci R (2011) Locating Al Qaeda's center of gravity: The role of middle managers. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34 (11): 825-842.

Nussio E (2018) Ex-combatants and violence in Colombia: Are yesterday's villains today's principal threat? *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 3 (1): 135-152.

Nussio E, Howe K (2016) When protection collapses: Post-demobilization trajectories of violence. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 28 (5): 848-867.

Preciado AR, Cajiao A, Tobo P, López N (2023) El proyecto "Estado Mayor Central": Un intento de unificación disidente. Serie Informes No. 38 (Octubre). Fundación Ideas para la Paz <https://ideaspaz.org/publicaciones/investigaciones-analisis/2023-10/el-proyecto-estado-mayor-central-un-intento-de-unificacion-disidente>

Sharif S (2022) Can the rebel body function without its visible heads? The role of mid-level commanders in peacebuilding. *International Peacekeeping* (OnlineFirst): 1-32.

Shesterinina A (2020) *Committed to Peace: The Potential of Former FARC-EP Midlevel Commanders as Local Leaders in the Peace Process*. Sheffield: SPERI.

--- (2022) Civil war as a social process: Actors and dynamics from pre- to post-war. *European Journal of International Relations* 28 (3): 538-562.

Shils EA, Janowitz M (1948) Cohesion and disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12 (2): 280-315.

Siebold GL (2007) The essence of military group cohesion. *Armed Forces and Society* 33 (2): 286-295.

--- (2011) Key questions and challenges to the standard model of military group cohesion. *Armed Forces and Society* 37 (3): 448-468.

Söderström J (2020). *Living Politics after War: Ex-combatants and Veterans Coming Home*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Staniland P (2012) States, insurgents, and wartime political orders. *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (2): 243-264.

--- (2014) *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Stedman SJ (1997) Spoiler problems in peace processes. *International Security* 22 (2): 5-53.

Stankovic T (2015) Microdisarmament and compliance costs: An analysis of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration programs. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38 (9): 691-709.

Parkinson SE, Zaks S (2018) Militant and rebel organization(s). *Comparative Politics* 50 (2): 271-290.

Theidon K (2007) Transitional subjects: The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants in Colombia. *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1 (1): 66-90.

--- (2016) Peace in Colombia: A time to believe? *Current History* 115 (778): 51-56.

Themnér A (2011) *Violence in Post-Conflict Societies: Remarginalization, Remobilizers and Relationships*. London: Routledge.

--- (2012) Former mid-level commanders in big man networks. In: Mats Utas (ed.) *African Conflicts and Informal Power: Big Men and Networks*. London: Zed Books, 205-223.

Thomas R, Linstead A (2002) Losing the plot? Middle managers and identity. *Organization* 9 (1): 71-93.

Thurston A (2020) *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Utas M (2005) The reintegration and remarginalization of youth in Liberia. In: Paul Richards (ed.) *No Peace, No War: An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 137-154.

Verweijen J (2018) Soldiers without an army? Patronage networks and cohesion in the Armed Forces of the DR Congo. *Armed Forces and Society* 44 (4): 626-646.

Weinstein JM. (2007) *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wiegink N (2024) Renamobilised: Former combatants and an armed opposition party in Mozambique. *War & Society* 43 (4): 398-410.

Wood EJ (2009) Armed groups and sexual violence: When is wartime rape rare? *Political Studies Review* 37 (1): 131-161.

--- (2018) Rape as a practice of war: Toward a typology of political violence. *Politics & Society* 46 (4): 513-537.

Zaks S (2017) *Resilience beyond rebellion: How wartime organizational structures affect rebel-to-party transformation*. PhD Thesis, UC Berkeley, Berkeley, CA.

Zyck SA (2009) Former combatant reintegration and fragmentation in contemporary Afghanistan. Conflict, Security & Development 9 (1): 111-131.

