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What happens to the 'terrorists'?

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Abstract

Lists have come to define terrorism. In the absence of an agreed-upon definition of what constitutes terrorism, proscription, or the inclusion of non-state armed groups on terrorist lists, has created a new category, a new reality. The material and symbolic consequences of these lists have been explored in human rights law and critical terrorism studies literature. But as the world seems to shift away from the terrorist framing, what happens to the 'terrorists' stuck on these lists?

Grounded in empirical research with listed non-state armed groups the article explores how listed actors themselves react to the listings. They should not be seen as mere passive recipients of these labels and lists – they are active agents and able to cope strategically with this stigma. Building on Rebecca Adler-Nissen's work on stigma in world politics, the article shifts the focus from state to non-state actors and assesses how different listed groups cope using Adler-Nissen's typology of stigma recognition, stigma rejection, and counter-stigmatisation. This diversity in reaction is unpacked through three case studies (ETA, Hezbollah, and FARC). While some armed groups have tried to explicitly reject the label imposed on them, others have embraced it.

The article traces what happens to the 'terrorists', how they are reacting, and whether they can ever escape their condition. Listing regimes have enabled the continuation of the war on terror through their embeddedness in the multilateral system, creating a permanence that can endlessly be reactivated.

Introduction

In November 2022, the European Union (EU) Parliament voted to declare Russia a state sponsor of terrorism. This move was largely symbolic: the EU cannot designate a state as a sponsor of terrorism as it only has a legal framework to designate non-state actors as terrorists. This is symptomatic of international policy shifting its focus back to great power rivalry but being stuck with the same instruments used during the last 20+ years of the war on terror. But does it indicate a return to terrorism being associated to both state and non-state actors? Is the pendulum swinging back? Or is terrorism itself as a way of framing violence out of date? What happens then to the counterterrorism infrastructure and the terrorist groups stuck on these lists?

The listing of non-state armed groups as terrorist organisations, or proscription regimes, has been an essential component of the war on terror. But while the discourse in Western capitals seems to have moved on from the terrorism framing, these lists have not disappeared. Remnants of a worn-out paradigm, terrorist lists have come to define who is a terrorist, since there is no agreed-upon definition of what terrorism is. Creating a specific category, these lists are widespread and remain deeply embedded in the multilateral system. While other framings might come and go, the bureaucracy associated with the war on terror and the existence of these lists have created a

permanence that can endlessly be reactivated. They continue to have symbolic and material effects and ensure a perpetuation of practices underpinned by the dehumanisation of the terrorist label. The indiscriminate bombing of Gaza since October 2023 following the Hamas attacks is a case in point. The fact that Hamas is a proscribed organisation globally makes it permissible for Israel to push the idea that there are no 'innocent civilians' in Gaza and that anyone associated with Hamas is a legitimate target.

The literature on labelling and proscription has already established the deeply stigmatising effects of lists.[1] What has not yet been explored is the agency of the listed actors themselves. This article shifts the gaze to the proscribed groups and asks the question: what happens to the 'terrorists'? How have they coped with the stigma, and can they ever escape from it? These questions matter because they allow us to centre the actorness of non-state actors in international relations and shift our focus beyond a state-centric understanding of counterterrorism. By building on the work of Rebecca Adler-Nissen on how states deal with stigma in world politics, the article is the first to apply her typology to non-state actors, examining three cases of listed groups to explore a range of coping mechanisms for international shaming.[2] Centring their agency in relation to the stigma, the article explores how they react, whether through stigma recognition, stigma rejection, or counter-stigmatisation. The three cases are illustrative of different coping mechanisms but also of a range of outcomes. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC–EP or FARC) – is a rare case of a group that was taken off the terrorist lists in the United States and the EU after completing a negotiation process that saw them become a political party. Basque Homeland and Liberty (ETA) has remained stuck on the lists even though the group has handed in its weapons and disbanded. Hezbollah, on the other hand, was still being added to terrorist lists as recently as 2013 and remains defiant, engaging with an alternative audience and operating in a separate social and ideological space.

The article gives a detailed empirical contribution based on in-depth personal interviews with the listed actors themselves and an analysis of statements or biographies in cases where direct access was not possible.[3] The empirics help us understand an aspect of the post-violent (for ETA and FARC) phase that has yet to be explored and brings original knowledge through interviews. The methodological choices made are linked to the attempt at switching the focus to the reaction and perspective of the listed groups themselves. The theoretical contribution is clear: by centring the listed groups' actorness and agency, the article shifts the gaze and shines a new light on how the terrorist stigma works and whether these groups can ever leave the terrorist tag behind. It also reflects on the differences of stigmatising state versus non-state actors and the enduring legacy of the war on terror through listing regimes. The article adopts a dialectic approach between theory and empirics to adapt the state-centric based theorisation of stigma to non-state actors.

Listing, non-state agency, and stigma in world politics

Listing should be understood as '*societal exclusion* and *symbolic banishment* of the affected persons'.[4] As de Goede describes in the case of individuals listed, it is a form of 'modern day exile'.[5]

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[1]Mareike de Goede, 'Blacklisting and the ban: Contesting targeted sanctions in Europe', *Security Dialogue*, 42:6 (2011), pp. 499–515. Mareike de Goede and Gavin Sullivan, 'The politics of security lists', *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*, 34:1 (2016), pp. 67–88; Judith Renner and Alexander Spencer, *Reconciliation after Terrorism: Strategy, Possibility, or Absurdity?* (London: Routledge, 2012); Sophie Haspeslagh, *Proscribing Peace: How Listing Armed Groups as Terrorists Hurts Negotiations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

[2]Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management in international relations: Transgressive identities, norms, and order in international society', *International Organization*, 68 (2014), pp. 143–76.

