

From Violent Political Conflict to Criminality

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Principle Investigator

Professor Roddy Brett, University of Bristol

Mershon Center for International Security Studies

Dr. Teri Murphy, The Ohio State University

Introduction: War to Peace Transition

The majority of violent political conflicts come to formal cessation through negotiated peace settlements (Caplan 2019). Peace agreements signed within such contexts habitually provide stipulations for armed groups – whether insurgent/guerrilla groups or paramilitary organizations – to transition through processes of demobilization, disarmament and reincorporation and, in some cases, to transform into official political actors/parties (Matanock 2018; Marshall and Ishiyama 2016). In parallel, peace accords frequently mandate the reform of state security forces. Security sector reform typically leads to the transformation of the structures of state security forces, the lustration of individuals accused of violations of international law, the revision of military doctrine and, where appropriate, the diminishment of their numbers, which often spiral during violent conflict (Bell and Wise 2022; Mac Ginty and Wanis-St. John 2022).

However, what follows rarely amounts to a clear-cut ‘peace’: post-accord states and societies do not follow a linear logic – from violence to peace – in the aftermath of war (Cheng et al. 2018). Rather, the shadow of war is cast long, and states and societies often remain post-accord and peaceless (Brett 2022). Under such conditions, conflict recidivism represents a major global security threat, given that approximately half of those conflicts settled through peace agreements collapse within five to ten years. When peace does hold, its quality remains poor, and life is frequently perilous, particularly for women and girls (Joshi and Wallenstein 2018). Coexistence between former armed adversaries and their political and social constituencies remains brittle, and the geographical territories where they reside often remain violent, while intergroup antagonism in the aftermath of violent conflict perdures, signifying that intergroup reconciliation is limited (Brett 2025).

After peace accords have been signed, although former armed adversaries may craft out a degree of ‘thin’ reconciliation / accommodation at the national political level, victims and perpetrators (and those that cut across both categories), and civilians who see themselves as bystanders, reside as uneasy neighbors, living in hyper-localized violent territories and geographies (Brett, Mac Ginty, Voyvodic, Sagherian-Dickey 2024). In such intimate communities, intergroup, intragroup and, at times, interpersonal relationships remain shaped by conflict identities and narratives and by the mutual distrust and ongoing discrimination that molded past violence or were hardened by it (Bar-Tal 2013). In such contexts, a discrete dichotomy between the past and present is seldom experienced, particularly for victims of violence (Brett 2022): the enduring scars of political violence sculpt a legacy that obfuscates the past, present and future.

At the same time, the embedded afterlife of war often means that states and societies are characterised by ongoing structural and direct violence, both political and criminal. States transitioning out of violent conflict are typically debilitated, their institutions weak and not infrequently infiltrated or captured by armed actors linked to past violence (Mac Ginty, Wanis St-John 2022). Under such conditions, the provision of public services by state institutions is often systemically weak.

War and its impact do not end then with the final bullet or with the signing of a peace agreement (Verdeja 2009): rather, both war continuity and its legacy are evident across a wide spectrum of social, political, economic and socio-cultural spheres, and within the physical space of territory. At the individual level, trauma, and its physical manifestations, may be passed down intergenerationally (Mulligan, Quinn, Hamadmad et al. 2025). Civilians, moreover, continue to suffer from conflict-related illnesses long after an accord has been signed (Rosoux 2017). Indigenous women in Maya communities in Guatemala, for example, were dying of what they called ‘sadness’ decades after the state-sponsored genocide had terminated in 1983. Similarly, unexploded ordnance littered across rural territories prevents farmers from accessing their livelihoods, while pollution seeps from such ordnance, further degrading ecosystems often already devastated as a result of war (Lin 2024). Ultimately, the lived experience of the zero hour of conflict termination is habitually meaningless, as civilians face regimes characterized by ‘no war, no peace’ (Bell 2006).

The Project: From Violent Political Conflict to Criminality

Within this wider context, this project focuses on one significantly important aspect of the aforementioned *peace-conflict continuity spectrum*, an aspect key both to recidivism and the quality of post-accord peace: *the nexus between violent political conflict and criminality*.