Appendix 1. Research methods

Analysis in this paper draws primarily on life history interviews with 14 former middle managers of the FARC-EP conducted in 2020 and 2022 in Bogotá (see Appendix 2). Most participants were recruited with the support from the Centre for Research and Popular Education / Peace Program (CINEP/PPP), which monitors the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement, and an ex-combatant organization Territory, Peace and Security Corporation (CorpoTEPAS). Importantly, only a few research participants were formal members of the organization. This meant that individual experiences were shaped by different post-peace-agreement affiliations. However, to reduce potential bias of this selection strategy, I extended selection outside of the CorpoTEPAS network based on the gaps identified in earlier interviews. For example, it was important for me to speak with individuals who joined the organization in the 2000s to understand the differences in training and progression to middle manager roles at the time of Plan Colombia when the FARC-EP was under significant pressure from counterinsurgency. I sought these and other categories of participants through academic and non-academic networks that I developed during fieldwork.

I complemented these materials with 44 semi-structured interviews collected in 2019, 2020, and 2022 in the Colombian government, security sector, universities, and think tanks, international non-governmental organizations, and select United Nations (UN) agencies (see Appendix 3). For example, I spoke with representatives of the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN) and the UN Verification Mission in Colombia who worked with former FARC-EP middle managers. These interviews contextualized ex-combatant accounts with insights of observers and a variety of stakeholders in the Colombian peace process.

My research on armed conflict, extensive experience of life history interviewing with ex-combatants, and understanding of Spanish enabled this work. But it would not be possible without the support of CINEP/PPP and translation where necessary by a Colombian research

assistant with situated knowledge of this context. My gradual entry into the field and vetting by CINEP/PPP and CorpoTEPAS meant to participants that I was committed to sustained work in Colombia and sought to understand their roles from their own perspective. This goal was also evident in the interviews. I adapted my terminology from 'demobilization,' which did not resonate with participants, to 'the laying down of arms,' which did, for example.

All interviews followed a thorough consent protocol approved as part of institutional ethics review.[1] I introduced the research project, the purpose of the interview, and the layers of consent—potential participants could reject being interviewed, withdraw their participation until a particular date, stop the interview at any moment, and answer any question in full, in part, or not at all. Verbal consent was sought where the written format was not possible. All interviews were voice recorded and transcribed, with identifying details removed at the point of transcription. Strict anonymity has been adhered to in the lifespan of the project. When potential research participants asked me whom I had interviewed before, for example, I did not reveal identifying information, even if this could help expand the network of research participants. I also took a cautious approach when ethical dilemmas emerged. For example, I made a decision not to co-author with a research participant as this would compromise what other research participants shared with me and could put the said research participant at risk of scrutiny and reputational damage in the sensitive political environment of Colombia.

Research participants

All participants in life history interviews occupied middle manager roles at least once during their time in the FARC-EP. This was the main criterion for the selection of research participants in this research. However, differences in gender, age, location, and specific roles they had in the organization reduced potential selection biases, which was particularly

[1] The University of Sheffield Research Ethics Applications were approved on 04/10/2019 (Reference: 030552) for fieldwork carried out in 2019-2020 and 20/07/2022 (Reference: 048989) for fieldwork carried out in 2022.

important because most research participants were recruited through one ex-combatant organization, and some were its active members. These differences also helped me access important elements of middle manager experiences that could otherwise be missed.

Participants included ten men and four women, which broadly corresponds to the gender balance in the organization. Gutiérrez Sanín (2008: 10-11) finds that women constituted a quarter of FARC-EP members. After the signing of the peace agreement in 2016, a quarter of FARC-EP ex-combatants were women (UN, 2022). Interviews with women were, thus, critical for understanding whether the entry, socialization, and progression in the organization—and, importantly here, experiences of middle management—varied by gender.