[3]Interviews and statements in Spanish were translated by the author. Interviews and statements in Arabic were translated by Nourhan Samir Ibrahim, research assistant.

[4]Mareike de Goede, *Speculative Security: The Politics of Pursuing Terrorist Monies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 157.

[5]Ibid.

This is intrinsically linked to stigma: 'The symbolic effect of proscription can lead to stigma – the shame and the exclusion of the targeted entity.'[6] Lists assemble names, and, side by side, the stigma creates a new reality. Previous work on proscription has already shown that beyond the very direct material effects of proscription such as asset freezes and travel bans, the symbolic delegitimisation itself engenders other material realities such as military aid and intelligence support in bolstering the government's fight against terrorists.[7] It also facilitates the treatment of listed terrorists and communities associated with them that would otherwise be considered unacceptable, leading to human rights violation such as extra-judicial executions, for example.[8]

Most studies looking at the impact of sanctions or listing in world politics are interested in how they come about, their effectiveness, or their effects.[9] Rarely is the focus of the inquiry the recipient of these policies and their reactions. In her work on states, Rebecca Adler-Nissen made the point that the objects of stigmatisation also had *agency*:

> If stigmatization works in international politics as in other spheres of life, we must recognize that states that are unable or unwilling to conform to 'normal' standards are not merely objects of failed socialization. Rather, they are active agents, able to cope strategically with the shame they are subjected to and, in some cases, may even challenge a dominant moral discourse by wearing their stigma as a badge of honor.[10]

The typology Adler-Nissen develops on stigma reaction for states is a helpful framework to understand the range of reactions even in cases of non-state armed groups. She outlines three principal reactions: stigma recognition, stigma rejection, and counter-stigmatisation. Adler-Nissen draws on Goffman's seminal sociological work of the 1960s. He showed how the construction of deviance is not just discursive but also material and embodied. Goffman described two types of reactions to stigma: stigma recognition and counter-stigmatisation. Adler-Nissen adds stigma rejection to create her typology. She applies them to the cases of three states that have been internationally stigmatised during different time periods: Germany, Austria, and Cuba. The case of Germany is focused on the post–Second World War, the period during which the country was stigmatised for its Nazi past and could not be trusted to have a foreign and defence policy. The Austrian example is more recent and focused on the EU's reaction to Jörg Haider and his Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) electoral victory when they became coalition partners in Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel's government. In a first for the EU, sanctions against a member state were implemented, and member states froze bilateral relationships based on the idea that the FPÖ had fascist tendencies not in line with the EU's core values. The Austrian government never accepted being labelled transgressive. The Cuban case is probably the most well known, with the reactions of the United States (US) to Fidel Castro's socialist revolution establishing an embargo from 1960.

In the case of stigma recognition, Adler-Nissen shows the deviant state working to reintegrate itself in 'international society', eventually succeeding, as in the case of Germany. According to Adler-Nissen 'international society' is to be understood as the 'audience of normal'. She concludes that cases of stigma recognition will make 'international society more cohesive'.[11] Stigma rejection is the category she adds to Goffman's work. While stigma in world politics involves asymmetric

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[6]Haspeslagh, *Proscribing Peace*, p. 37

[7]Haspeslagh, *Proscribing Peace*.

[8]Richard Jackson, Lee Jarvis, Jeroen Gunning and Marie Breen-Smyth, *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Haspeslagh, *Proscribing Peace*.

[9]David Cortright and George A. Lopez, *The Sanctions Decade: Assessing UN Strategies in the 1990s* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000); Lee Jarvis and Tim Legrand, *Banning Them, Securing Us? Terrorism, Parliament and the Ritual of Proscription* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020); Haspeslagh, *Proscribing Peace*.

[10]Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management', p. 144.

[11]Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management', p. 153.

power relationships, she puts forward the idea that stigmatisation can be 'restored and coped with'.[12] Using the case of Austria to illustrate this, she shows how stigma can lead to a mutual embarrassment of the stigmatiser and the stigmatised. With counter-stigmatisation, the stigma is turned into a virtue, and the stigmatiser is the one perceived as the transgressor. This can happen when there are 'competing visions of "international society"', as in the case of Cuba and the US,[13] where Cuba was able to remain linked to an alternative 'international society' through its connections with other communist nations and groups. In that case, the US stigma became an emblem of pride.

Extrapolating from states to non-state actors, one could assume a similar range of responses to the 'terrorist' stigma. Stigma has an international and a domestic audience. In the stigmatised states, according to Adler-Nissen, there will be a domestic debate, people will ask themselves: 'Are we ashamed?'; 'Have we been misunderstood?'; 'Should we resist?'.[14] These questions will be discussed, but the elected representatives of the state (or their authoritarian rulers) will be the ones taking the decision, managing the diplomacy, and choosing how to react strategically to the stigma. When it comes to non-state armed groups, how does that relationship play out? Do they even care? How do they deal with the 'intersubjective processes of negotiating stigma'?[15]

Unlike many states, non-state armed groups do not have democratically elected representatives. Their reaction to the stigma, who reacts, and how this internal and domestic debate will take place, will be different from in a state context. Here, we need to tap into literature that has explored non-state actors' behaviour and reactions. Scholars working on legitimacy and non-state armed groups have pointed out that there is a direct link between a group's international relationships and its 'domestic legitimacy'.[16] Domestic and international support are seen as complementary.[17] So one central question is: which stigma reaction would foster internal legitimacy for the group?

