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What's in a Frame?

> Peace is not an absence of war, it is a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition
> for benevolence, confidence, justice.
>
> Baruch Spinoza

"They want to make us look like victims," said Mari,[1] the frustration clear on her face. "We are not victims of the FARC. We are victims of the *state*." She landed hard on this last word, visibly annoyed. We had been talking amicably for a while, until I started asking her about the many claims of sexual violence within the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrilla ranks. It was clear she had heard this question many times before, and the way she pressed her lips together in a thin, hard line indicated that she did not like it at all. We were sitting on two plastic chairs outside a makeshift hut with a blue tarp for a roof. One of the members of the FARC Secretariat – the guerrillas' seven-man governing structure – was napping inside. Over lunch the day before, he told me he was more comfortable there than in the unbearably hot drywall structures built for ex-combatants in the camp. When I asked him questions about FARC women and the government's narratives about them, he said that I needed to talk to Mari. Mari would set me straight, he implied.

We were in one of the many ETCR (Territorial Spaces for Reincorporation and Training) camps scattered across Colombia (see Figure 1). These camps were meant to be temporary housing for FARC ex-combatants after the peace accord was signed in late 2016, until they were transferred to more permanent communities. The buildings were indeed slapdash, with

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[1] All of the names of research participants in this book are pseudonyms.

FIGURE 1   Research site: FARC reincorporation camp (ETCR).
Photo credit: author.

exposed drywall, concrete floors, and plastic roofs that sucked in the heat
and baked the residents inside. A few lucky residents had fans – most did
not. Each ETCR, I would discover, had unique quirks and design flaws
alongside major humanitarian issues: limited access to healthcare, contam-
inated water, spotty cell phone signals, sewage disposal issues, epidemics
of boredom, and somewhat alarming levels of beer consumption among
the younger men. In one camp, the leaders told me that they had pock-
eted the government money allocated for an engineer and built the houses
themselves. This was why all the roofs were crooked and the walls were
slanted, they explained, laughing with a tinge of embarrassment. This was
two years after the peace accord, even though these camps were designed
for only six months. As I write this several years later, some ex-combatants
that I spoke to are still there, in this "temporary" housing.

But back to Mari. It was hot and we were sheltering in the shade of
several large palm trees. Occasionally, a chainsaw would buzz nearby,
muffling our conversation and causing Mari to laugh when I couldn't

understand her. It was nice to see her laugh, because during most of our conversation she had been intense and guarded. Violence against women comrades, she said, never happened. *Ever*. Those stories were made up by deserters and government infiltrators who were paid to lie. She knew this first hand, she said, because she had been captured and arrested once, and the military offered her money to lie:

The first thing they put in your hands – it's that I also was imprisoned – and the first thing they put in your hands, the justice department, is the following: on the table they can put 200, 300 million pesos.[2] And they say, "you want to leave freely right now?" Knowing that's not going to happen because there are laws already instituted, [criminal] codes that say that, for rebellion, you have to pay many years in prison, for murder you have to pay many years, but nonetheless they trick the people and offer money. Or they do not offer money, they show a package and say, "well, you will collaborate. You will tell me who is the commander, what the commander does, who are the contacts, and in this package that we will give you, we have a house in Europe, you will have private security, we will pay you monthly."

She trailed off, rolling her eyes as if to say, "who would believe such nonsense?" And yet, according to her, many combatants *did* believe it. In fact, deserters' stories are one of the government's key weapons to discredit the FARC. By telling stories of forced contraception and abortion, jungle C-sections, human trafficking, and other serious human rights violations, the Colombian government has worked for decades to discredit the FARC's grievances and invalidate any claim the group has of being an egalitarian "army of the people" fighting for human rights. The more Mari talked about this, the more incensed she became:

At no point was anyone restrained … like the media always says, that we came into the ranks to prostitute ourselves. This is not true! At least, a person who has all his senses in his head [would understand] that they give a rifle to me to fight the enemy, and the commander is going to grab me and is going to rape me, and I'm not going to use this rifle? *(Laughs)* I mean, I don't understand in what head of what person this makes sense … Could it be that I am going to let them rape me, I am going to let them abuse me, if I am fighting for those changes [for women's rights] and if I can confront a soldier? I mean, this is where the question remains that people have to discuss: Is it possible that the women were raped *and* venerated in this manner there?

