
Fighters for Peace

*Ex-combatants: Lessons learned - “Formers” engage in
preventing violence and extremism*

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1. Introduction

Working with “formers” (former extremists and ex-combatants) in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) can be very impactful on target groups such as marginalized and excluded youth who are at the brink of radicalization or who have already taken the path of extremism. This article highlights the work of Fighters for Peace (FFP) from a frontline practitioners’ angle. Fighters for Peace is a Lebanese Non-Governmental Organization composed of former combatants of the Lebanese civil war from different political, religious and social backgrounds who have undergone a profound personal change process and who engage now in peace building, reconciliation processes and the prevention of extremism and violence.

2. Background: The Lebanese Civil War

2.1 War period

The Lebanese civil war was a multi-faceted conflict that lasted from 1975 until 1990. Internally, religious, political and economic factors played a role in this conflict. The civil war quickly turned into a more regional and international conflict, as Palestinian fighters were targeting Israel from Lebanese ground, and international players such as the former Soviet Union, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria as well as France and USA had their significant share in this conflict.

The war ended in 1990 with the Ta'if Agreement. This peace agreement granted amnesty to everyone who had been involved in the Lebanese civil war. Former war lords became political leaders in a power-sharing system. This was supposed to be a transitional solution in order to stop the war, but the former war lords are still in key positions until today, and the sectarian divide continues to exist in the small Mediterranean country.

For the combatants of the different militias, the amnesty law granted them the transition to civil life without any prosecution or charges. This can be seen as something positive. However, for the war victims, such as the relatives of those who were forcibly kidnapped and disappeared – and who had often been murdered on check points or in detention centers – the absence of a transitional justice process is painful. Until today, 17,400 persons remain missing and their fate is unknown.

Since the former war lords are still in power, there's no political will to open up the files of the past and to deal with the memory of the Lebanese civil war. A common history book that deals with the Lebanese civil war doesn't exist. War memorials are few. In the public discourse, "turning the page" rather than dealing with the past is common rhetoric. Therefore, some researchers speak of a state-induced amnesia.

2.2 Post-war Lebanon

Post-war Lebanon has seen many cycles of violence after 1990. In a non-inclusive list, here some examples: In 2005, Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was killed by a car bomb. Many others in the convoy died. During the same year, journalists and political leaders were assassinated. In 2008, Beirut witnessed street fights among Sunni and Shiite youth and the country was on the edge of plunging into period of renewed civil strife, only 18 years after the civil war had ended. In 2012, in Lebanon's second largest city Tripoli, Sunni and Alawite militia groups fought each other for months in a bloody conflict.

Since the cycles of violence and acute conflict continued after the end of the war, a group of former combatants from formerly feuding militias came together in a press conference in 2012, presenting an open letter to the young generation of fighters in Tripoli, urging them not to repeat the same mistakes that they had once committed. The media responded positively to this press conference, which made headlines. This encouraged the ex-combatants to set up their own organization, because they felt that their voices mattered. "Fighters for Peace "(FFP) was born.

3. Fighters for Peace

The organization was officially registered as a non-profit organization in Lebanon in May 2014. It started with five members and now has around 50 members (2019). Over 35 members are ex-combatants (both male and female, from almost all political parties and religious sects). Other

members are peace activists, researchers, journalists, psychologists, educators and youth and others.

All ex-combatants of Fighters for Peace went through a deep and often painful process of critical reflection and inner change. Various activities helped them to change and to come out as ex-fighters in public (which is still somewhat of a taboo, despite the amnesty law):

- Biography work: In group sessions which are led by a certified biography work professional and a psychologist, ex-combatants experience a safe space to voice their own war memories, hopes, dreams, losses and regrets. Biography work aims to unite the past, present and future perspectives and sets the personal experience into a broader socio-political context and supports the strengthening of inner resources.
- Training in public speaking, presentation skills, story telling: Most ex-combatants from FFP received this training so that they could act as testimonies of war in front of an audience.

It must be noted that in post-war Lebanon, no official reintegration process took place. Some ex-combatants were integrated into the state sector as government employees, a few became part of the Lebanese army, but most were left alone and had to struggle to make ends meet – many of them ended up in the informal sector. There was no psychological or psycho-social support at all at the end of the war, neither for the ex-combatants nor for victims. The concept of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), from which both victims, civilians and former fighters can suffer is still new to Lebanon. Many Lebanese suffer from PTSD as a consequence of lived war experiences, and there's a danger that the trauma are transferred to future generations, which can potentially fuel extremist behaviors within post-war generations.