We know from the now-prolific literature on rebel governance that an important focus for the armed groups will be the role of the communities they claim to represent.[18] So we can consider how these communities might be affected by the stigma. How do they react to it? This relationship with their constituency will be important and will lead to different strategic assessments. One could imagine that, in cases where the population is deeply affected by the stigma, it will push the groups to shift strategies, potentially even towards stigma recognition. If the communities are less affected or if they see it as irrelevant to their daily lives, it might have little effect. For instance, if a non-state armed group is listed as a terrorist but their key constituencies consider the label to be unjustified or ludicrous, would the stigma have any effect?

Labelling and stigmatisation is a two-way process and may lead to different reactions towards listing 'depending on who is doing the listing and their relationship with them, but also how the listing will affect its own community or relationship towards them'.[19] Similar to a state classified as 'rogue', a number of non-state armed groups will be unbothered by the framing or discourse coming from the West.

The question is: how hegemonic is the stigma? As Jabri argued, 'singular subjectivities and monolithic identities are … always constructed through hegemonic discourses which contributes

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[12] Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management', p. 152.

[13] Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management', p. 169.

[14] Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management', p. 154

[15] Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management', p. 156.

[16] Romain Malejacq, 'From rebel to quasi-state: Governance, diplomacy and legitimacy in the midst of Afghanistan's wars (1979–2001)', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 28:4–5 (2017), pp.867–86, Reyko Huang, 'Rebel diplomacy in civil war', *International Security*, 40:4 (2016), pp. 102, p.89–126.

[17] Klaus Schlichten and Ulrich Schneckener, 'Armed groups and the politics of legitimacy', *Civil Wars*, 17:4 (2015), pp. 409–24.

[18] Ana Arjona, Nelson Kafir, and Zachariah Mamphilly (eds), *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Hyeran Jo, *Compliant Rebels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Reyko Huang, *The Wartime Origins of Democratization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[19] Haspeslagh, *Proscribing Peace*, p. 43.

to a dominant form of identity'.[20] If the group has an alternative network and a range of other contacts and relationships, another form of identity emerges that is defiant, and they will push back. The stigma will be carried as a badge of honour.

The following three case studies illustrate the range of reactions to the 'terrorist' stigma as well as a range of outcomes as the listed groups try to escape their condition. The theoretical contribution will be further developed in the case studies sections through an iteration between theory and empirics.

Stigma rejection: Colombia and the FARC's peace negotiations

In the case of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People's Army (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia–Ejército del Pueblo, FARC–EP or FARC), the terrorist stigma was deeply associated with 9/11. The armed group had been listed as a terrorist organisation by the US since 1997, but it did not have a substantial effect. They were not stigmatised or sidelined. In fact, in the late 1990s the FARC were busy negotiating a peace deal with the Colombian government in a demilitarised zone the size of Switzerland, with an array of foreign dignitaries visiting them, including Queen Rania of Jordan.

A number of epithets have been used to describe the FARC over the years, such as insurgents, guerrilleros, narco-guerrilleros, and narco-traffickers, but it is only after 9/11 that the listing of the FARC as 'terrorists' took hold and the stigma took on a whole new meaning. The FARC were subsumed as an enemy in the global war on terror. In the words of Colin Powell: 'There's no difficulty in identifying [Bin Laden] as a terrorist, and getting everybody to rally against him. Now there are organizations that probably meet a similar standard. The FARC in Colombia comes to mind, the Real IRA comes to mind, all of which, both of which are on our terrorist list down at the State Department.'[21]

As then president of Colombia Andrés Pastrana took on the office, he also encouraged the EU to list the FARC as a terrorist organisation in 2002. This then picked up unprecedented momentum with President Álvaro Uribe Velez, who anchored his strategy on the stigmatisation of the FARC as terrorists. The FARC disappeared from public discourse in Colombia, and the armed conflict became simplified as a war against terrorists.[22]

In multiple statements over the years, the FARC rejected the label.[23] They wanted the state to 'exclude from the language of official epithets of "terrorists and narco-terrorists" to refer to our organisation of political-military opposition against the state'.[24] This was corroborated in interviews with the FARC. In response to the question of how the group reacted to the stigma, a representative said: 'It is totally opposite to what we are. It is a political struggle' and added: 'It was about delegitimising us, they wanted to show us as an organisation without political objectives.'[25]

Similarly, in her example of Austria, Adler-Nissen showed how the Austrian government never accepted being labelled as transgressive. The Austrian representatives rejected the stigma, they 'never fully accepted the stigma imposed upon them, insisting on belonging to the European community of values and rejecting stigmatization'.[26] The imposition by the EU of sanctions on one of

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[20]Vivienne Jabri, *Discourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 183.

[21]Colin Powell, October 2001, quoted in Jonathan Wright, 'Powell sees "gray areas" in defining terrorism', *Reuters* (25 October 2001).

[22]Haspeslagh, *Proscribing Peace*.

[23]Based on a study of 20 years of FARC–EP statements by the author in her previous work, Haspeslagh, *Proscribing Peace*.

[24]FARC–EP, 'Comunicado del Secretariado de las FARC–EP: Condiciones propuestas al nuvo Presidente para retomar la solución política', Montañas de Colombia (15 May 2002).

[25]Alexandra Nariño (Tanja Nijemeijer), member of the FARC negotiating team, personal interview, May 2015, Havana, Cuba.

[26]Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management', p. 164.

its own member states was unprecedented. European governments started to freeze their bilateral relationships with the Austrian government.