The transition from violent political conflict to criminality has been a common phenomenon across the globe, including in Central America (Kruijt and Koonings 1998; Ruiz 2020; McSweeney 2022; 2023; Cruz, Rosen and Mizrahi 2023), Brazil (Abdenur 2019), Northern Ireland (Jupp and Garrod 2019), the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC (Titeca and Edmond 2019), Iraq (Kulić and Bolhuis 2023), Colombia (Durán-Martínez 2018; Kerr 2020; Valencia and Sinisterra 2021; Goyes and Sandberg 2023), Syria (Vianna de Azevedo 2020), South Africa (Shaw and Haysom 2016), to name a few. Many such contexts share a series of interlocking, mutually reinforcing economic, political, demographic factors, including violent dynamics within territories affected by conflict and entrenched corruption linked to drug production and trafficking, the widespread availability of weapons, land dispossession and expropriation affecting rural communities and environmental destruction, often linked to the conflict (Devine, Magliocca, McSweeney, Tellman, Fagan, Sesnie and Nielsen 2021). Said cases are characterized, moreover, by transnational dynamics, including relationships and capital flows (Devine, Magliocca, McSweeney, Tellman, Fagan, Sesnie and Nielsen 2021).

The specific examples above evidence, furthermore, how post-accord criminality is a diverse phenomenon, which incorporates a broad range of distinct patterns of violence, criminality and organized crime and social and political actors, including drug production and trafficking (Central America, Colombia, Myanmar, Iraq, Afghanistan), gang activities (Central America, Colombia), human trafficking, including of women for sexual slavery (the Balkans, Brazil, Iraq-Syria, Central America, Mexico), illegal mining (Brazil, Colombia), the oil economy (DRC), smuggling enterprises, including of weapons and goods (Syria, Colombia), the illegal wildlife trade (Brazil).

The *conflict-criminality* trajectory itself is not the preserve particular type of armed group or individual actor – i.e. state (security forces) or non-state (paramilitary/insurgent) actors – nor is it a pathway adopted exclusively by groups linked to the armed/political right or the left. In the case of state security forces that previously deployed counter-insurgency strategies and structures against insurgent groups, individuals or entire structures often become embedded in post-accord criminal networks and activity in the aftermath of an accord, increasingly orienting themselves toward illicit and personal profit. As empirical cases from across the globe evidence, structures within armed groups have habitually transformed into criminal organizations in the once a peace agreement has been signed, often deploying their existing architecture, armed capability, capacity for territorial control, and (licit and illicit) networks to traffic drugs, weapons, or people (Valencia and Sinisterra 2021).

Of course, the dichotomy between political violence *during conflict* and criminality *in its wake* is not a helpful one. Armed political groups frequently engage in criminal activity through established, clandestine criminal structures during conflict and before a peace agreement has even been signed across local and national territories and geographies and, moreover, at the transnational level (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Gutiérrez 2022). At the same time, so-called criminal groups that are active in the aftermath of a peace agreement frequently engage in political activities, whether this is influencing local political parties, infiltrating state institutions or buying electoral candidates. In this regard, the political-criminal divorce is often unhelpful: organizations are dynamic (Trejos Rosero, Bravo Hernández, Badillo Sarmiento 2024), capable of pursuing multiple agendas, as was the case in Iraq, for example (Kulić and Bolhuis 2023). In these scenarios, rather than armed groups being dismantled, empirical data demonstrates how they mutate (or consolidate) to adapt to the new ‘democratic’ post-accord context or in a vacuum left by the demobilization of another armed group. Under such conditions actors have become increasingly involved in organized criminality, aiming frequently to monopolize criminal activity (Trejos Rosero, Bravo Hernández, Badillo Sarmiento 2024). Post-accord criminal organizations, as such, may originate within or be shaped by the web of relationships – either competitive or cooperative – developed between the security forces (legal and illegal) and other sectors within society (politicians, private sector and other civilians) during the conflict (Omelicheva and Markowitz 2021). This phenomenon is particularly the case where conflict ‘spoils’ are widespread (such as conflict diamonds or narcotics, for example), corruption is systemic and where state structures are compromised or weak.

In other cases, former-combatants struggle individually with reintegration and turn to crime for economic survival; others return to armed struggle through the revolving-door of failed DDR processes. Often, the lack of meaningful provisions within the peace agreement itself – related, for example, to weak stipulations concerning DDR, socio-economic rights, ownership of land, territorial control and governance, employment opportunities and the like – and ongoing structural violence (poverty and political/socio-economic exclusion) may play a role in driving individuals towards armed struggle or criminality (Bangura, Owusu, Quaye 2023). In cases such as Colombia, where former combatants have been systematically executed after the formal cessation of conflict, and where societal norms and attitudes tend towards rejecting their shift from insurgent to civilian, individuals may return to the armed struggle or use their networks to gain access to the opportunities afforded by criminality. Finally, in those cases where armed paramilitary structures have been excluded from peace negotiations, individual

members (and the structures themselves) may mutate towards criminality, a trajectory often reinforced by the links between paramilitary structures and formal political and military actors who retain access to powerful networks (Brett 2016).

