# The Missing Pillar:
# Re-centering Disengagement and Reintegration in the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda for a More Innovative Approach to Sustaining Peace

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## Abstract

A decade after Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015), the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda has gained visibility through expanded youth participation and institutionalized advisory mechanisms. Yet YPS has matured unevenly and remains weaker than Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in routinization, senior sponsorship, and financing leverage, leaving participation vulnerable to performative practice when detached from mandates and budgets. This paper identifies a "missing pillar" problem: although 2250 anchored Disengagement and Reintegration, later YPS resolutions have not built a comparable operational architecture, and Disengagement and Reintegration is absent from condensed political compacts such as the Pact for the Future. It explains this sidelining through the political economy of unpopular programming, shaped by security sensitivity and reputational risk, institutional fragmentation across Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR), Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), justice, and child protection, and financing headwinds. Using Youth Associated with Non-State Armed Groups (YANSAG) as a lens, it reframes Disengagement and Reintegration as agents-of-peace pathways and proposes an implementation-facing YPS resolution to mainstream eligible youth within youth systems, embed safeguards and community acceptance mechanisms, and leverage cross-agenda synergies under austerity.

## 1. Introduction: A decade of YPS and the problem of uneven maturation

The YPS agenda sought to position youth as co-architects of peace and security policy, not only beneficiaries. Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) defined youth as persons aged 18–29 and set five pillars: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration. Over a decade, YPS has expanded in visibility through expected youth participation, proliferating advisory mechanisms, and broader references in policy instruments.

At ten years, the question is whether YPS has become operationally consequential, able to shape tradeoffs under fiscal constraint and geopolitical fragmentation. This paper argues that visibility has outpaced institutional authority, producing uneven pillar development.

Two claims follow. First, Disengagement and Reintegration is the "missing pillar": 2250 links youth to DDR planning and reintegration needs, but subsequent resolutions do not create an implementation scaffold. Second, YPS remains a "weak agenda" relative to WPS, with thinner bureaucratic ownership and less predictable financing. Together, these dynamics privilege rhetorically safe participation while sidelining the politically sensitive work of reintegration, leaving a critical youth cohort, those exiting non-state armed groups, insufficiently served.

## 2. How Disengagement and Reintegration became least operationalized pillar

### 2.1 What 2250 actually mandates

Security Council Resolution 2250 is unambiguous that youth are relevant across conflict cycles, including post-conflict processes. It urges actors negotiating and implementing peace agreements to consider youth needs in repatriation, resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration, and reconstruction, and it creates a dedicated Disengagement and Reintegration section that explicitly links youth to DDR planning.

The key point is not merely that 2250 mentions reintegration; it is that 2250 frames Disengagement and Reintegration as a core action area. This matters because it anchors Disengagement and Reintegration as YPS-native, not merely a borrowed concept from DDR or P/CVE. It also implies that YPS legitimacy extends into politically charged terrain, such as former combatants of non-state armed groups[2].

[2] Primary targets for disengagement and reintegration in traditional and third-generation DDR programs are combatants who have endorsed a peace agreement and those who have left violent

## 2.2 What later YPS resolutions do and do not do

Subsequent YPS resolutions deepen the narrative around participation, protection, prevention, and partnerships, and they reference the progress study and implementation reporting. Yet they do not create an operational equivalent to the 2250's Disengagement and Reintegration section: they neither define a Disengagement and Reintegration theory of change within YPS nor establish a structured set of asks that would mainstream Disengagement and Reintegration as a YPS deliverable.

Security Council Resolution 2419 (2018) includes a request that reporting consider youth participation in peace processes including DDR processes, but this appears as an element of reporting rather than as an implementation scaffold. Resolution 2535 (2020) reiterates the five pillars list, including disengagement and reintegration, but the operative paragraphs primarily advance participation frameworks, capacities, and financing for YPS broadly rather than Disengagement and Reintegration-specific pathways.

Most recently, Resolution 2807 (2025) reaffirmed the YPS agenda and encouraged Member States to adopt or strengthen national action plans on YPS, promoted safe and meaningful youth participation in the Council's work, and invited consideration of expert-level discussions on YPS, including in country-specific contexts. However, while resolution 2807 further consolidates the Council's engagement with YPS, it similarly stops short of articulating an implementation architecture for disengagement and reintegration. The operative focus remains concentrated on participation and enabling environments, with Disengagement and Reintegration continuing to lack dedicated operational guidance, safeguards, and financing pathways comparable to other pillars.

## 2.3 The Pact for the Future as a revealing stress test

A revealing test of agenda prioritization is what survives in condensed, forward-looking political compacts. In the Pact for the Future, which adopted at the UN general assembly in September 2024, Youth, Peace and Security is framed largely through participation and inclusion, without a corresponding articulation of Disengagement and Reintegration as a policy priority[3].