The stigma was immediately rejected by the Austrian government and broader Austrian society. Then, over time, some EU member states – Denmark, for example – also started contesting the stigma. The situation started becoming embarrassing for the EU according to Adler-Nissen; they nominated a committee of three 'wise men' to untangle the situation. The committee concluded that the sanctions had 'offended Austrian voters', and sanctions were subsequently lifted. The Austrian case shows that 'stigma needs moral resonance' to work.[27] In this case, the stigma did not have enough moral resonance, it led to mutual embarrassment, and the Austrian government succeeded in rejecting the stigma and getting the EU to reverse it.

Unlike in Austria, broader Colombian society had taken on the 'terrorist' stigma with enthusiasm. This is not unusual considering it was the FARC that was targeted, an illegal non-state armed group that had taken up arms since the 1960s. What was different, however, in the case of a non-state armed group is that the stigma was perceived differently by local communities associated with the FARC. As Idler and Paladini Adell argued, people at the local level were not so focused on the 'terrorism/counter-terrorism dynamics' in Colombia but rather on everyday necessities.[28] So, while the stigma dominated the narrative and framing at the national level, it also made the FARC much more isolated, which restricted their interactions to the very local level and with like-minded actors, none of whom recognised the terrorist stigma.[29] So, the FARC's self-perception was not particularly affected.

The group certainly did not see itself as terrorist. In an interview with Marco Calarcá, who led the group's international relations for a time, he explained how the group emerged as a result of broader violence: 'Our origin is legitimate – it is our right to rebellion.' He added that they have always held on to their political nature and that 'we have nothing to do with terrorism'.[30] Similarly, another FARC combatant representing the group during the peace negotiations added: 'We have always had a political project … we took arms because there are no guarantees for the opposition, but our objective is political.'[31]

The road to the Havana negotiations (2012–16) with the Colombian government was fraught and complex, and not the focus of this article. But the point of relevance here is that the FARC, having rejected and resisted the stigma, ended up in a formal negotiation process, with the government giving them recognition. In the words of Marco Calarcá: 'Ever since the early 1980s with [President] Betancur – every time the government sat with the FARC there was a recognition de facto.'[32] For the FARC, the decision to enter into a negotiation was largely to do with an attempt at regaining a form of recognition and salvaging their political identity: 'Now with the opening of the table we can do that [talking politics] … Iván Márquez [then leader of the FARC] is no terrorist, no criminal. He is a fighter, a rebel and rebellion is a right.'[33]

The FARC rejected and resisted the stigma and, in the end, were successful in removing it to a large degree. First, symbolically, the Colombian government shifted the discourse used to describe the FARC, dropping the terrorist label, in a move characterised as a 'linguistic ceasefire'.[34] Second,

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[27] Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management', p. 163

[28] Annette Idler and Borja Paladini-Adell, 'When peace implies engaging the "terrorist": Peacebuilding in Colombia through transforming political violence and terrorism', in Ioannis Tellidis and Harmonie Toros (eds), *Researching Terrorism, Peace and Conflict Studies: Interaction, Synthesis and Opposition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 124-45 (p. 135).

[29] Haspeslagh, *Proscribing Peace*.

[30] Marcos Calarcá (Luis Alberto Albán Burbano), member of the FARC negotiation team and International Secretariat, personal interview, May 2015, Havana, Cuba.

[31] Isabel San Roque, member of the gender sub-commission, sub-commission de genero, FARC negotiation team, personal interview, May 2015, Havana, Cuba.

[32] Interview with Marcos Calarcá, May 2015.

[33] Isabel San Roque, personal interview, May 2015.

[34] Haspeslagh, *Proscribing Peace*.

materially, having signed a peace agreement with the Colombian government in 2016 and transitioned into a political party, Comunes, the group was also removed from the EU list in 2017 and from the US Foreign Terrorist Organizations list in 2021.

But, unlike in the case of Austria where the stigmatised government was easily reintegrated into the EU family, in the case of a stigmatised non-state armed group, even with this radical transformation, the stigma is still hard to shake off. Between 2016, when the peace agreement was signed, and April 2021, 271 former FARC members were killed, according to the investigative unit of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) tribunal. The JEP feared that up to 1,600 former rebels could be killed between 2016 and 2024 if the current levels of killings were to continue. During a 'pilgrimage for life and peace' in 2020, bringing together 2,000 former members of the FARC in Bogotá, Pastor Alape, former commander of the FARC, denounced the stigmatisation and killings the group was continuing to suffer and the 'responsibility of the State in these crimes … intolerance in the speeches of government officials and the president of the republic himself'.[35] The association between being considered an (ex-)terrorist, thus dehumanised, and considered fair game for killing is still deeply entrenched in Colombia. While some of the killings might be explained by other factors, this still has to be 'understood in a context where the labelling of individuals as "terrorists" or "terrorist sympathizers" has been used as a justification by paramilitary groups for targeted assassinations' in Colombia.[36]

So, while the FARC is the only case of a listed armed group being de-listed internationally after a successful peace negotiation, the label still sticks, with clear material consequences. The difference between state and non-state actors here is stark and can be understood in the context of the deep asymmetries of the international system based on state power. Looking back at examples of non-state armed groups that were able to leave the stigma behind, we can think of Nelson Mandela and the ANC in South Africa or Menachem Begin and Irgun in Israel. Both of these later became the state and thus had the ability to challenge the stigma. Both also happened before 9/11 and the embeddedness of the war on terror bureaucracy.

