



Post-Conflict Reintegration and ex-Boko Haram Militants in Nigeria: Fate of Acceptance or Rejection

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Abstract

The Boko Haram insurgency has had profound and lasting effects on Nigeria, leaving a trail of destruction and displaced communities. As the nation seeks to establish stability and lasting peace, the issue of post-conflict reintegration of ex-Boko Haram militants emerges as a critical challenge. This study examines the potential fate of ex Boko Haram militants upon their return to society - whether they will face acceptance or rejection. Primary and secondary data were utilised. The study population is 74,300 and sample size of 398 respondents were determined using Taro Yamane simplify formula for proportion. The findings show that a significant number of respondents claim familial ties with former militants and want them to be reintegrated back to the societies. The study therefore concluded that the success of reintegration efforts will depend on continued collaboration between the government, NGOs, and local communities to foster understanding, address concerns, and build trust.

Keywords: Conflict, Militant, Reintegration, ex-Boko Haram, Post-Conflict, Peace

Introduction

In the heart of Africa, Nigeria stands as a nation that has weathered the tumultuous storm of the Boko Haram insurgency - Boko-haram is ranked the fourth deadliest terrorist group in the world (Morgan, Adams & Hammond, 2020) -, a crisis that has etched its indelible mark on the country's landscape, its people, and its aspirations (BBC, 2021). The conflict has left a trail of destruction, displaced millions of people, and resulted in the rise of ex-Boko Haram militants who surrendered or were captured (Albert, 2021). However, as Nigeria endeavours to mend the fractures and weave a fabric of stability and lasting peace, a formidable obstacle emerges on the path to redemption: the reintegration of ex-Boko Haram militants into a society grappling with the echoes of conflict (Ike, Singh, Jidong, Murphy & Ayobi, 2021). Within the tapestry of this intricate narrative, a critical juncture arises, demanding a deeper understanding of the potential destinies awaiting ex-Boko Haram militants as they navigate the intricate labyrinth of societal return (Reliefweb, 2020). Will acceptance pave their way, or will the shadows of rejection loom large? This very question forms the crux of a painstaking study that delves into the heart of human nature, exploring the complexities of rehabilitation and reformation within a post-conflict society. However, reintegrating former fighters, particularly when they have joined so-called terrorist organizations, is a controversial undertaking often causing a public criticism (Renard & Coolsaet, 2018). For example, on 25 July 2020, the Nigerian army announced that about 600 ex-Boko Haram militants would be reintegrated back into society. While this decision is laudable, it caused widespread concern across Nigeria as many Nigerians raises concerns about the transparency of the selection process used for those being released and the capability of the Nigerian reintegration programmes such as "Operation Safe Corridor" to effectively screen the combatants to ensure they pose

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minimal or no threat to the host communities (Ogunnubi & Aja, 2022). However, a growing body of literature has often tended to focus on the militant's deradicalisation, demobilization and the rate of recidivism as a yardstick for determining successful reintegration of former militants (Barkindo & Shane, 2016; Barrelle, 2015; Koehler, 2016).

Prior studies by Okoli and Iortyer (2014), who looked into terrorism and humanitarian crisis in Nigeria: insights from Boko-haram insurgency, Vanda (2018) amnesty, defectors' programs, leniency measures, informal reconciliation, and punitive responses to Boko Haram, and Anthony (2019), Boko Haram insurgency on integration: pieces of evidence from Northern Nigeria have explored some of these approaches. Though, the significant focus on fate of acceptance alongside rejection tends to downplay the role of the extant community to which the combatants will be reintegrated. Furthermore, Saheed (2022) wrote on community receptivity to restoring Operation Safe Corridor's deracialized Ex-Boko Haram members in Northeastern Nigeria. In addition, Ngoi and Ibrahim (2022) assessed guilt feelings among Boko Haram repentant and perceived entrepreneurs to be engaged in Self-reliance: counselling interventions. However, these studies have not looked into the post-conflict reintegration of ex-Boko Haram militant, especially concerning fate of acceptance or rejection by the host communities.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study is to examine the fate of acceptance or rejection of ex-Boko Haram militants in post-conflict reintegration Nigeria.