This omission should not be read as a mere drafting accident; it reflects the political economy of what is easy to endorse in multilateral language versus what triggers

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extremist organizations. However, other types of disengaged combatants should also be given due consideration. See Nagai and Harper (2023).

[3] See United Nations General Assembly (2024).

contestation. Disengagement and Reintegration invoke contested questions: detention, screening, proscription, criminal accountability, reconciliation, community security bargains, and reintegration financing. Under geopolitical polarization and fiscal austerity, these are precisely the issues least likely to be elevated unless deliberately championed.

## 3. Why Disengagement and Reintegration is consistently sidelined

The marginalization of Disengagement and Reintegration is not well explained by "lack of evidence" alone. Instead, it is better understood as the intersection of (i) security sensitivity, (ii) institutional fragmentation, and (iii) financing incentives.

### 3.1 Security sensitivity and reputational risk

Disengagement and Reintegration sit at the boundary of peacebuilding and security practice. In many settings it is associated with counterterrorism and national security, which raises reputational and political risks for donors and implementing agencies.

For example, in Somalia, reintegration support for defectors from al-Shabaab has been delivered by IOM and national/international NGOs in coordination with government counterparts[4]. In practice, however, Disengagement and Reintegration programming often sits uneasily at the interface of reintegration assistance and national-security objectives. As a result, even when framed as purely reintegration support, it sometimes be perceived by key actors as part of a broader counterterrorism posture, elevating both security threats and reputational risks for implementers and donors. Following persistent threats and the end of major donor funding in March 2024, the pathway contracted and sites were disrupted. By January 2026, only one full-scale center in Dhusamareb remains operational, supported by an international NGO.

In addition, even when programs are framed as rehabilitation or reintegration support, they are basically vulnerable to accusations of rewarding perpetrators or legitimizing armed groups[5]. These reputational risks are amplified where public discourse is polarized and where domestic politics encourage punitive rather than reintegrative policy signals[6].

[4] The author has around 10 years of practitioner experience in Somalia, working on disengagement, rehabilitation, reintegration for defectors and prisoners of Al-Shabaab.
[5] This is one of the recurrent, well-documented challenges in DDR programming. See Briscoe. et al. (2011); McMullin (2013); Sesay and Suma (2009).
[6] Such dynamics have been observed across diverse DDR contexts. In Nigeria, reintegration for disengaged combatants of Boko Haram face similar vulnerabilities to those seen in Somalia. See Glazzard (2023).

### 3.2 Institutional fragmentation

Disengagement and Reintegration also suffer from being "everywhere and nowhere" institutionally. DDR sits historically in peacekeeping and political missions; P/CVE often sits in separate security or development tracks; detention and prosecution are handled through justice systems; and child-associated armed group frameworks have their own legal and protection architecture. YPS risks adding yet another layer unless it provides integrative value.

In practice, many Disengagement and Reintegration needs arise in contexts where the classical DDR preconditions, peace agreements, trust in the peace process, minimum security, and political will, are weak or absent[7]. That shift has been widely recognized in policy practice, but it complicates program design and, crucially, donor appetite. Donors are often reluctant to fund long-cycle reintegration outcomes that depend on political bargains, community acceptance, vulnerable local labor markets, and high risk and sensitivity.

### 3.3 Financing headwinds

Disengagement and Reintegration has also been affected by broader financing headwinds. Global peace operations have experienced consolidation and drawdowns over the past decade, and peacekeeping budgets have faced persistent pressure. Because DDR has historically been linked to mission settings, fewer or smaller missions can translate into weaker institutional platforms and reduced financing space for DDR-adjacent programming.

In parallel, P/CVE funding has exhibited cyclical patterns, rising sharply during periods of heightened salience and then declining or being reallocated as geopolitical priorities shift. The political attention cycle does not always map neatly onto long-term reintegration needs. In an era dominated by interstate war anxieties and great-power competition, disengagement and reintegration interventions can struggle to compete with hard security spending, even if their long-term cost-effectiveness is strong.

The combined effect is a structural disadvantage: Disengagement and Reintegration is expensive, long-term, politically sensitive, and cross-sectoral. That makes it less attractive for rhetorical multilateralism and harder to mainstream without a deliberate integrative strategy.

[7] See Nagai (2021); Piedmont (2015); United Nations (2019).

## 4. Why YPS remains institutionally weaker than WPS

### 4.1 Bureaucratic seniority and ownership

WPS has benefited from longer institutionalization, stronger senior champions, and deeper routinization across ministries and missions. YPS, by contrast, is often managed by younger focal points or units with limited authority. This is not a critique of youth leadership; it is an observation about bureaucratic leverage. When an agenda is owned by staff without budgetary or political authority, participation risks becoming consultative without being decision-shaping[8].