Half of the participants joined the FARC-EP under the age of 18, including the youngest at the age of 13. This is in line with the organization's widespread practice of recruiting children, particularly over 15 years old (UN, 2016). Born across the decades of the 1960s-1990s, participants' lived experiences reflect the changing social, political, and economic circumstances in the country. While most recall the killings of members of the Patriotic Union (UP), a left-wing party founded in 1985, for example, those born in the 1960s also remember student protests and repression of students in the 1970s. These different experiences were crucial for ideological formation and entry into the FARC-EP. Despite these differences, all participants joined the organization after its 7th Conference of 1982, which transformed the peasant guerrilla into a 'people's army' as captured in the addition of 'EP' (*Ejército del Pueblo*) to its name. The structure of the organization, within which middle manager roles were assigned, consolidated at that time and is, therefore, comparable across the interviews.

Participants also come from across Colombia, including the departments of Caquetá in the Amazon Region, Antioquia, Caldas, Cundinamarca, and Santander in the Andean

Region, Nariño and Valle del Cauca between the Andean and Pacific Regions, Chocó in the Pacific Region, and Córdoba and Sucre in the Caribbean Region. Their subsequent locations before and after joining the FARC-EP span other departments, including in the Orinoquía Region (Llanos Orientales). This geographical breadth gets at different structural conditions in the territories where research participants lived and were FARC-EP members, namely, the Caribbean, Eastern, Middle Magdalena, Northwestern, Southern, and Western Blocs.

Having spent five to 31 years in the organization, participants represent diverse middle manager roles, from squadron deputy, the entry-level middle management role, to front commander, the role with which most participants associate the middle management ceiling. This includes distinctive roles in the urban Bolivarian movement and militancy, mobile and guard units, and units oriented more to financial and political rather than military responsibilities. This also includes distinct middle manager experiences along the evolution of the FARC-EP, for example, as the organization expanded due to drug production and trafficking and other illicit activities in the 1990s and adapted to aerial bombardment, among other pressures, in the 2000s. This broad scope in the organizational hierarchy, branches, and periods reflects similarities and differences in middle manager roles across the FARC-EP structure and changes in the conditions that the organization faced over time.

Interviews and analysis

Life history interviews walked through the process of joining the FARC-EP (Part 1), experience within the organization (Part 2), with a particular focus on the meaning of middle manager roles to research participants (Part 3), and their activities during the peace process (Part 4) (see Appendix 4). I tailored follow-up questions to the research participants' individual trajectories. For example, questions differed for the participants who were involved in activism before joining the FARC-EP, those who belonged to rural and urban FARC-EP structures and specialized units, such as the Mobile Column Teófilo Forero or the

guard of the Secretariat members, and those who had distinctive experiences of being imprisoned as FARC-EP members before the signing of the peace agreement or elected to the Congress after. These differences highlight a varied range of experiences in the FARC-EP.

Life history interviews lasted from one to four hours, averaging one and a half hours. In total, nearly 23 hours of interview materials, or 200,000 words transcribed in Spanish and translated into English, were analyzed in depth. Semi-structured interviews were one hour long each and were carried out and transcribed in English with some exceptions. The analysis of these interviews included three rounds of coding and was conducted both manually and using the NVivo software, moving iteratively between collected materials and insights from existing research.

First, I analyzed semi-structured interviews collected in 2019 to identify themes of importance to observers at the early stages of reintegration, with a focus on former FARC-EP middle managers. These themes included the differences between individual and collective reintegration routes, the options that ex-combatants had, the leadership of former middle managers in territorial spaces for training and reincorporation (ETCRs) established in 2017 and new reincorporation areas (NARs) ex-combatants formed, particularly in their economic projects, and the relationship between ex-combatants, the political party that emerged from the FARC-EP, civilian communities, and the Colombian government. This analysis set the stage for life history interviews carried out in 2020.