The above insights tell us something about the paths taken by armed political actors in the aftermath of a peace agreement across diverse, yet unconnected empirical cases. However, little systematic research has been carried out into the trajectory of political actors and their structures in the aftermath of negotiated settlements from a comparative, empirically led, qualitative perspective.

Taking as a point of the departure the problematization of the political / criminal dichotomy, this project, *From Violent Political Conflict to Criminality*, will fill this research gap by exploring two interconnected **research questions**:

- *How and why do armed political groups/structures (and individual perpetrators??) overlap with criminal networks before, during, and after conflict?*
- *Which factors shape how the activities and strategies of armed groups/structures and their individual (former) members mutate from political violence to criminality and organized crime?*

Corollary research questions will compound the main research questions and guide our study. These include:

- *How, if at all, does the way a conflict ends shape the conflict-criminality trajectory? In short, how, if at all, do DDR and SSR provisions, transitional justice mechanisms and wider stipulations within peace agreements shape the conflict-criminality trajectory?*
- *What role do wider factors play in enabling or hindering the conditions that facilitate the conflict-criminality trajectory? In short, how do the character of state institutions (weak/strong) and state capacity, the relative availability of economic opportunities and 'spoils' shape individual and group decisions to participate in illicit activities?*
- *To what extent do counterinsurgent organizational structures, ideologies, and relationships with the state shape post-conflict criminal trajectories?*
- *To what extent does the strength of the state shape types of criminal activity and levels of violence?*
- *What role do geo-political / strategic factors play in enabling or hindering criminal activity in the aftermath of a conflict? Here, proximity to borders and the existence of transnational criminal networks may play a role.*
- *What role does the availability of new technologies (such as drones) play in facilitating the conflict-criminality trajectory?*
- *Does the inclusion / exclusion of specific armed actors from peace negotiations have a bearing on violence to criminality trajectories?*
- *What lessons can be drawn from different case studies to inform more effective policies for post-accord security and social cohesion?*

Case Studies and Justification

The project will work with **three** specific case studies: Colombia, Ecuador and Northern Ireland. The research on these specific cases will be empirically-led inductive and qualitative. There will be **four** cross-cutting thematic axes: (i) *gender*, (ii) *legitimacy*, (iii) *demobilization, disarmament and reincorporation and peacebuilding*, and (iv) *territorial trap and extraterritoriality*.

Two of the case studies (Colombia; Northern Ireland) have experienced highly localized, protracted internal armed conflicts, characterized by proportionately high-levels of egregious conflict-related violence perpetrated by diverse state and non-state actors. In both cases, the armed conflicts were followed by national and internationally-led peace processes – leading to comprehensive peace settlements signed in 1998 and 2016, respectively). The peace accords signed led to considerable investment in post-accord statebuilding/reconstruction interventions.

The case of Ecuador – currently the most violent country in Latin America – is, in part, an outlier, given that the country has not undergone a civil war or internal armed conflict. However, in 2024, President Noboa decreed an internal armed conflict against 22 criminal groups operating in the country, labeling them ‘terrorist’ organizations. Furthermore, Ecuador’s recent criminal trajectory is bound intimately to the ending of Colombia’s own armed conflict, representing a spillover effect in Colombia’s southern neighbour. Here, we see the profound impact of former Colombian paramilitaries now operating in Ecuador (where Mexican and Albanian cartels are also operating). Criminal organizations operating in the border department of Nariño (Colombia) and historically linked to Colombias’ leftist insurgencies, such as the Commandos of the Frontier, have direct links to criminal organizations currently operating in Ecuador. In this regard, while Ecuador is not experiencing a conventional armed conflict, as such, criminal and political violence in the country is closely shaped by the dynamics of Colombia’s armed conflict. Ecuador represents, moreover, a possible emblematic case of hybrid political and criminal warfare, one that is likely to be replicated across other regions.

The cases and their respective political/criminal trajectories differ significantly. Across Colombia and Northern Ireland, fragile formal peace agreements have held and accommodation between elite actors has been crafted. In the third case (Ecuador), the government is using the narrative of armed conflict, while deploying strategic military operations akin to a country undergoing civil war. Significantly, all cases demonstrate high indicators of criminality. Moreover, criminal activity within each case study is characterized by significant transnational components.