Having said that, the ex-combatants of Fighters for Peace, through their inner reflection process and their willingness to share their experiences and lessons learned, they disengaged from their former militias. Fighters for Peace provides them with a new family, and a new home.

3.1 Activities of Fighters for Peace for Prevention of Violence and Extremism -Primary Prevention

From 2014 until mid 2018, FFP has held over 300 events, reaching around 18,000 direct beneficiaries.

Fighters for Peace uses a multiperspective, narrative approach to challenge existing stereotypes and preconceptions. The ex-combatants of the organization use their personal stories as a warning to future generations not to commit the mistakes they once had done. They encourage the general public – and especially the youth – to think critically, not to follow leaders blindly, and most of all, not to see violence as a legitimate means to reach one's goals. With the following activities, FFP seeks to prevent renewed conflicts in Lebanon and the Arab region:

- Dialogue sessions: The ex-combatants of Fighters for Peace act as testimonies of the war and share their war experiences and stories of change with Lebanese youth in schools, universities, libraries, youth clubs.
- Photo exhibition: The exhibition, which showcases a collage of war pictures and current portraits of ex-combatants, is entitled "Transformations" and highlights the transformation process of each ex-fighter. For some, being shown in the exhibition was the first time to come out in public as ex-fighter.

- Video-recorded interviews (testimonies): The video recorded interviews show the critical reflections of ex-combatants on the war and are a warning to future generations not to repeat the same mistakes.
- Playback theater: Playback theater is an interactive form of theater, where the audience shares their war memories, which are then reenacted on the spot. Playback theater is a powerful tool of personal and societal healing. For many members of the audience, both ex-combatants as well as war victims and civilians, the forum of the playback theater is a first step to talk about the war, to start healing both the personal and societal wounds of war, and it is also a first step towards reconciliation with oneself and "the other".
- Documentaries: The documentary series is a contribution to the collective memory of the war, highlighting different incidents, angles and perspectives of the war. Ex-combatants who chose to be part of such documentaries have the opportunity to talk in depth about their own lived experiences, views and reflections.

With these activities, Fighters for Peace works on a general, societal level about Dealing with the Past. By targeting both youth, as well as the general public with their shared stories, FFP hopes to prevent further conflicts and engagement in violent extremism.

3.2 Fighters for Peace's activities as Secondary Prevention: Disengaging recent fighters in Tripoli

As mentioned in 2.2, Lebanon faced renewed cycles of violence and limited local conflicts during its post-war period. Therefore, Fighters for Peace felt the urge to act in communities which are currently in conflict, or still divided, and targets groups which were already radicalized and had – at least some of them – engaged in violent extremism.

For example Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city, witnessed a conflict between Alawite and Sunni neighborhoods in 2012. Although the conflict calmed down, divisions still exist. Together with other NGOs and local leaders, FFP assisted the local population to formulate a Roadmap to Reconciliation. FFP's part was to reach out to the recent combatants of the feuding sides, to hold focus group meetings separately first, and at a later stage to bring the fighters from both sides together to weekend workshops so that they could formulate their vision for a more peaceful city.

As a first step, Fighters for Peace was supposed to engage with small focus groups of each side separately at first. However, the leaders came with almost a hundred followers to the first meetings – and they were armed. FFP's ex-combatants asked them to put their guns on the table. The recent fighters, being a bit shocked at first, agreed. The ex-combatants of Fighters for Peace made it clear to the recent fighters that they had been in their situation before – and that was why they knew how they thought, what they feared, and how they acted. This was the first step to build trust – the ice was broken.

Consequently, FFP held hundreds of meetings – small group as well as one-to-one meetings and bigger gatherings – with the recent combatants and their communities. It became clear that for the first time, the fighters of Tripoli found a counterpart which could be trusted. It was very important for them to be valued as persons, to have someone who would show interest in their situation and listen to their grievances.

As further steps, after this initial bonding and trust building, FFP managed to bring the formerly feuding sides together for workshops, cultural events and bigger gatherings. Recent fighters as

well as other community members from Tripoli gave their testimonies about the conflict, which are accessible online. The recent combatants engaged actively in the formulation of the Roadmap to Reconciliation. Last, but not least, Fighters for Peace has gained a little offspring in Tripoli – the recent fighters FFP worked with formed their own peace group.

FFP's activities in Tripoli can be seen as a success story of disengagement, where former extremists came together to build a common ground. However, a lot of work still needs to be done and the recent fighters need continuous support. The overall result was positive and the Tripoli example is an experience transferable to other conflict areas in Lebanon.