Stigma recognition: Spain, the Basque country, and ETA's unilateral transition

The terrorist label was nothing new for Euskadi Ta Askatasuna ('Basque Homeland and Liberty', ETA) in the Basque country. Ever since its inception, the group had been considered a terrorist organisation by the Spanish government. What changed post-9/11 was that this label was given international legitimacy. As then prime minister José Maria Aznar recalls in his memoir: 'We'd been fighting for years to make changes internationally on things like police co-operation, legislation and classifying terrorist groups, and just a few months after September 11th, we achieved more than we had over the course of all those years.'[37]

ETA was included in the new EU list of terrorist organisations in 2001. Significantly, it was not just the armed group that was listed as a terrorist, but also socio-political organisations associated with the group – all considered part of 'the terrorist group ETA'.[38] This opened the way for the banning of Batasuna as a political party in Spain in 2002; the party was later added to US and EU terrorist lists in 2003. It was unprecedented for a political party, not an armed organisation, to be listed as terrorists.

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[35]'"Respect for our lives": Colombia's former FARC rebels march in Bogota to protest against murders', *Agence France Presse, France 24* (2 November 2020).

[36]Cristina Rojas (2005), 'Elusive Peace, Elusive Violence: identity and Conflict in Colombia'. In Cristina Rojas and Judy Meltzer *Elusive Peace International, National, and Local Dimensions of Conflict in Colombia*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.209-237, p. 229, cited in Sophie Haspeslagh, 'The "linguistic ceasefire": Negotiating in an age of proscription', *Security Dialogue*, 52:4 (2021), pp. 361–79.

[37]José Maria Aznar, *Eight Years as Head of State* (Madrid: Planeta, 2004, p. 181, cited in Teresa Whitfield, *Endgame for ETA: Elusive Peace in the Basque Country* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2014), p. 98.

[38]EU Council Common position 27 December (2001/931/CPSP2001) – for example, the youth movement Jarrai-Haika-Segi or Gestores pro Amnestia, the organisation that campaigned for the release of ETA prisoners.

Stigma recognition can be associated with Germany. In the case of post–Second World War Germany explored by Adler-Nissen, the country was stigmatised to such a degree that it was completely demilitarised and could have no defence policy. She noted that, not only did the German leadership accept the stigma, there were also popular anti-war movements in the country during the 1960s and 1970s that reinforced this view. In the case of the Basque country, over time, the broader Izquierda Abertzale (IA) movement and ETA recognised the stigma and chose to distance themselves from the 'terrorist' label. But the cases differ in terms of how the change took place, giving some indication as to the different effect stigma has on state and non-state actors. In Germany, it was the German chancellors and high-level politicians who accepted the stigma and led to a gradual rehabilitation of the country over the following decades. In the Basque country, it first took hold at the community level.

While there was a recognition of the stigma that led to a significant shift in strategy for the armed group, the shift did not initially happen within the leadership of ETA. If anything, they rejected it, resisted, and fought on. It was their social base and broader Basque society that acknowledged the stigma and encouraged a change in strategy within its political organisation. As one military and political leader of the IA described: 'ETA had always had social support, for about 60 years. But a large majority of Basque society starts turning against it. It was more and more evident that they did not agree with the political-military strategy and wanted a pacific-democratic strategy.'[39]

The international listing of ETA and the broader IA movement came soon after the end of the failed Estella-Lizarra Declaration in September 1998, which had brought together a broad range of nationalist parties in the Basque country and after which ETA had declared a ceasefire. After ETA ended its ceasefire in late 1999 and with the international labelling of the IA as terrorists, the strategies were being questioned by some parts of the Basque nationalist movement. According to one civil society activist, 'this sparked much debate within the movement. The debates about violence were very much alive.'[40]

One major turning point was the Madrid bombings of 11 March 2004, when 10 bombs exploded practically simultaneously on 4 commuter trains during the morning rush hour, killing over 190 people and injuring around 2,000. The coordinated attacks had initially been pinned on ETA by the then Aznar government vying for re-election three days later. After thousands marched in the streets demanding the truth, the government admitted it was not ETA. The bombs were later claimed by Al-Qaeda, who saw it as a response to Spanish involvement in the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.

The Madrid bombing had the net effect of showing that tactics and strategies associated with terrorism were over because of their association with Islamist terrorist violence. The association with other groups such as Al-Qaeda (after the Madrid bombings) did make them reflect and want to distance themselves from that type of violence, though theirs was not 'the same random violence'.[41] The leadership within the IA 'realized their social base was shifting'[42] and wanted to separate themselves more actively from the terrorist stigma.

This was further compounded after ETA broke its ceasefire with a bomb attack in the parking lot of Terminal 4, Madrid-Barajas Airport in late December 2006 after the collapse of the next negotiation attempt. In the words of a leader of the IA: 'Our social base was convinced much earlier. After the collapse of Estella-Lizarra there is a shift in perception. The collapse of the next process was a confirmation of what they already suspected.'[43]

This is when certain key individuals within the political leadership of the group acknowledged the stigma. They needed to shift strategies more radically. After the 2006 Barajas airport attack, the

[39]Interview 7, personal interview, June 2022, San Sebastien.
[40]Interview 9, interview, June 2022, Bilbao.
[41]Interview 1, personal interview, August 2012, Bilbao.
[42]Interview 9 personal interview, June 2022, Bilbao.
[43]Interview 6, personal interview, June 2022, San Sebastien.

possibility of an ETA ceasefire was considered to be 'no longer useful, nor credible'.[44] Key individuals within the leadership started to embrace the stigma and decided they needed a shift in strategy that was not reversible. In the words of Arnoldo Otegi, former negotiator in Geneva, 'that strategy was exhausted'.[45]