### 4.2 The decorative participation trap

YPS's normative success in elevating youth voices can paradoxically reinforce a performative dynamic. If youth participation is treated as an end in itself, the agenda can be satisfied through events, advisory boards, and consultation mechanisms without materially altering policy choices. The gap between presence and power becomes particularly acute when youth engagement is not linked to mandates, financing decisions, or measurable outcomes.

### 4.3 Child-youth boundary politics

YPS also faces boundary politics with child-focused frameworks. The definitional variation of "youth" across institutions, and the overlapping but distinct needs of children versus youth, can create competition rather than synergy. This matters for Disengagement and Reintegration because youth transitioning out of armed groups often sit precisely at the contested boundary: some were recruited as children and age into youth status, yet may no longer receive child-protection attention once they pass age thresholds. The result is an implementation gap that can become a security and human-rights problem at the same time.

## 5. Reframing Disengagement and Reintegration inside YPS: from risk management to agents of peace pathways

If Disengagement and Reintegration is presented merely as a neglected "add-on," it is unlikely to attract sustained political and financial commitment. The strategic alternative

[8] Given the limited substantive influence afforded to youth, the promotion of youth participation has been criticized as tokenistic or merely decorative, signaling inclusivity rather than enabling meaningful participation in decision-shaping. See Leclerc and Wong (2024).

is to present Disengagement and Reintegration as a force multiplier. To achieve this, it is first necessary to connect Disengagement and Reintegration more organically with the other four pillars of the YPS. Furthermore, beyond youth engagement and empowerment, innovative synergies must be identified with adjacent domains such as WPS, child protection, climate security, and juvenile justice, requiring strategic design and implementation. If achieved, Disengagement and Reintegration will accelerate the overall outcomes of YPS while becoming a pillar that further advances Sustaining Peace.

### 5.1 Why YANSAG sharpens the case

For the consideration on such strategy, empowerment work on Youth Associated with Non-State Armed Groups (YANSAG) provides a concrete lens for this integrative reframing. The central argument is that youth exiting armed groups should not be understood only as threats to be neutralized, but as holders of potential social value if credible pathways exist for disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration[9]. Such hidden youths can convert lived experience of violence into unique capacity for peacebuilding with various ways[10].

The agents of peace framing is not romantic; it is pragmatic. It offers a rationale for why investing in Disengagement and Reintegration is not merely damage control, but a means of generating prevention and solution dividends.

### 5.2 Understanding Disengagement and Reintegration in Relation to Other YPS Pillars

To unlock the unique potential of YANSAG, Disengagement and Reintegration should be deliberately mainstreamed across the other YPS pillars. This strengthens YPS legitimacy and practical functionality by ensuring that youth most affected by recruitment and conflict are not treated as exceptional or peripheral caseloads.

Participation:
As youth, YANSAG should be included, subject to appropriate safeguarding, in the peace initiatives and participatory mechanisms promoted under YPS. Their perspectives, grounded in lived experience of recruitment, violence, and exit, can sharpen the design of credible prevention and peacebuilding interventions. Meaningful participation can also reinforce disengagement and reintegration by building agency, social recognition, and pathways into constructive civic roles.

Protection:

[9] See Nagai (2023); Nagai (2025a).
[10] See Global Taskforce for Youth Combatants, https://gt4y.org/, (accessed 30th January 2026).

YANSAG should fall squarely within the protection pillar. Many were recruited as children, including as former child soldiers, and frequently face serious rights violations both while associated with armed groups and during disengagement and reintegration processes[11]. Incorporating YANSAG into protection frameworks therefore extends YPS practice across the child–youth transition while enabling safer, more sustainable Disengagement and Reintegration outcomes.

Prevention:
Youth targeted for disengagement and reintegration can themselves contribute to prevention. YANSAG embody the consequences of prevention failures and escalation into conflict. With safeguards and community-acceptance mechanisms, this experience can translate into prevention dividends through peer-to-peer engagement, credible messaging, and contributions to community resilience. Mainstreaming YANSAG thus offers a practical route to operationalize Sustaining Peace by linking prevention, conflict resolution, and post-conflict peacebuilding.

Partnership:
Partnerships are essential to implement Disengagement and Reintegration at scale and with legitimacy. Mainstreaming YANSAG requires coordination among government counterparts, security and justice actors, service providers including education and labour systems, and community stakeholders, so Disengagement and Reintegration is embedded within broader youth empowerment and service-delivery ecosystems. Without integration, it remains politically fragile and programmatically isolated, and is likely to be deprioritized.

5.3 Building Synergies

Under sustained fiscal austerity across the UN system and donor governments, major stand-alone financing for Disengagement and Reintegration is unlikely. A more viable pathway is to treat it as a catalytic function mainstreamed into adjacent agendas where political traction, delivery platforms, and resources already exist. The objective is not additional reporting, but to prevent Disengagement and Reintegration from disappearing in condensed political commitments and to make delivery feasible through integration.

