

# Book Review: Demobilizing Irregular Forces

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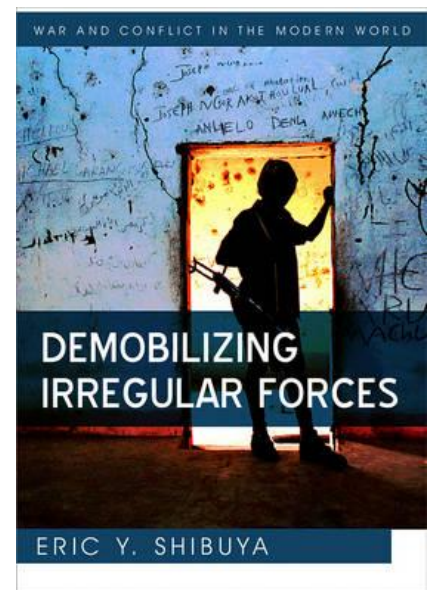
*Demobilizing Irregular Forces* is one of the first comprehensive introductions to the process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) in the contemporary world. Examining regions as varied as Africa, Asia and Central America, it guides readers through the different stages of the DDR process as well as assessing competing perspectives surrounding its implementation. **Ryan Evans** finds an elegant read that will appeal to students and practitioners looking for material outside of the standard reading.



**Demobilizing Irregular Forces. Eric Y. Shibuya. Polity.**

## Find this book:

Bringing irregular armed actors back into the fold of society is a fitting topic for [Eric Shibuya](#), who has spent much of his career in Professional Military Education in the United States. It is a topic that the U.S. Marine Officers who fill his classroom have grappled with in Afghanistan's restive Helmand Province – a place I came to know well when I worked there for the U.S. Department of Defense as an adviser. In Helmand, while Western officers fight a war and try to train Afghan police and soldiers, British and U.S. officers are also working hard to reintegrate insurgents back into Afghan society. It is a delicate balancing act. And it is reintegration that concerns Shibuya, along with disarmament and demobilization, which together form an acronym well-known to scholars of conflict, military officers around the world, and peace-building and keeping professionals at the United Nations, the World Bank, and other international bodies – DDR. DDR has received a great deal of attention as it has been applied by local and international officials seeking to end conflicts or ensure they remain ended in Sierra Leone, Columbia, Liberia, Cambodia, and many other countries – including Mali, which is now in the news for drawing a French military intervention.



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This book elegantly and persuasively synthesizes a wide body of literature and as such will be useful to all of these audiences – particularly for junior practitioners looking to read beyond the texts of their official manuals and for academics new to the subject who want to get a lay of the land. However, while it is an excellent primer, perhaps even the best available, as a handbook it does not offer any original research or penetrating observations.

DDR is a difficult subject to tackle as a holistic subject with generalizable principles, and Shibuya cautions against doing this while still grappling with the fact that he is writing a book about DDR with general, albeit heavily caveated arguments. This is an ongoing tension in the book. He works hard to remain true to the principles best expressed by Prof. Mats Berbal and Dr. David Ucko in their path-breaking DDR research programme – that it is dangerous to view DDR as a universal set of best practices than can be applied across all contexts. Each case of DDR must be studied and analysed within its political context and the broader post- or mid-conflict political processes taking place, of which DDR may be a part. Between different cases of DDR, there are major differences between the armed groups concerned, history and sociology of the societies involved, and the levels of involvement of different external actors. Each case of DDR presents its organizers and sponsors with different policy choices and dilemmas that must be studied in their contexts. Shibuya wisely explains, 'social context and psychological skills will always trump bureaucratic arrangements and technocratic processes.' While this warning has been announced before, it is one that bears repeating for technocrats at the UN, the World Bank, USAID, and DFID. These

organizations have an institutional faith in technocratic processes that are too often applied in the face of contravening unique historical and sociological realities.

Still, there are still *some* general principles and *some* 'lessons learned'. *Demobilizing Irregular Forces* readily describes these, such as the need to link the national to the local, or the macro to the micro, as well as the simple but oft-ignored fact that disarmament may not and need not precede the demobilization and reintegration. These may be either sequenced or integrated. Crucially, the author situated DDR within a larger conversation about Security Sector Reform and political peace-building efforts. DDR cannot be understood as a subject in and of itself and Shibuya deftly explains why.

Yet despite the achievements of this text, it lacks granularity and colour. Too often, it stalls in lengthy literature review. Shibuya has mastered the literature, but this reviewer wanted to read more about what the author himself thinks. Shibuya hints at some original ideas, but does not work to develop them. In the final chapter, when he summarizes the key debates in the field – security vs. development, integration vs. phasing, targeting groups vs. individuals, and others – Shibuya misses an opportunity to break new ground and make bold arguments. This does not mean he does not offer important arguments. His most important argument – peppered throughout the book is that 'oftentimes, the things that can be *measured* are not the things that *matter*.' While it has been said before, just like his warning against a blind faith in bureaucracy and technocratic processes, it bears repeating to a Western military and government audience obsessed with metrics and 'measures of effect.' Success in disarmament may not be in the number or proportion of weapons taken from combatants, but from the trust developed between parties and the state. Demobilization may involve physical processes, but the psychological dimension of a person leaving an armed group – which may never be measured – is the most important.

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**Ryan Evans** is a Research Fellow at the Center for National Policy in Washington, DC. He specializes in the conflict in Afghanistan, civil society and foreign policy in Turkey and Egypt, and Islamist mobilization. From 2010-11, Evans worked for the US Army's Human Terrain System in Afghanistan where he was embedded as a social scientist supporting the British-led Task Force Helmand. For his PhD research at the King's College London War Studies Department, Evans is examining the relationship between Islamic political activism and foreign and security policies in Turkey and Egypt. [Read more reviews by Ryan.](#)