These individuals started making the point within the broader movement that the 'non-use of the armed struggle could also become a way of initiating negotiations'.[46] The idea of a unilateral transition started to emerge, and it sparked a process of dialogue within the IA and ETA. But not everyone in the movement was convinced, particularly within ETA itself and among prisoners who had sacrificed years in detention and who saw giving up the armed struggle as surrendering. A senior IA figure involved in the unilateral transition reflected back on this period: 'For some people it was going too quickly, it created anxiety for those who envisioned a different structure to the process.' He went on to add that 'our clocks weren't synchronised, ETA was late and had to accelerate its steps'.[47]

When the political branch managed to contest local elections in an alliance with other nationalist forces under the name of Bildu in 2011, they received 25 per cent of the vote. This was a momentous support for the strategic shift away from violence. In the words of one IA leader, it was 'like an oil leak in the sea'.[48] As one member of the group recalled: 'The first time I could vote legally for my party was in prison in 2011. This is a characteristic of my generation.'[49] The movement became increasingly convinced that this was the right thing to do. ETA declared a permanent end to its violence in October 2011 and eventually handed in its weapons in 2017.

ETA illustrates how the international 'terrorist' stigma was recognised in the Basque country and then digested by the non-state armed group. The stigma was translated locally, as it was their social base that recognised the label and wanted to disassociate from it, realising it no longer helped and in fact hindered their political objectives. This was a successful transition because, in the words of one civil society activist, 'they are actually much more likely to achieve their political objectives now than in 2007'.[50]

But, similarly to the FARC, in the case of non-state armed groups, the stigma is hard to shake off. The group remains stuck on the international terrorist lists, even though they have fully transitioned away from violence, have given up their weapons, and disbanded in 2018. The Spanish government has not engaged in any form of political negotiations with the group, and there has been little acknowledgement of the group giving up violence. ETA members are still scattered across the country in jails far from their families, as part of a so-called dispersion policy. In our state-centric international system, it is obvious that the EU and the US will not take ETA off the lists unless the Spanish government gives them a green light. Moreover, criminal proceedings are still hanging over former militants, which is the reason why no names of interviewees can be used in this article. This illustrates how the bureaucratic and legal embeddedness of listing regimes freezes the possibility of the 'terrorists' escaping their condition when a government has little incentive to change or transform the relationship. Even when the government tries to shift tack, such as the Sánchez Socialist government's recent political deals with Bildu, they have come under attack for 'forming an "indecent" pact' with terrorists.[51]

What is striking in the case of ETA is the differences across the levels of analysis – from the local to the national. While the stigmatisation continues at the national level, with Spain still associating ETA with broader terrorist threats, at the regional level, in the Basque country, there has been a

[44] Interview 2, personal interview, June 2022, San Sebastien.
[45] Interview 7, personal interview, June 2022, San Sebastien; Teresa Whitfield, *Endgame for ETA*.
[46] Interview 2, personal interview, June 2022, San Sebastien.
[47] Interview 5, personal interview, June 2022, San Sebastien.
[48] Interview 7, personal interview, June 2022, San Sebastien.
[49] Interview 10, personal interview, June 2022, San Sebastien.
[50] Interview 9, personal interview, June 2022, Bilbao.
[51] Words of conservative opposition leader Alberto Núñez Feijóo in lead-up to 2023, as reported in the *Financial Times* (13 July 2023), available at: {https://www.ft.com/content/8c288dd6-de04-4358-ba6d-78c213f3849f}.

much more radical transformation. The transition of ETA and the broader IA has been broadly acknowledged, they have been recontextualised in the Basque country, and the idea of Basque independence has never been stronger. During the last Basque regional election, in April 2024, Bildu won 27 mandates, compared to 21 previously in the 75-seat Basque parliament, giving it the same number of seats as the centrist Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). Bildu's candidate Pello Otxandiano said to cheering crowds: 'This is the best result the separatist left has ever had in its history.'[52]

Counter-stigmatisation: Hezbollah's Islamic resistance against the Great Satan

Hezbollah was seen in the 1980s as the epitome of an international terrorist organisation according to the US, engaging in international hostage-taking and suicide bombings. Two notable attacks against American embassies led to listing by the US as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1997. But the US struggled to get their vision accepted by others. The EU, for example, long resisted including Hezbollah in its list of terrorist organisations; it was only in 2013, with the group's involvement in Syria, that the EU ended up listing the armed wing of Hezbollah, not the whole organisation.

Hezbollah has always claimed to be the representatives of the socio-economically deprived Shiite community and a resistance group against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. The organisation has had a dynamic trajectory, from being involved in a number of terrorist attacks in the first decade of its existence[53] to becoming the main representative of Shiites in parliament since 1992 and holding cabinet positions in Lebanon since 2005. Hezbollah also gained legitimacy not just from Shiites but also other Lebanese who rejected the presence of the Israeli forces. Israel's withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in 2000, ending its 22-year occupation, bolstered their position.