The second round of coding followed this field trip. I mapped individual trajectories of former FARC-EP middle managers to identify gaps in the categories of research participants and patterns in their joining, training and progression, and post-agreement experiences as well as inconsistencies in the accounts of ex-combatants and observers and other participants in the Colombian peace process. The surprising observation of the clarity with which observers characterized FARC-EP middle managers (e.g. ‘In the middle, there are

these people who were really in charge… They were like the bosses of the guerrilleros' (SI3)) and the complexity of their roles as reflected by former middle managers themselves emerged at this stage. These findings guided my fieldwork in 2022, and I paid particular attention to the heterogeneity of middle management experiences in subsequent interviews and analysis.

Having spoken with individuals whose FARC-EP experiences could differ from those I had captured before and clarified inconsistencies that emerged in the analysis in subsequent semi-structured and life history interviews, I recoded all life history interviews, comparing the trajectories of former FARC-EP middle managers according to:

1. when, where, and how they joined the FARC-EP, including their social, political, and economic background, memories of violence and repression, education, and political activities before joining;
2. training and tasks in the organization;
3. their understanding and experience of middle manager roles; and
4. their participation in the negotiations, the laying down of arms, and reintegration.

The paper draws on these core materials to outline different processes of 'becoming' middle managers from joining to progression and positions in the middle level in the FARC-EP.

References

Gutiérrez Sanín F (2008) Telling the difference: Guerrillas and paramilitaries in the Colombian war. *Politics & Society* 36 (1): 3-34.

United Nations (UN) (2016) Report of the Secretary General on children and armed conflict in Colombia (September 2011-June 2016). S/2016/837.

--- (2022) United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia. Report of the Secretary-General. S/2022/267.

Appendix 2. Participants in life history interviews

#	Date	Gender	Born	Birth region	Joined	Joining region
LHI1	04/02/2020	M	1963	Caribbean	1986	Caribbean
LHI2	04/02/2020	M	1973	Pacific	1989	Pacific
LHI3	04/02/2020	M	1962	Andean/Pacific	1985	Andean/Pacific
LHI4	05/02/2020	F	1980	Andean	1994	Andean
LHI5	05/02/2020	M	1969	Amazon	1986	Amazon
LHI6	05/02/2020	F	1985	Andean/Pacific	2002	Andean/Pacific
LHI7	05/02/2020	M	1970	Andean	1985	Andean
LHI8	06/02/2020	M	1962	Andean	1989	Andean
LHI9	06/02/2020	M	1969	Amazon	1989	Amazon
LHI10	06/02/2020	F	1985	Andean	1991	Orinoquía
LHI11	06/02/2020	M	1998	Andean	2011	Andean
LHI12	14/10/2022	M	1980	Andean	2000	Amazon
LHI13	28/10/2022	M	1978	Andean	2001	Andean
LHI14	01/11/2022	F	1965	Caribbean	1992	Amazon

Appendix 3. Participants in semi-structured interviews

#	Date	Organization
SI1	17/05/2019	Fundación Ideas para la Paz
SI2	17/05/2019	Universidad de los Andes
SI3	17/05/2019	Organización Internacional para las Migraciones
SI4	18/05/2019	Museo Casa de la Memoria de Medellín
SI5	20/05/2019	Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización
SI6	21/05/2019	Organización Internacional para las Migraciones
SI7	21/05/2019	Universidad del Rosario
SI8	22/05/2019	Universidad de los Andes
SI9	22/05/2019	United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia
SI10	22/05/2019	Universidad Javeriana
SI11	23/05/2019	United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office
SI12	23/05/2019	United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office
SI13	03/02/2020	CINEP/PPP
SI14	03/02/2020	Universidad de los Andes
SI15	03/02/2020	Universidad de los Andes
SI16	03/02/2020	United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia
SI17	06/02/2020	Agencia para la Reincorporación y la Normalización
SI18	07/02/2020	Departamento Nacional de Planeación
SI19	10/02/2020	Consejería Presidencial para la Estabilización y la Consolidación
SI20	11/02/2020	Universidad Nacional de Colombia
SI21	11/02/2020	Fundación Santa Fe de Bogotá
SI22	11/02/2020	Universidad Católica de Colombia
SI23	11/02/2020	United Nations Development Programme
SI24	06/10/2022	United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia
SI25	06/10/2022	United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia
SI26	07/10/2022	Centro de Estudios Estratégicos sobre Seguridad y Defensa Nacionales
SI27	12/10/2022	Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz
SI28	13/10/2022	United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia
SI29	19/10/2022	Organización Internacional para las Migraciones
SI30	19/10/2022	Fundación Ideas para la Paz
SI31	20/10/2022	Fuerzas Militares de Colombia
SI32	21/10/2022	Fundación Conflict Responses
SI33	21/10/2022	Observatorio de Tierras
SI34	24/10/2022	Museo de Memoria de Colombia
SI35	24/10/2022	International Crisis Group
SI36	25/10/2022	Fuerzas Militares de Colombia
SI37	27/10/2022	Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Paz (INDEPAZ)
SI38	27/10/2022	Observatorio de Memoria y Conflicto
SI39	27/10/2022	Universidad de los Andes
SI40	28/10/2022	Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz
SI41	01/11/2022	Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación
SI42	02/11/2022	Fuerzas Militares de Colombia
SI43	02/11/2022	Comisión de la Verdad
SI44	16/11/2022	Tripartite Monitoring and Verification Mechanism