Case selection criteria have then been carefully chosen, permitting the formulation of a matrix that covers a series of variables with respect to the nature, causes, and impact of the historical conflict and ongoing criminal violence. They represent a combination of:

- Two most similar (Colombia, Northern Ireland) and
- Most different (Ecuador)

All cases, nevertheless, demonstrate significantly active criminal networks linked to transnational actors. Two cases (Colombia and Ecuador) demonstrate high incidence of new technologies employed by criminal actors.

In the case of Northern Ireland, the peace process ended in 1998, yet criminal activity and paramilitary operations are ongoing. The Colombian peace process ended in 2016, representing, as such, a more recent case study, which is characterized by a significantly high number and diversity of armed actors involved in both political and criminal activity. The Colombia case remains active and continues, in this regard, to evolve, despite the recent peace accord. Ecuador represents, as stated, a context where formal civil war has not been waged, and yet where the factors driving criminality and inherently linked to the armed conflict in neighboring Colombia. In this regard, we see one case as historical (Northern Ireland); one immediate ongoing (Colombia); and one future oriented (Ecuador).

The following factors are representative of the cases:

Region:

2 Latin American (upper-middle income)
1 European (high income);

Chronological Framework:

2 Cold War conflicts extending into post-Cold War
1 Non-Cold War Conflict

Duration of Armed Conflict/Violence:

Colombia 53 years
Ecuador 18 months
Northern Ireland 30 years

Nature of Armed Conflict:

Colombia – 1 ideological/drug/terrorism related
Ecuador – criminal
Northern Ireland – sectarian / nationalist

Victimization of Civilians:

Colombia – 385,000 of a total of 450,000
Ecuador – TBC: rise from homicide rate of 6.7 inhabitants per 100,000 to 44.5 per 100,000 (beyond that of Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, and Honduras. A 640% increase in child homicides since 2019
Northern Ireland – 1879 of a total of 3568

All cases will be analysed in terms of their own merit through the research questions (and corollary questions) outlined above. Each country will, moreover, be analyzed comparatively across all three cases. Furthermore, the project will employ four crosscutting lenses, both as specific lenses through which to read each case study, and as a means of cross-case analysis: (i) *gender*, (ii) *legitimacy*; (iii) *demobilization, disarmament and reincorporation and peacebuilding*,

and (iv) *territorial trap and extraterritoriality*. The crosscutting analytical lenses will strengthen the comparative insights to be gained from the project, while also reinforcing the original contribution of the project.

Comparative Framework

Insights from wider scholarship have meticulously demonstrated how conflict relapse and poor quality peace result from inadequate DDR measures, absent or weak implementation of socio-economic or rights-related provisions (Goodhand 2008; Lemay-Hebert and Murshed 2016; Brett 2017), post-agreement incidence of political and criminal violence (Stedman 1997), economic stagnation, the post-settlement political exclusion of former combatants (Hardgrove 2017; Knight and Ozerdem 2004), and the inadequate embedding of democratic structures within society and state (Keels and Nichols 2018). Our three case studies demonstrate incidences of all of the above aspects. However, we intend to move beyond analyses framed rigidly through factors that address post-agreement recidivism and poor-quality peace, in order to allow us to think comparatively about the degree to which the deployment of formal peacemaking and peacebuilding models (or the lack thereof) shapes post-agreement criminality, at the local, territorial, and national levels. While two cases (Colombia and Northern Ireland) speak directly to formal peacebuilding paradigms, the remaining case (Ecuador) allows us to look from a distinct perspective, where formal peacebuilding models have not, as yet, played a role. In this regard, we are interested in developing insights that shed light on peacemaking and peacebuilding models; factors shaping political and criminal violence; the overlapping of political and criminal economies, structures and actors. As such, the following themes below guide the comparative analysis, and speak to diverse levels of analysis (local, national, transnational):

- Whether peace accord design and peacebuilding frameworks can mitigate the emergence of criminal actors in the wake of a peace settlement
- How provisions for demobilization, disarmament and reincorporation shape politico-criminal actions and trajectories
- Who are the politico-criminal actors and what are their motivations and objectives (such as profit, control of illicit economies, political power and so on)
- How political are the criminal actors and how criminal are the political actors
- The nature of post-agreement politico-criminal violence: what strategies are deployed, what kind of violence is asserted, do actors employ new technologies (drones), who their victims are
- How states combat criminal activities in the aftermath of an armed conflict
- What is the impact on civilians and how do they learn to live with presence of politico-criminality: do they collaborate, avoid, and so on
- What is the impact on the environment
- The transnational nature of the politico-criminal actors
- The role of gender in shaping politico-criminal actions and trajectories
- The degree to which legitimacy and legitimization play a role in shaping politico-criminal actions and trajectories