WPS:
YANSAG includes women and girls, many of whom face compounded risks upon return, including stigma and gender-based violence[12]. Disengagement and Reintegration that

[11] See Nagai (2025b).
[12] This point has been widely noted in the context of DDR implementation and persists in settings where formal DDR programmes are absent or limited.

ignores gender dynamics is unlikely to be effective; it should therefore link to WPS architectures through gender mainstreaming and targeted service access, while leveraging WPS's stronger institutional footholds and funding channels.

Child protection and juvenile justice:
Many YANSAG were recruited as children yet exit armed groups after turning 18, falling into the long-recognized ageing-out gap between child protection frameworks and adult security responses[13]. Synergy requires extending child protection practice across the child–youth transition and applying rehabilitative juvenile justice approaches where appropriate, strengthening safeguards and reintegration stability.

Climate security:
Climate-affected areas are often rural and marginalized zones where state presence is limited and recruitment risks can intensify. Such geographies frequently overlap with YANSAG concentration. Climate security and adaptation programmes can therefore incorporate Disengagement and Reintegration cohorts through climate-resilient livelihoods, community resilience initiatives, and local dispute-resolution mechanisms, reducing vulnerability to re-recruitment while supporting cohesion.

Food security:
In settings such as Somalia and Yemen, fiscal constraints can make even basic subsistence support for disengaged youth difficult, undermining reintegration in practice. Integrating Disengagement and Reintegration-eligible youth into existing food assistance and social protection modalities, with minimum inclusion benchmarks and safeguarding/community-acceptance measures, can stabilize reintegration while supporting community recovery.

Human rights:
A human-rights framing is essential to legitimacy and effectiveness, given the heightened risks YANSAG face of arbitrary detention, coercion, stigma, and exclusion from services[14]. Embedding Disengagement and Reintegration within human rights standards, including due process, non-discrimination, proportionality, and protection against retaliation, broadens the stakeholder coalition and helps prevent Disengagement and Reintegration from being reduced to a narrow counterterrorism, DDR, or P/CVE tool.

[13] See Amnesty International (2025); United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (2021); Verhey (2001).
[14] See Tzanakopoulos. et al. (2025).

### 5.4 Mainstreaming YANSAG and why an additional YPS resolution on Disengagement and Reintegration is necessary

The reframing above is not self-executing. In the absence of a clear Council signal and a concise implementation scaffold, Disengagement and Reintegration remains easy to sideline. Member States seeking a more outcome-oriented second decade of YPS should consider an additional YPS resolution that re-anchors Disengagement and Reintegration as a deliverable, guided by three principles.

First, it should be implementation-facing and mainstream Disengagement and Reintegration-eligible youth within existing youth engagement and empowerment programmes. It should request context-specific strategies by relevant UN missions and country teams that treat YANSAG as an included subset of broader youth programming. Strategies should specify credible exit and referral pathways, reintegration packages aligned with labour markets and education systems, and community acceptance mechanisms, including dialogue and restorative approaches where appropriate, alongside support to victims and conflict-affected communities.

Second, it should embed safeguards to make Disengagement and Reintegration politically defensible. This includes standards against retaliation, exploitation, arbitrary detention, and stigmatization, and clear references to due process, non-discrimination, and the child–youth transition gap. Without safeguards, programming is vulnerable to punitive capture and becomes a reputational liability for implementers and donors.

Third, it should fit austerity by privileging integration over stand-alone funding and by leveraging synergies with adjacent agendas. In practice, this means requiring mainstream programmes to include eligible youth as a targeted subgroup through platforms with resources and political traction, including WPS-aligned services, child protection and rehabilitative juvenile justice, climate resilience and climate-security programming, food security and social protection, and human-rights-based safeguards. In addition, monitoring should remain light and outcome-focused: access to exit pathways, inclusion and retention in services, reintegration stability, protection outcomes, and community acceptance.

## 6. Conclusion: making the next decade different

At ten years, YPS faces a choice: remain a visibility agenda centered on participation, or mature into an operational framework that reshapes peace and security decisions. Disengagement and Reintegration is the key test. While 2250 anchored it explicitly, later

resolutions have not operationalized it, and the Pact for the Future illustrates how easily it disappears without deliberate championing.

A Disengagement and Reintegration-focused YPS resolution is therefore strategic, not niche. It addresses uneven pillar development and the structural weakness of YPS relative to WPS. Under austerity and instability, the strongest case is integrative: mainstreaming high-risk cohorts, including YANSAG, into credible exit and reintegration pathways with safeguards and community acceptance can generate cross-pillar outcomes and dividends for sustaining peace.

If the next decade of YPS is to deliver more than representation, it must deliver durable outcomes. Re-centering Disengagement and Reintegration is among the most direct ways to do so.

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