Contextualizing the Conflict of Boko Haram

To understand the potential outcomes of post-conflict reintegration, it is crucial to contextualize the Boko Haram insurgency. Boko Haram, an Islamist extremist group, emerged in the early 2000s and gained prominence in 2009 with its violent campaign to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria. This watershed moment, a culmination of years of ideological fervor and strategic planning, bore testimony to the group's unflinching determination to reshape the sociopolitical landscape of Nigeria. The group's brutal tactics, including bombings, kidnappings, and mass killings, have caused immense suffering among Nigerian civilians. The reverberations of these brutal tactics were far-reaching, inflicting immeasurable suffering upon Nigerian civilians and communities. Homes turned into rubble, lives snuffed out prematurely, and families torn asunder—such were the consequences of a conflict that knew no bounds. The narratives of pain and loss that unfolded against this backdrop were etched with both despair and defiance, testaments to the resilience of human spirit in the face of unrelenting adversity. According to the Global Terrorism Index report (2019), Boko Haram is ranked the fourth deadliest terrorist groups in the world. The group is also known to be responsible for over 30,000 deaths as a result of terrorism (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2019). Moreover, Boko Haram has been integral to the displacement of over 2.6 million people and is notorious as the most dreadful Nigerian insurgent group (Chinonso, 2018).

Causes of the Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria

The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria is a multifaceted issue with roots in socio-economic inequality, religious tensions, corruption, poor governance, and regional disparities (Anyanwu, 2020; Sageman, 2011). Despite Nigeria's wealth in natural resources, stark socio-economic disparities exist, creating environments where disenfranchised communities are vulnerable to extremist ideologies (Zuru & Bintu, 2014; Babaita, 2020). Boko Haram exploited these inequalities, promising equality and justice. Religious diversity in Nigeria, particularly between

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Christian and Muslim populations, has occasionally led to tensions. Boko Haram has used these divisions, promoting a distorted interpretation of Islam that resonated with marginalised or misunderstood segments of the population (Ushe, 2015; Maiangwa, 2012; McBride, 2019).

Corruption is another significant factor. The pervasive graft and lack of transparency in governance led to public disillusionment, driving individuals towards radical alternatives (Abdullahi, 2020; Imhonopi & Urim, 2016). Furthermore, inadequate governance, characterised by mismanagement and ineffective policies, created conditions conducive to extremism (Igbokwe, 2020; Kerandi, 2008). Boko Haram found opportunities in the government's failure to address socio-economic issues (Badewa, 2022). The Northeast region of Nigeria, marked by poverty and marginalisation, became a fertile ground for Boko Haram. The group exploited the region's dire conditions, presenting itself as a source of purpose and empowerment (Adesoji, 2010; Rotberg, 2019). Understanding the Boko Haram insurgency requires recognising the complex, interlinked factors contributing to its rise. Addressing these underlying causes is crucial for Nigeria to forge a path towards a more equitable and resilient future, learning from past challenges (Ziame, 2020).

Community Involvement and Healing

In the context of post-conflict reintegration, community involvement is crucial, acting as a vital agent of change in reshaping narratives, rebuilding relationships, and facilitating acceptance and healing (United States Agency for International Development & United Nations Development Programme, 2000). Local leaders, religious figures, and civil society organisations play pivotal roles in sowing the seeds of reconciliation, fostering a sense of belonging that overcomes divides created by conflict (Bar-Tal & Bennink, 2004). Local leaders are particularly influential, their impact reaching beyond political boundaries to the heart of communities (Van Leeuwen, 2016). They use empathy and understanding to break down walls of suspicion and fear, initiating dialogues for airing grievances and beginning the healing process.

Similarly, religious figures, by realigning religious teachings with messages of peace and coexistence, guide individuals on a path of redemption and serve as intermediaries in conversations that dispel hatred and division (Kingston, 2019). Civil society organisations also contribute significantly through grassroots initiatives, offering practical support like trauma counseling and vocational training, embodying community resilience (Maynard, 1997). Engaging communities in dialogue is fundamental, creating a platform for acknowledging grievances and forging a collective desire for peace (Shapiro, 2020). The ultimate aim is healing, both personal and communal. This involves promoting understanding, empathy, and reconciliation, transforming reintegration into a collective catharsis (Charles & Fowler-Watt, 2023). Rebuilding trust, a fragile construct shattered by conflict, is essential, requiring patience and empathy towards the traumas experienced by all sides (Nilsson, 2005). Community involvement in healing is more than policy; it is a narrative of resilience and hope, demonstrating the transformative power of collective action. This narrative emphasises healing not just from the wounds of conflict but also from the deeper scars on the collective soul.

Reintegration Challenges

The reintegration of former Boko Haram militants in Nigeria presents complex challenges across psychological, ideological, and logistical dimensions (The Conversation, 2022). Deeply influenced by extremist indoctrination, the ex Boko Haram militants face the daunting task of reshaping their identities towards peace and coexistence (Anyanwu, 2022; Courtheyn, 2018).

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Deradicalization programmes are crucial in this effort, aiming to replace radical beliefs with narratives of tolerance and acceptance (Hearne & Laiq, 2010). However, the success of these programmes is not guaranteed and is complicated by the number of ex-militants and their varied backgrounds and experiences (Corps, 2016).