I did not challenge her on the trope that armed soldiers cannot be raped by their peers or superiors, though decades of military history prove this

2 Roughly equivalent to US$58,000–87,000. This incredibly large sum may have been an exaggeration.

to be untrue. She was so earnest that it made me wonder. *Was* it possible? Could women have been raped *and* venerated in the FARC ranks? By that point, I had heard tear-filled stories of forced abortions, older commanders taking advantage of young girls, teenage boys molested by their mentors, life-threatening escapes, and more.

There were two clear frames here. First, that FARC women were loyal fighters, essential to the cause, feminist saviors who would enlighten poor and abused women. But the contrasting frame, the government's frame, maintained that FARC women were victims who were manipulated, tricked, and subjugated by male commanders. I had heard these stories of abuse first hand from both FARC loyalists and deserters, when they had little reason to lie to me about it. What, then, was the purpose of this and other framing contests, and how did these discursive battles affect ex-combatants and their transitions to civilian life? What did these extended framing contests mean for the quality and stability of the peace agreement?

The longer I stayed in Colombia, the more I saw these framing contests intersecting all around me, and the more I realized how much they might teach us about sustainable peace. Discursive battles were everywhere, in every single conversation. The demobilized FARC loyalists vehemently refused to be called "demobilized", because for them that word implied capitulation to the government. Ex-paramilitaries rejected the word "paramilitary" and instead called themselves "self-defense forces." Deserters rejected the label of "traitor" bestowed on them by loyalist FARC members, with many choosing instead to frame themselves as noble for having left the fight. FARC loyalists talked around the issue of drug trafficking, saying that the so-called "war on drugs" was an American sham. These loyalists said drugs were the scourge of Colombia, that the government was corrupt, and that they were the only ones who cared about "the people." The government, on the other hand, has long called guerrilla groups in Colombia "narco-terrorists," conflating them all as nothing but criminals. And in all of this, deserters claimed to be the "real victims," pointing to the government as the "real terrorist."

In fact, when I started writing this chapter, Colombia's president set off a heated discursive debate when he used the term "collective homicides" to refer to a string of massacres that had recently occurred across the country.[3] His critics derided the president for trivializing the marked

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[3] Semana, "¿Cuál Es La Diferencia Entre Homicidios Colectivos y Masacres?" *Semana*, August 24, 2020, www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/cual-es-la-diferencia-entre-homicidios-colectivos-y-masacres/696762/.

increase in massacres,[4] arguing that the term "collective homicides" ignores that massacres in Colombia are a systematic criminal phenomenon and not random events.[5]

Rhetorical battles about how to frame the war itself run alongside many armed conflicts. What do these frames and labels achieve, and what is their long-term effect on Colombia's fragile peace? And how do these gendered and racialized framing contests between insurgent groups and the government affect combatants' perceptions of their alternatives and their transitions to civilian life?

EX-COMBATANT TRAJECTORIES

This book contains stories from ninety-nine individual ex-combatants (thirty-seven women and sixty-two men), 39 percent of whom deserted at least one nonstate armed group, though some fled from more than one. These ex-combatants come from two leftist guerrilla groups, the FARC and the National Liberation Army (ELN), and one rightist, state-supporting paramilitary group, the United Self-defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). The AUC officially demobilized in 2003–6, and the FARC demobilized in 2016 – though dissidents from both groups remain active. And, despite multiple rounds of peace talks over the last several years, the ELN was still active at the time of writing this book.

The book follows the stories of twelve of these combatants, using testimonies from the other eighty-seven, alongside fifteen interviews with government reintegration professionals, civilian experts, and military and police officers, to explore the ways in which frames are constructed, debated, and transformed in armed conflict. I chose these twelve for several reasons. First, I wanted to ensure representation from all three of the armed groups, from men and women, from deserters and loyalists, and from various ethnicities and ages. Second, I wanted to illustrate several key post-demobilization trajectories that I saw repeated in the full sample of combatants. Third, I maintained contact with several of these ex-combatants for years after the initial fieldwork, which allowed me to provide a fuller picture of their lives after demobilization.