3.3 Primary and secondary prevention with youth

The Tripoli experience encouraged Fighters for Peace to pinpoint other conflict areas or divided communities in Lebanon and to focus their efforts on the work with youth in these areas, which are often marginalized and impoverished. In order to have an easier access to the target groups, FFP joins up with other organizations, which have been active in these areas for years, doing valuable educational and social work. FFP will give their testimonies about the war to the youth of these areas, but also expand the scope of activities in order to increase its impact and sustainability. The idea is to let the testimonies and dialogue sessions be followed by workshops about conflict resolution, mediation, acceptance, tolerance, and other relevant topics. This work will be embedded in the existing social, (mental) health support and vocational/educational training that other NGOs active in these areas provide.

Also, FFP envisions to include in the target group young detainees and returnees from Syria. For Countering Violent Extremism and Disengagement, the ex-combatants of Fighters for Peace offer alternative role models. The ex-combatants from Fighters for Peace were probably not jihadists, but they once were violent extremists as well. They were between 12 and 20 years old when they engaged in the civil war – the same age group as the young detainees. They understand well the appeal of weapons and the urge to achieve societal change by using violence. They had gone through similar processes of radicalization, violent extremism and then disengagement as the young detainees and returning fighters. Because of the parallels in these processes and their stories of change, the ex-fighters from FFP can offer convincing alternative role models to the youth. Moreover, by passing on their personal stories, the ex-combatants of Fighters for Peace possess of a natural authority and authenticity that has a powerful impact on youth.

3.4 Gender-perspectives: Women's roles in war and peace

Although Middle Eastern societies attribute very stereotypical roles and behaviors to women, such as the ones of being the caretakers of the children, family and the home, and reduces their characteristics of being soft, kind or passive, women's roles in war and peace are more than merely just 'the victim'. And women aren't automatically peacemakers just because of their gender, either. During the Lebanese civil war, some militias employed women as messengers, nurses, guards, weapons smugglers, informants, military trainers, fighters and military leaders. Therefore, FFP created a group of female ex-combatants, often to the surprise of the audience when they have an appearance in public as change makers. Women could take over important roles in times of war, as they can play important roles in times of peace. Since in the Arab world, they are still the most important pillar in the family, they are influential on their children's mindsets. Mothers can make a difference in a child's upbringing, and if a child chose the path of peace or violence. Therefore, to include women in FFP's work is important. The organization reaches out to female ex-combatants, as well as to female educators, teachers, university professors, journalists and the like and would like to press for more visibility of women in the

public sphere. Therefore, female ex-combatants were part of FFP's exhibition "Transformations", as well as the dialogue sessions, in interviews and on the organization's website. Fighters for Peace's women are an important component of the organization's primary intervention activities.

3.5 PVE and Disengagement abroad

For FFP, "abroad" means outside of Lebanon. FFP's staff gave trainings in identity building, conflict resolution, and peace building to recent fighters from Syria and Iraq. Also, the organization engaged with Syrian activists, recent combatants and refugees in Europe, namely Germany and Scandinavia. In Germany, for two years in a row, FFP worked with Syrian refugees on reconciliation, mediation, because the refugees who come from different religious and political and social backgrounds bring their multiple conflicts with them to their host country. Therefore, it was important to sit down with them, talk about their grievances and conflicts and find a common ground as well as a common vision for their future in Syria.

Since the question of dealing with returning fighters from Syria and Iraq and their families to Europe becomes more pressing, Fighters for Peace can fill some gaps in being involved in disengagement strategies. They were once part of a conflict in the Arab world as extremists and fighters; they know the multi-faceted conflicts and grievances that exist in this region, and they underwent similar processes of radicalization, extremism and disengagement as the returning fighters and their families. The ex-combatants of Fighters for Peace might not be the perfect psychologists or social workers, but they can fill gaps in accessing other layers and similar lived experiences that a German or Belgian or Scandinavian psychologist or social worker can't offer.

4. Conclusion

Fighters for Peace works on different levels: Preventing Violence and Extremism targeting youth, women and society in general; Countering Violent Extremism and Disengagement in marginalized areas with youth and in divided communities; and with recent fighters in Lebanon and abroad.

Since FFP's ex-fighters have gone through processes of radicalization, extremism, violence, then disengagement and successful reintegration, they offer alternative role models to recent fighters, youth and society as a whole. Since Fighters for Peace presents the personal stories of former enemies, showing that they can work together for reconciliation and peace, they give hope and present a positive living example to people who are from divided communities and who were drawn into violence and extremism.