Adler-Nissen looks at Cuba as an example of counter-stigmatisation when US sanctions were established in 1960 against Fidel Castro's socialist revolution. The stigma became an emblem of pride, and Adler-Nissen shows how the leadership responded to the US stigma with their own strategies, turning it from a 'vice into virtue'. For example, she refers to the tactical use of images of Abu Ghraib torture next to the US embassy to embarrass their stigmatiser. This interactive nature of stigma is also present in the case of Hezbollah. Hezbollah responded to the terrorist stigma with a counter-discourse, through maximalist diatribes characterising the US as the 'Great Satan'.[54]

Sheikh Nai'm Qâssem, former Vice Secretary General of Hezbollah and considered the historian of Hezbollah, says the American-Western attempts to denounce them as fundamentalist, extremist, or terrorist are attempts at dominating the Muslim world ideologically. They question who is extreme and who is moderate, pointing out that 'refusing oppression, the right to resist through refusing occupation, Hezbollah is moderate'.[55] This language is picked up by Hezbollah's allies and affiliates. The Iraqi 'Hezbollah' Brigades denounced in a statement the inclusion of the Chief of Staff of the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, Abdul Aziz Al-Muhammadawi, known as Abu Fadak, on the US sanctions list, blaming the 'Great Satan', the 'Evil America', claiming that it is terrified and confused by the free men of the resistance, and that its decisions are an admission of defeat and weakness.[56]

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[52] AFP, 'In Basque vote, a major breakthrough for left-wing separatist Bildu' (21 April 2024), available at: {https://www.rfi.fr/en/international-news/20240421-in-basque-vote-a-major-breakthrough-for-left-wing-separatist-bildu}.

[53] Hezbollah 'largely abandoned terrorist (but not other violent) methods after the 1990s'. Katerina Dalacoura, *Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 68.

[54] Philippe Droz-Vincent, 'Le Hezbollah vue par l'administration americaine', in Sabrina Mervin (ed.), *Le Hezbollah: état des lieux* (Paris: Sindbad-Actes Sud, 2006), pp.65-74 (p. 67).

[55] Sheikh Na'im Qâssem, *Hezbollah: La voir, l'experience, l'avenir* (Beirut: Albouraq, 2008), p. 300

[56] Statement by the Iraqi 'Hezbollah' Brigades on the inclusion of 'Hajj Abu Fadak' on the US sanctions list, *International Quran News Agency* (15 January 2021).

Hezbollah sets itself up as a leader of a distinct camp, in the resistance against the US and its allies:

Many of the regional countries were tools to implement the American and Israeli policies in the region. Again, the resistance axis, the resistance countries, and the resistance groups stood to face this war. It settled the battle in Iraq, in Syria and in Lebanon. In Yemen, the aggression is still ongoing. Gaza is still resisting all the types of aggression and embargo. I predict that the sanctions will be intensified on our supporters and on us – on Iran, Syria, all the resistance groups in the region, and on us. In Lebanon, they sanctioned the banks and limited many of their transactions. They created a list with the names of merchants, companies, institutions and organizations and designated them as terrorists and it is prohibited to work with them. This might continue by adding new names and organizations.[57]

This is similar to the case of Cuba, which by proposing a 'separate system of honour' manages to push back and stay outside of the US's sphere of influence through their communist allies.[58] Stigmatisation of states and non-state actors does not necessarily lead to loss of status or exclusion. The Cuban case illustrates the difficulties of stigmatising when there is no hegemonic discourse or no agreed understanding of what should be considered a threat internationally: 'When the United States cannot produce an understanding of normality that can mobilize a broader group of countries, various forms of resistance become possible. This raises the question of who is stigmatizing whom.'[59]

In that context, it is worth looking at the EU's decision to add the military wing of Hezbollah to their list of banned terrorist organisations in July 2013, having long resisted the move, and with Hezbollah itself having considered the EU an actor they could deal with and engage in dialogue with.[60] Secretary-General of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah rejected the EU's decision as an 'aggressive and unjust decision which is not based on any proof or evidence'. His statement described the declaration as 'written by American hands, in Zionist ink'.[61]

Hezbollah has taken on the stigma as a badge of honour. Nasrallah said in another speech in 2013: 'For the terrorist designation lists, if Europe considers us as a game changer in the region, that is great. We are proud of that. Your terrorist list, keep it to yourself.'[62] Nasrallah is pitting Hezbollah as the winners, the true patriots: 'They are designating us as terrorists because we defeated them and we are defending our nation and our country. Hezbollah will face these sanctions with patience, stamina.'[63]

Hezbollah has been defiant. It has embraced the stigma and has used it domestically to bolster its legitimacy. 'For Hezbollah, as for quite a few other political actors, its foreign policy is above

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[57]Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary-General of Hezbollah, 'We expect sanctions to intensify on the resistance and its supporters' (2019). Al-Ayyam TV YouTube Channel, available at: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkauXNhqoOg}.

[58]Abdi M. Kusow, 'Contesting stigma: On Goffman's assumptions of normative order', *Symbolic Interaction*, 27:2 (2004), pp. 179–97, cited in Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management'.

[59]Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management', p. 169.

[60]Sheikh Na'im Qâssem *Hezbollah: La voir, l'experience, l'avenir*, p.340.

[61]'By limiting the listing to the armed wing, the EU was trying to avoid damaging its relations with Lebanon's government, but the split may complicate its ability to enforce the decision in practical terms. Hezbollah does not formally divide itself into armed and political wings, and Amal Saad Ghorayeb, who wrote a book on the group, said identifying who the ban would apply to will be difficult.' Justyna Pawlak and Adrian Croft, 'EU adds Hezbollah's military wing to terrorism list', *Reuters* (22 July 2013), available at: {https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-hezbollah-idUSBRE96K0DA20130722}.

[62]'Nasrallah underestimates the inclusion of his party in the terrorist list', Arabic Skynews YouTube channel (2013), available at: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xj1eEJAz6X0}.