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[4] El Espectador, "Las Masacres Aumentaron Un 30% En Los Primeros Dos Años Del Gobierno Duque," *El Espectador*, August 7, 2020, www.elespectador.com/colombia2020/pais/la-guerra-en-los-dos-primeros-anos-del-gobierno-duque/.

[5] Semana, "¿Cuál Es La Diferencia Entre Homicidios Colectivos y Masacres?"

The first ex-combatant, Mari, has already been partially introduced. Mari was in her early forties when I met her; she joined the FARC when she was fourteen after years of being constantly displaced by violence. She had spent twenty-seven years in the group before the peace agreement. Mari is a staunch loyalist, spent several years in a Colombian prison, and was a clear leader in the camp. From the moment I met her, it was clear that Mari is a person who gets things done and waits for no man. She was grateful for her militant experience and told me that she never once considered leaving the FARC, not even as a teenager.

The second ex-combatant I focus on, also from the FARC, had a very different story. Dayana is an Indigenous woman in her thirties who also joined the FARC at fourteen, but to escape an abusive family. Articulate, kind, and immediately likable, Dayana slowly opened up and told me that she faced the same abuse inside the FARC that she had tried to escape in her own family. After seven years in the ranks, she fled, pregnant and alone, only to reluctantly return to a FARC reincorporation camp years later with her two children in order to claim reintegration benefits.

Pablo, on the other hand, vehemently denied everything that Dayana and other women like her have said. A proud member of the FARC's governing Secretariat, Pablo insisted that the women who told those stories were nothing but spies and paid informants. Despite the fact that there had never been a single woman in the Secretariat, Pablo assured me that the group was truly egalitarian, while pointing to women's lack of "capacity" as the reason that they were not commanders.

Three more FARC ex-combatants round out this group: Mafe, Andrés, and Lina. Mafe never really "joined" the FARC, she says. She was essentially consumed by the organizational structure when the group took over their community. Educated and eloquent, Mafe saw the FARC as the only group doing anything to help her community, and at age twenty she became passionately involved in their work as a political ideologue, educating other communities about the FARC's mission and goals. Ten years later, demobilized but still determined to fight for equality, Mafe was organizing women's meetings at the FARC camp when I met her, trying to educate local women about equality and the need for women's representation in politics.

Andrés, however, was essentially the direct opposite. Full of bravado and a big talker, he cared little for FARC ideology and loved to tell me about all the drug deals he did for the group. He told me that before he demobilized, his mother thought he was dead because the military showed up one day with an unrecognizable body, saying that it was her son. They even held a funeral. (This caused significant problems when he tried to

demobilize and the military told him that he was already dead.) Once, when I met up with Andrés in a conflict-affected region, he reassured me with a grin: "Don't worry about being robbed here. The *narcos* keep all that under control." Andrés loved his militia job so much that he refused to demobilize when the FARC signed the peace accord, taking his chances with the dissidents. When that proved too dangerous for his young family, he sought refuge in a government safe house. Now labeled a traitor by both sides – the group he was loyal to for over a decade *and* the dissidents he abandoned – he was constantly on the move, fearing for his life.

Lina was also constantly in hiding. Having deserted the FARC with her militia commander husband over a decade ago, the couple hid their ex-combatant past and registered for benefits with the Colombian Victims' Unit. Eventually discovered, they were forced into the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program run by the government. This program has its fair share of informants on all sides, and Lina and her husband were soon on the run after receiving death threats from the group they abandoned long ago.

In addition to these ex-combatants from the FARC, the book follows three former members of the ELN: Junior, Michael, and Namona. Junior joined the ELN when he was only eleven, because his entire family was already in the group and, as the son of a top commander, opposition forces were threatening to kill him. He was still a true believer when we met, but after fourteen years in the ranks, he made a fatal error and was forced to run for his life. He had never wanted to leave the group, and he clearly did not want to be in the military safe house either. Michael, however, was a different story: forcibly recruited by the ELN when he was seventeen, Michael was charming, bright, and immensely loveable. He reminded me of my undergraduate students and made me wonder what his life could have been like if he had been born somewhere else. Michael spent three years in the group before he escaped, but then had no idea what to do next. He certainly could not go home, where the group was waiting to kill him, but where could he go, with no money, no legitimate work experience, and no references?