Contribution

The project will generate new knowledge that advances academic understanding of this topic by carrying out empirically-led, qualitative research into the trajectory of political actors and their structures in the aftermath of negotiated settlements from a comparative perspective. The research is original from two mutually reinforcing perspectives: firstly, the comparison of the three case studies themselves; secondly, the deployment of key crosscutting and comparative analytical frameworks built into the research. In this regard, the project will build theory and comparative learning through engagement with the empirical case studies. At the same time, and significantly, the project will inform practical strategies for policymakers at the international and national levels with the aim of rupturing definitively cycles of violence and building sustainable peace.

Team Composition

The team will consist of 12 people:

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

- *Professor Roddy Brett*, University of Bristol

MERSHON CENTER:

- *Dr. Teri Murphy*, The Ohio State University

CASE STUDY ANALYSTS

Northern Ireland Case:

- *Dr. Clara Voyvodic*, University of Bradford
- *Dr. Claire Hazelden*, Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime

Ecuador Case:

- *Dr. Renato Rivera*, Global Initiative against Organised Crime
- *Glaeldyss Gonzalez*, International Crisis Group, contracted as independent expert

Colombia Case:

- *Dr. Carlos Moreno*, Universidad Pontificia Javeriana, Colombia
- *Professor Luis Trejos*, Universidad del Norte, Colombia

CROSSCUTTING THEMATIC ANALYSTS

- *Professor Mathew Coleman*, The Ohio State University, Transnational Dynamics
- *Professor Hollie Nzitatira*, The Ohio State University, DDR
- *Deborah Bonello*, Insight Crime, contracted as independent expert: Gender
- *Genevieve Kotarska*, University of Bristol: Legitimacy

ANNEX 1

Structure and Timeline

Phase 1: July-October 2025: PROJECT FRAMING AND LAUNCH

July – September 2025:

- Initial workshop at the Universidad Javeriana, Bogota, Colombia, during which time experts will present ideas relating to the project research questions
- The project lead will carry out a wide-ranging literature review that identifies the four case studies and elucidates specific insights from them that will form the core content of the comparative study

OUTCOME: A five-page document that sets out the project framework (including case studies and research questions)

October 2025:

- The project will be launched at the Mershon Center for International Security Studies, The Ohio State University

OUTCOME:

- A roundtable with OSU faculty to present the project and develop further insights building on OSU faculty ideas and knowledge
- Meetings with minimum two OSU faculty to discuss research methodologies
- A graduate masterclass to present and discuss the core intellectual and empirical pillars of the project with graduate students

Phase 2: October – December 2025: FINALIZATION OF PROJECT PROPOSAL

- The project lead will finalize the research and methodology framework for the project
- The project lead will carry out monthly meetings with the country experts to support the development of their specific research/methodology

OUTCOME:

- The final draft of the research project
- Agreements (MOU) with the empirical case study experts

Phase 3: January – May 2026: DATA COLLECTION

- Project lead to supervise the empirical research process, including regular bi-weekly meetings with team members and development of comparative knowledge base

OUTCOME:

- Research design for each country case study: interview format, interviewee program, specific case study areas/towns/cities/neighborhoods/criminal groups
- 25-30 interviews for each case study
- Crosscutting lens built with thematic experts for analysis of cases

- Ethics approval obtained

Phase 4: May – July 2026: DATA ANALYSIS

- Project lead to support experts in the writing of seven draft papers (one per case study; one per crosscutting theme) that address the research questions and showcase the insights from each case study and thematic analysis
- Project lead to develop an introduction to a special issue/collected volume (with Bristol University Press perhaps?)

OUTCOME:

- Seven draft articles on the case studies authored by the case study and thematic experts
- Introduction to a special issue or collected volume

Phase 5: (TBD) 2026: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

- The project findings will be presented by the research team at the Mershon Center for International Security Studies, The Ohio State University

OUTCOME:

- A policy white paper with Mershon (potentially co-authored with PolicyBristol)
- A roundtable with OSU faculty and policymakers / practitioners to present the findings
- A graduate masterclass to present and discuss the core intellectual and empirical pillars of the project with graduate students