Appendix 4. Life history interviews: Examples of questions

Part 1: Joining the FARC-EP

Childhood
What region do you come from? How was it growing up in the region? What was the situation like?
Why did you move? How was your family displaced?
Were your x relative part of the party/an organization?
What happened to your x relative? Why was your x relative a target?
Were you afraid of the paramilitaries/the army/x guerrilla?
Did the FARC-EP compete with the paramilitaries/the army/x guerrilla in your region?

Education
Did you go to school? Where?
Why did you go to a private/public school? What was the difference?
When did you start university? Where?
What did you study at the university? Why?

Mobilization
Did you join student organizations? Which ones?
How did you find out about x organization?
Was x organization strong within the school/university?
Why did you join this but not other organizations?
How did you join x organization? Did you/your family/friends know someone from x organization? Did you speak with a member? Did they tell you how to join? Why did x organization accept you?
When you were in x organization, what did you do? What were your roles?
Did you participate in protests/demonstrations/strikes? What were they about?
When you studied, what ideas resonated the most with you? Did you discuss these ideas with other students/professors/organization members?
Did you finish school/university? Why/why not?
How did you transition from x organization to x political party/other political activity?
Were you targeted? How did you know that you were targeted?
Did you start working?

Motivations to join the FARC-EP
What was the moment when you decided to join the FARC-EP? Was it your own decision or did you discuss it with others? With whom?
What were your options at that time? Why did you join the FARC-EP rather than studying/working?
Why did you join the FARC-EP rather than x organization?
What motivated you to join the FARC-EP?
Did your parents support your decision to join the FARC-EP?
Were you convinced that you wanted to join the FARC-EP?

The process of joining the FARC-EP
How did you join the FARC-EP? Did you/your family/friends know someone from the FARC-EP? Were FARC-EP members visiting homes/holding meetings in your area?

How did you know where to go? Did someone come to collect you? Did you just show up?
Why did the FARC-EP accept you?
What age were you? Why did/didn't the FARC-EP accept you at that age?
Did you join alone or with others? With whom? Did they all join? Why did/didn't they join?

Part 2: Experience in the FARC-EP

Training
What happened when you joined the FARC-EP?
When did you get your nom de guerre? How did you decide on it?
How long was your training? What was the training like? What did you learn/do?
Was the training different in urban and rural structures? Was the training different for women?
After the first months, did you have any doubts about staying in the organization? What were your doubts? Why did you decide to stay?
Whom did you train with?
What was the commander course like?

Tasks
Which structure of the FARC were you assigned to?
What were your first tasks in the organization? Why were you given these tasks? How did these tasks change over time? Did you have to train again?
Were the tasks different in urban and rural structures? Were the tasks different for women?
Did you complete your tasks alone or with others? With whom?