Namona is a bit of an outlier in that she joined the ELN in her late thirties because she needed a job, and to this day she regrets that decision. She says she spent most of her time as a cook for the group but experienced a severe trauma at the hands of her comrades, which precipitated her escape. When I met her again nearly a year later, she and her husband were still on the run, with a reward for their capture (or death) on their heads.

Finally, the book follows three ex-paramilitary members who have been demobilized since 2005–6: Tobias, an intimidating former AUC

commander with a crushing handshake, who now writes poetry and makes children's toys; Hugo, a dizzying storyteller who joined the AUC as a young drug-addicted *sicario* ("assassin") and credits the organization for his sobriety; and Nell, a fiercely independent woman who joined the AUC as a single mother of three, when guerrillas destroyed her business and she desperately needed work and protection. While Tobias and Hugo expressed pride in their roles fighting back against the guerrillas, Nell insisted several times that she was never involved in any violence.

Through these twelve stories, this book examines what happens to ex-combatants leading up to their decisions to disengage (or not) from non-state armed groups, what happens afterward, and how ex-combatants interpret and engage with the frames constructed around them and about them. How do deserters manage the constant fear of being caught, the demands of the government to share intelligence, and the stigmatization that prevents them from obtaining jobs and proper housing? How do loyalists manage the post-demobilization struggle of identities as their collective breaks down – one part of them a fighter for justice, and the other part a struggling citizen, trying to put food on the table and navigate the unknowns of civilian life? And how do ex-paramilitaries, demobilized for nearly fifteen years and still facing stigma and rumors, shed these violent identities when the temptation of fast and easy money is all around them?

DESERTION DECISIONS AND REINTEGRATION PATHWAYS

I originally went into the field interested in the puzzle of desertion, but it quickly became clear that how and why insurgent organizations, governments, and individual combatants were framing stories of desertion was critical to understanding the complexity of these individual decisions to fight or flee and the experiences that came afterward. Why rebel groups thrive or disintegrate has long been a puzzle in political science, including questions of why some combatants desert their groups while others stay – but the question of how these trajectories affect reintegration experiences is far less explored. The civil war and insurgency literature has primarily addressed rebel group cohesion at the organizational level, examining how and why different types of groups retain recruits – or not.[6] Individual-level

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[6] Dora L Costa and Matthew E Kahn, *Heroes and Cowards: The Social Face of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín, "The FARC's Militaristic Blueprint," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29, no. 4 (2018): 629–53; Francisco

analysis is more prevalent in terrorism and psychology literature, which offer multiple explanations for desertion, including government pressure, in-group violence, disillusionment in the group's cause, networks, and trauma.[7] This latter body of literature crosses many disciplines and at times is disjointed or often contradictory. Nonetheless, five key variables emerge: types of commitment, ideology, identity, networks, and costs/benefits of membership. Types of commitment to the group – such as economic, personal, or ideological commitment – are significant in weighing one's options to fight or flee, as are ethnic and religious identities, which can hold people firmly inside a group.[8] Indeed, multiple studies conclude

Gutiérrez Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Ideology in Civil War: Instrumental Adoption and Beyond," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 213–26; Stathis N Kalyvas, "Ethnic Defection in Civil War," *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 8 (2008): 1043–68; Kevin Koehler, Dorothy Ohl, and Holger Albrecht, "Disaffection to Desertion: How Networks Facilitate Military Insubordination in Civil Conflict," *Comparative Politics* 48, no. 4 (2016): 439–57; Theodore McLauchlin and Wendy Pearlman, "Out-Group Conflict, In-Group Unity? Exploring the Effect of Repression on Intramovement Cooperation," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (2012): 41–66; Theodore McLauchlin, "Desertion and Collective Action in Civil Wars," *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2015): 669–79; Paul Staniland, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (2012): 16–40.