[63]'Who are the members of Hezbollah that were affected by the new US sanctions?', Elnashra TV YouTube channel (2020), available at: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMX8ZuHeK0I}.

all a domestic policy.'[64] The group is unbothered by the US or EU listing, their audience is not Western governments. Their allies operate in a different 'system of honour'. Russia, for instance, made the specific point in 2015, in the context of the Syrian conflict, to state that Hezbollah is not a terrorist organisation.[65] More recently, in June 2024, in the context of the tensions between Israel and Hezbollah over the war in Gaza, the deputy head of the Arab League, Hossam Zaki, made the point that the League would no longer refer to Hezbollah as terrorists in their statements.[66] This illustrates that, whether the stigmatised actor is a state or a non-state actor, they are capable of reacting strategically especially if they have allies outside of the stigmatiser's spheres of influence. In the case of non-state armed groups, particularly the Islamic kind, it might actually bolster the group.

This case highlights the challenge for listing regimes in a context were these groups have alternative networks; the stigma appears to strengthen them by shoring up their legitimacy. This will only become more pronounced as the world heads towards increased multipolarity. But while groups like Hezbollah are able to use the stigma strategically to shore up their local legitimacy, they are still experiencing the material reality of being on international terrorist lists. In the aftermath of the 7 October Hamas attack in Israel, the lists have allowed Israel to receive little international criticism for the assassinations of Hezbollah leaders and airstrikes in Lebanon.

Conclusions

The diversity of response to the terrorist stigma through recognition, rejection, and counterstigmatization shows that the agency of listed actors cannot be ignored. Even though proscription regimes homogenise the groups by listing them side by side, their reaction to the stigma varies considerably. More research could deepen this finding, centring their actorness, and also consider whether listed groups may switch strategies or adopt more than one depending on the circumstances or how the context evolves.[67]

The variation in reaction to proscription matters because it highlights the blunt nature of listing regimes – you are either on or off the lists – leaving international policy with little flexibility in terms of response. Different reactions to the stigma should surely require a different set of policy responses. For instance, keeping ETA on the international lists of terrorist organisations might not incite other listed actors to follow their path of unilateral transition.

There are two important differences that emerged on how stigma affects and is managed by non-state actors compared to state actors. The first is that while the effect of stigma appears more pronounced at the leadership level when it comes to state actors, the effect of stigma is more localised in the case of non-state armed groups. It is the way the stigma is affecting the communities and populations the non-state armed group claims to represent that seems to matter most and will thus shape how the group chooses to react to it. In the case of the Basque country, it was the community-level reaction to the stigma that ended up pushing the group's leadership towards a shift in strategy and stigma recognition. In the case of the FARC, even though broader Colombian society took up the stigma with gusto, the FARC itself rejected it because their localised interactions considered the label a misnomer and irrelevant. For Hezbollah, the stigma actually strengthened their local legitimacy and thus encouraged them in pushing back through counter-stigmatisation. Future research could unpack in more detail the different levels of analysis of stigma at the local, regional, national, and international level.

[64]Aurélie Daher, 'A fighting Shiism faces the world: The foreign policy of Hezbollah', in Mohamed-Ali Adraoui (ed.), *The Foreign Policy of Islamist Political Parties: Ideology in Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 127-41 (p. 128).

[65]'Russia says Hezbollah not a terrorist group: Ifax', *Reuters* (15 November 2015), available at: {https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-terrorgro-idUSKCN0T412520151115}.

[66]While the Arab League does not have a list of terrorist organisations, it had labelled Hezbollah as a terrorist organization since March 2016: *Middle East Eye* (30 June 2024), available at: https://www.middleeasteye.net/.

[67]Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management'.

The second key difference is that stigma is much harder to shake off for a non-state armed group. In Adler-Nissen's work, the cases of Austria and Germany illustrate how a state can be stigmatised but then reintegrated into the fold of 'international society' with little consequence whether they rejected or recognised the stigma. In the case of non-state armed groups, this seems an elusive quest, with the stigma being incredibly hard to shake off. The case of the FARC showed how, even after having transformed into a political party and being de-listed, they are still being stigmatised as 'terrorists' and targeted by paramilitary groups. Similarly with ETA, while they have disbanded, given up their weapons, and transformed into a purely political force, they are still listed and banned and the risks of criminalisation are still hanging over their individual (ex-)members. The 'terrorists' seem to never escape their condition unless they become a state. This raises further questions about power and the international system that should be explored.

A fundamental assumption underpinning listing regimes is shaken. The hegemony of the stigma is seen to fray in contexts where the group is operating in a different 'system of honour'. The case of Hezbollah shows it is important to analyse the audience and networks of the listed entity to understand the possible impact of stigma. Hezbollah remains defiant. Many non-state armed groups care less than states about international recognition from the US and Western allies, as the case of the Taliban in Afghanistan also illustrates. The relevance of the tool in today's world should be questioned especially when the listings themselves appear to be strengthening the groups they often claim to be fighting against, namely Islamic armed groups.

Even though international discourse seems to be moving away from them, terrorists remain on lists. In the case of ETA, the group went so far as to hand in their weapons and disband, but they are still on the lists. This is where the difference between labels and lists matters. Stigma that is linked to mere language is one thing that can be shifted; stigma linked to a list with its embedded legal and bureaucratic reality is hard to undo. This is similar to what Charlotte Heath-Kelly found in this Special Issue on the embeddedness of counter-radicalisation and extremism in social policy. Terrorist lists are an important remnant of the global war on terror that is not going away and has serious symbolic and material implications. They can be endlessly reactivated, underpinned by dehumanisation and global legitimacy as we see in the targeting of the Hezbollah leadership or the indiscriminate bombings of Gazans. The lists create a permanence that can always be reinvigorated when deemed salient. If it were not for the lists, might the world move on from the war on terror?

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