



# Integrating militias

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## Question

*What conditions make militia integration more likely to be effective and what are the common associated risks? What role has the international community played in militia integration?*

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## 1. Summary

The integration of militias into armed forces is often seen as a means of preventing the resumption of conflict in post-conflict settings (Colletta, 2012, p. 48). It has been used as a strategy in a number of countries, with recent examples including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan.

Key risks associated with militia integration include:

- **Defection:** Militias can use the threat of defection to obtain greater rewards or incentives from governments who want them to integrate into the armed forces. This can result in a cycle of defection and reintegration, with militia demands constantly increasing.
- **Dissatisfaction among the armed forces:** Members of the armed forces may not be happy with militia members, who they previously fought against, obtaining positions of seniority, especially if these former militia members are promoted above long-serving officers.
- **Disconnect between militia integration and broader Security Sector Reform (SSR):** Militia integration may not fit in with broader SSR aims, such as the downsizing or professionalisation of the armed forces.
- **Ethnic divisions:** Militia integration can result in ethnic imbalances or rivalries within the armed forces. Moreover, former militia members may not shift allegiance to the central command, remaining loyal to, and taking orders from, those who were their leaders when they were militiamen.
- **Militia fragmentation:** Militias rarely integrate in full, with some remnants opposing integration. These often go on to form new groups and new allegiances.

Factors increasing the effectiveness of militia integration include:

- **Accountability:** Some form of vetting procedure is important when integrating militias. Moreover, those responsible for abuses should be held accountable for their actions.
- **Rewards/ incentives:** Militias are unlikely to agree to integration without rewards/ incentives for doing so. However, where possible these should be non-material, and should not result in further destabilisation.
- **Timeliness:** This reduces the risk of militias defecting while waiting for the integration process to be finalised.

There is a limited body of literature on militia integration into the armed forces. The literature consists largely of reports by research institutes, with some peer reviewed journal articles. Much of this literature is dated. The recent literature on militia integration focuses largely on DRC and South Sudan. There is very little recent evidence on the role of the international community in supporting militia integration. The literature identified during the course of the research was largely 'gender-blind.'

## 2. Risks associated with militia integration

### Defection

In South Sudan, leaders of armed groups took advantage of the fact that the government was

willing to make significant compromises in the militia integration process to achieve stability. They used force or the threat of violence as a bargaining chip, entering a cycle of defection and reintegration, to improve their own positions or personal wealth (Warner, 2016, p. 10). A similar situation occurred in DRC, where the government adopted a policy of 'negotiation and co-optation rather than pressure' when dealing with armed groups. This had the same result as in South Sudan, with militias using threats of desertion or the rejection of army integration to obtain the 'rewards' they desired (Baaz & Verweijen, 2012, p. 14). They had an incentive to engage in violence, as by doing so they were viewed as a more significant threat by the government, which in turn was more willing to give them what they needed to integrate. The result in DRC was the emergence of parallel power structures within the armed forces. Moreover, it weakened the divisions between the army and extra-military networks, as these groups often maintained close connections with their local civilian constituencies or 'non-integrated armed remnants' (Baaz & Verweijen, 2012, p. 14).

The perception that some militias receive more favourable concessions than others can also result in militias that have been integrated defecting. In DRC, there were several instances of militias opting for integration into the armed forces, only to defect and return to violence, as they believed other militias were being treated more favourably. In one case, a militia looted villages and raped dozens of women and children in response to hearing that they would receive 'less favourable' military ranks upon integration (Zena, 2013, p. 5).

## **Ethnic divisions**

In South Sudan, the lack of ethnic or regional quotas for militia integration meant that the ethnic composition of the armed forces did not match the ethnic composition of the country. Although the Nuer ethnic group constitute about 16% of the country's population, they made up 65-70% of the army (Warner, 2016, p. 11). The Dinka's dominance in other government positions, due to the fact that they are traditional core constituency of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), meant that smaller ethnic groups were underrepresented in powerful positions, leading to persisting grievances (Breitung et al, 2016, p. 14). Ethnic integration and mixing of units did occur, and there were attempts to relocate former militia leaders to other parts of the country. However, these were largely ineffective. Soldiers did not respect the central command, continuing instead to take orders from 'their own' leaders (Breitung et al, 2016, p. 14).

Similarly, in DRC, militia members were generally unwilling to accept postings in regions where their ethnic group was not in control. Rivalries from the civil war persisted and led to tensions between different brigades within the armed forces. Moreover, some militia leaders who became senior ranking officers within the army due to their previous militia seniority went on to build a personal support base of soldiers within the army (Knight, 2009, p. 32).

## **Dissatisfaction among the armed forces**

In South Sudan, members of the SPLA have not been happy about the militia integration process, as integrated officers are frequently offered a rank higher than that of other existing SPLA officers who had recently been engaged in fighting them. Some also regard the militia integration process as rewarding insurgency, and are concerned that SPLA officers unhappy with

their current rank could take up arms 'as an alternative path to promotion' (Small Arms Survey, 2013, p. 10).

## Disconnect between militia integration and broader SSR

In South Sudan, there was a disconnect between militia integration and broader security sector reform initiatives, which sought to downsize the armed forces and transform the SPLA into an 'accountable and affordable force' (Breitung et al, 2016, p. 10). Militia integration had the opposite effect, resulting in an increase in the size of the armed forces and in the cost of maintaining them. This point is related to one made by Krebs and Licklider, who argue that sustaining large armed forces is generally beyond the fiscal capacity of post-conflict states, which already have many legitimate demands on their limited resources, including investment in future growth. They note that in cases where military spending is high this diverts funding from other important areas such as alleviating humanitarian suffering and long-term development (2014, p. 136).