[7] Mary Beth Altier, John Horgan, and Christian Thoroughgood, "In Their Own Words? Methodological Considerations in the Analysis of Terrorist Autobiographies," *Journal of Strategic Security* 5, no. 4 (2012): 85–98; Mary Beth Altier, Christian N Thoroughgood, and John G Horgan, "Turning away from Terrorism: Lessons from Psychology, Sociology, and Criminology," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 5 (2014): 647–61; Mary Beth Altier et al., "Why They Leave: An Analysis of Terrorist Disengagement Events from Eighty-Seven Autobiographical Accounts," *Security Studies* 26, no. 2 (2017): 305–32; Julie Chernov Hwang, *Why Terrorists Quit: The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2018); Neil Ferguson, Mark Burgess, and Ian Hollywood, "Leaving Violence behind: Disengaging from Politically Motivated Violence in Northern Ireland," *Political Psychology* 36, no. 2 (April 2015): 199–214; M Jacobson, "Terrorist Dropouts: Learning from Those Who Have Left," Washington Institute, 2010, www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus101.pdf; John Horgan, *Walking away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2009); Ben Oppenheim et al., "True Believers, Deserters, and Traitors: Who Leaves Insurgent Groups and Why," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 794–823.

[8] Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan, "Turning away from Terrorism"; Tore Bjørgo, "Processes of Disengagement from Violent Groups of the Extreme Right," in *Leaving Terrorism behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, ed. Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan (New York: Routledge, 2009); Oppenheim et al., "True Believers, Deserters, and Traitors"; Caryl Rusbult, Christopher Agnew, and Ximena Arriaga, "The Investment Model of Commitment Processes," in *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, ed. Paul Van Lange, Arie Kruglanski Higgins, and E Tory (London: Sage Publications, 2012); Jacquelien van Stekelenburg and Bert Klandermans, "The Social Psychology of Protest," *Current Sociology* 61, nos. 5–6 (2013): 886–905; Bryan F

that ideology is especially significant in explaining variations in patterns of violence, troop retention, and operational choices.[9]

In addition, networks both inside and outside the group can influence decisions to leave or stay: strong social bonds with law-abiding people can draw people out, but the reverse is also true when a person's strongest bonds are inside the group. Trauma or high costs of membership might motivate people to leave, but these factors can also make them too scared to leave.[10] The direction and causal mechanisms of many of these variables remain unclear and unsatisfactory, as does the degree of overlap and/or compound effects – with the role of gender(ed/ing) norms in desertion decisions largely unexplored.

GENDER AND ARMED CONFLICT

Feminist and critical security scholars have added an important aspect to research on armed conflict by highlighting that armed group ideologies are highly gendered, with state and nonstate armed groups frequently emphasizing militarized masculinities that reward heterosexual aggression and "toughness," while using feminization of the enemy and

Bubolz and Pete Simi, "Disillusionment and Change: A Cognitive-Emotional Theory of Gang Exit," *Deviant Behavior* 36, no. 4 (2015): 330–45; Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh, *Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); A Rapoport, *The Origins of Violence: Approaches to the Study of Conflict* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1994); Anne Speckhard, "The Emergence of Female Suicide Terrorists," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 11 (2008): 995–1051; Stephen Vertigans, *The Sociology of Terrorism: People, Places and Processes* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

[9] Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: The Many Faces of Women Terrorists* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2011); Dara Kay Cohen, *Rape during Civil War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016); Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Antonio Giustozzi, "Networks and Armies: Structuring Rebellion in Colombia and Afghanistan," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010): 836–53; Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood, "Ideology in Civil War"; Thomas Hegghammer, "Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 1 (2013): 1–15.

[10] Altier, Thoroughgood, and Horgan, "Turning away from Terrorism"; Bjørgo, "Processes of Disengagement"; Frank Bovenkerk, "On Leaving Criminal Organizations," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 55, no. 4 (2011): 261–76; Chernov Hwang, *Why Terrorists Quit*; Froukje Demant et al., *Decline and Disengagement: An Analysis of Processes of Deradicalisation* (Amsterdam: IMES, 2008); Ferguson, Burgess, and Hollywood, "Leaving Violence Behind"; Koehler, Ohl, and Albrecht, "Disaffection to Desertion"; McLauchlin, "Desertion and Collective Action in Civil Wars"; Dorothy Ohl, "The Soldier's Dilemma: Military Responses to Uprisings in Jordan, Iraq, Bahrain, and Syria," PhD dissertation, George Washington University, 2016.