Part 3: Middle manager roles

Characteristics
Are there different levels of middle managers?
Is the squadron commander a middle manager?
Is the role of middle manager necessary connected being a commander?
Is being a middle manager about being in charge of a particular number of guerrillas? How many?
What is the relationship between a middle manager and those they are in charge of?
Why is a middle manager seen like a father/mother by rank-and-file combatants?
Why are some middle managers followed more than others?
What is the relationship between a middle manager and top leaders? Do they give you orders? Do you report to them? What kinds of information do you pass to them?
What does a middle manager do? What are the responsibilities?
What is the relationship between a middle manager and communities?
How does a middle manager work with communities?
Does a middle manager work with other armed actors?
Is the role of middle manager different in the urban guerrilla?
Where does the middle manager role stop and top leadership start?

Personal experience
When did you consider yourself to be a middle manager for the first time? Why do you think you became a middle manager at this time?

How did you become a middle manager? Who decided to make you a middle manager? Why did they decide to assign you at that time/to that role/unit? Why did they trust you to take on this role?
What qualities/experience helped you become a middle manager?
Did you have doubts about being a middle manager given the responsibilities that this role entails?
What did you do as a middle managers that differentiated you from rank-and-file combatants?
Did attitudes toward you change when you became a middle managers? How and why?
How did you make sure that those you are in charge of as a middle manager listen to/respect you?
Did those you were in charge of come to you with problems/for advice? What kinds?
How was it being a middle manager when you were pregnant and had children?

Progression
Why did some who met the requirements become middle managers whereas others did not?
How long did you stay in x role? What roles did you have thereafter?
How did you rise in the ranks? After x period, did you receive additional responsibilities? What were these responsibilities?
What was most difficult about rising from x to x rank?
Was the process of rising in the ranks similar in the urban guerrilla?
Until when did you consider yourself to be a middle manager?

Part 4: The 2016 peace agreement

Negotiations
What was your role when the negotiations started? Did you go to Havana?
How was it being a woman in the negotiation process?
Did you receive information about what was being negotiated? How?
Were you concerned about the negotiations? Did you think the peace agreement would be signed?
Did you discuss the negotiations with those you were in charge of?
Was there resistance to the negotiations among those you were in charge of? What kinds of doubts/fears did they have? Did you convince them that the agreement was a good idea? How?
How did your relationship with those you were in charge of change during the negotiations?

Laying down of arms
When the peace agreement was signed, where did you go, and with whom? Whose decision was it?
What was your role in disarmament? Did you give an order to your unit to lay down armed?
Were those you were in charge of worried about laying down their arms?
Did you oversee the laying down of arms process? How?
How did you make sure that your unit laid down arms? Did everyone in your unit lay down arms?

Reincorporation
When disarmament finished, did your entire unit stay in the ETCR? How long were you in the ETCR?
What did you do in the ETCR? What was your daily life like? What were your roles?

What were your options? Why did you stay/leave the ETCR? Why did/didn't you move to your home region/family/city?
What options did your former unit members have? Did they discuss these options with you? Did you try to convince them to stay/leave the ETCR?
How did you create the NAR? With whom?
How many are you in the ETRC/NAR/vereda/x location?
Do you feel safe in the ETCR/NAR/vereda/x location?
Did your former unit members continue coming to you with problems/for advice? What kinds?
Do you still work with former rank-and-file ex-combatants? What are your roles in the productive project/organization/commune/political party? Can we ask you to chart your roles on paper? Is it a formal or informal role? How did you come into this role? Did you get elected? Who elected you?
How do you attract ex-combatants and communities to participate in x project/initiative?
Is there resistance among ex-combatants to your leadership? How do you maintain your leadership?
Do you still consider yourself a middle manager?
Are you still in touch with the top leadership of the organization?
Your role is dangerous today, why do you continue in it? What other challenges do you face?