## Militia fragmentation

All integration processes leave behind militia remnants. Militias are composed of members with different interests and motives, so there is often a lack of cohesion in decision-making. Therefore, when making decisions on integration or institutionalisation, militias often fragment to create new alliances and groups (Akl, 2017, p. 13). The degree to which this happens is influenced by a number of factors:

- **Ethnicity:** The different ethnic groups within a militia, and the relationship between them, has an impact on how they fragment.
- **The background of members:** There are differences in the way that militias composed of former soldiers or professional fighters and those composed of those with no military background fragment.
- **Religion:** If militias have a religious identity, like Jihadist militias, then this will have an affect on how they fragment.
- **Political affiliations:** There are differences in the ways in which militias motivated by political ideology and those motivated by narrower economic interests fragment.
- **Tribal affiliations:** If militias consist of a majority of members from a specific tribe, then tribal interests will have an impact on how they fragment (Akl, 2017, p. 13).

## 3. Factors increasing the effectiveness of militia integration

According to Burgess (2008), the following factors are key in ensuring successful militia integration:

- 'The principles, values, and objectives of the military integration must be reflected in comprehensive peace settlements.
- There must be a strategy and resources for the demobilisation of combatants.

- Major parties must have the political will to ensure that the rank-and-file comply with leadership directives.
- All parties must be included in a flexible and adaptable process.
- A realistic assessment of the capacity of the state and security forces to perform complex tasks associated with the process of military integration must be undertaken' (p. 15).

More detail about these and other factors that increase the effectiveness of militia integration is provided below.

## **Accountability**

In order to ensure accountability, integration with systematic persecutions and vetting systems in place is the preferable. However, there is often resistance to such procedures among those to be integrated. Baaz and Verweijen advocate for the inclusion of a truth-telling dimension into integration procedures. They argue that this would 'foster some sense of accountability' and 'signal "new beginnings"' among suspected perpetrators of abuses. They suggest that in combination with training and education, this could potentially contribute to a commitment to professional values, and strengthen combatants' identification with their new institution (Baaz & Verweijen, 2012, p. 23). However, they acknowledge that such an approach cannot be used for perpetrators of grave abuses, who should at the very least be removed from command positions (Baaz & Verweijen, 2012, p. 23).

## **Rewards/ incentives**

Militia members are unlikely to voluntarily accept integration. Thus it is important to determine which types of benefits they will be offered as an incentive to integrate. Such incentives often include professional categorisation, regular income, social benefits, government pardons and sometimes opportunities to participate in official politics (Akl, 2017, p. 12). Discussing the case of DRC, Baaz & Verweijen argue that it is important that pay-offs to integrated groups do not create further destabilisation. They suggest that providing non-material pay-offs, such as educational opportunities abroad, is one way of doing this. Moreover, they state that it is important to ensure that pay-offs do not become entrenched, as this would potentially give integrated groups a level of financial autonomy that would enable them to create a parallel network within the armed forces (2012, p. 24).

## **Detailed integration agreements**

Militia integration agreements should have clear time-lines and clearly specify the rights and duties of the signatories in detail (Baaz & Verweijen, 2012, p. 24). Moreover, it is important that there are strict conditions for the handing over of arms and for ensuring that all fighters are either integrated or demobilized. For this to happen there needs to be control and verification in the areas formerly controlled by integrating armed groups, in order make sure that there are no arms caches or remaining combatants (Baaz & Verweijen, 2012, p. 24). Baaz and Verweijen suggest that external actors, like UN military observers, could play a role in verification (2012, pp. 24-25).

## Timeliness

Militia integration processes should be carried out in a timely manner. Failure to do this can result in re-defection, as happened with David Yau Yau's militia in South Sudan in 2012. The group chose to resume rebellion as a result of the long waiting process for integration (Small Arms Survey, 2013, p. 10).

## 4. Role of the international community in militia integration

A literature review published by the University of Birmingham identifies two key lessons on the role of the international community in military integration generally:

- International assistance can significantly increase the chances of successfully achieving integration. The most common forms of assistance are flexible 'process' support and technical military training.
- International actors can play important arbitration roles if invited to do so by both parties to the integration process (Knight, 2009, p. 24).

A peer-reviewed journal article on military integration, on the other hand, argues that integration is more effective if the international community does not play a central role in the process. It cites activities like providing side payments, offering reassurance and applying pressure as being indicative of a weak commitment to peace among the warring parties, and thus as a predictor of negative outcomes when the international community leaves (Krebs & Licklider, 2015, p. 104).

The literature search undertaken for this report found little evidence of recent international support for militia integration processes. In the cases covered by this report, the international community appears to have played a very limited role in militia integration. The available information on international support for militia integration in South Sudan is contradictory. According to a policy brief published by Small Arms Survey, the international community reportedly actively supported negotiations with militia leaders in South Sudan (2013, p. 12). However, the nature of this support is unclear. On the other hand, an article in the *Stability Journal* states that no foreign assistance was requested or provided to support the integration process (Warner, 2016, p. 9). The article does however state that the UN provided limited support for some aspects of the military integration process, such as logistical assistance for some of the ceasefire negotiations with the late George Athor, leader of the South Sudan Defence Army, and during David Yau Yau's first rebellion (2010-2011) (Warner, 2016, p. 9). The literature reviewed does not provide any information on the extent to which this support was effective.

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## About this report

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