Logistically, the reintegration process demands significant resources and infrastructure (Achamkulangare, 2014). A comprehensive approach is needed, one that caters to physical, emotional, and societal needs. This includes vocational training, education, mental health support, and community reintegration (Bloomfield, Barnes & Huyse, 2003). The diversity of the ex-militants' motives—ranging from desperation to conviction—requires personalised strategies for effective transformation and reintegration (Adebayo, 2019). Community dynamics also play a critical role. There is potential resistance and resentment from communities that have suffered under Boko Haram, making it essential to foster understanding and reconciliation (Granville, 2020). This process is riddled with uncertainties but also offers opportunities for resilience, innovation, and healing (Ike, Jidong, Ike & Ayobi, 2023). The transformation of ex-militants into constructive community members is a powerful testament to human potential and change. Nigeria's challenge is to redefine this narrative, underscoring reintegration as a commitment to a future of forgiveness, understanding, and peace (Kyambadde, 2021).

Government Response and Reconciliation Efforts

The Nigerian government, along with international partners, has embarked on a comprehensive programme aimed at responding to and reconciling with the past, particularly concerning the Boko Haram insurgency. This programme, as posited by Onuoha (2018), is not just focused on healing old wounds but also aims to build a foundation for a more inclusive and peaceful future. Central to these efforts is the reintegration of ex-Boko Haram militants, as discussed by Brechenmacher (2018). This approach acknowledges that true healing encompasses more than just deradicalization; it requires addressing the complex mix of factors that led individuals to extremism. The initiatives thus involve psychological transformation, socio-economic reintegration, education, and community reconciliation. Deradicalization, highlighted by Koehler (2016), is key, aiming to replace extremist ideologies with narratives of tolerance and coexistence through various strategies, including counseling and religious guidance.

Socio-economic reintegration is another critical aspect. According to Klima and Dal Santo (2018), this tackles the socio-economic disparities that often make individuals vulnerable to extremism, offering vocational training, job opportunities, and education. Education plays a crucial role in empowering individuals and dismantling the ignorance on which extremist ideologies are often based. Community reconciliation is also vital. As Holmer and Shtuni (2017) point out, it provides a platform for dialogue, forgiveness, and a unified desire for peace. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives remains debated. Concerns like the authenticity of deradicalization, resource allocation challenges, and the risk of recidivism (Akinbi, 2015), along with the scale of the insurgency (Borum, 2004), present significant challenges. The Nigerian government's efforts represent a blend of hope and uncertainty. The true measure of success for these initiatives will be their ability to tackle not just the symptoms of extremism but its root causes, as the future of Nigeria depends on turning these aspirations into reality.

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Methodology

This study utilizes a field survey through structured questionnaire and interview. The information gathered from the respondents in the selected three (3) IDP camps within Borno State (Muna Badawi and 400 Housing Estate (Gubio) Camps) and Yobe State (Bayari YBC camp), included willingness to accept or reject the ex-Boko-haram militants. The interview was also conducted to solicit information from the senior staff of operation safe corridor, disaster management actors from both State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) Borno and Yobe States Offices and non-governmental organization, El-Kanemi Memorial Foundation (EMF). In addition, this paper also relies on secondary data sources, including books, journal articles (both print and online), government documents and conference proceedings on the topics at hand. The study population stand at (74,300) with sample size of 398 respondents, using Taro Yamane simplified formula for proportion ($n = \frac{N}{1 + N(0.05)^2}$) and two staffs each were interviewed from the two selected government institutions and NGOs. The received data were analysed using the application of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), and the outcomes were then examined using basic descriptive statistics, presented as percentages. The findings were summarized using a Reins (5) rank Likert scale.

Data Presentation and Interpretation

This section presented the data analysis of the Post-conflict reintegration and ex-Boko Haram militants in Nigeria: Fate of Acceptance or rejection. The Table 1 revealed the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents on each of the assertions and its values/responses were organized using Likert scale of measurements, such as: Strongly agree (1), Agree (2), Neutral (3), Disagree (4) and strongly disagree (5). In addition, the mean value ($\bar{\chi}$) summarises the strength of the respondents for each of the statements, using a decision rule as thus: where ($\bar{\chi} < 2.5$), more respondents tended towards disagree; and where ($\bar{\chi} > 2.5$), more respondents tended towards agree. On the first assertion in Table 1, an aggregate of 147 (36.9%) and 167 (42.0%) of the respondents strongly agree and agree that ex-Boko Haram militants cause suffering to the IDPs and the communities, while 62 (15.6%) and 17 (4.3%) of the respondents disagree and strongly disagree to the assertion with 5 (1.3%) of the respondents were neutral. This implies that ex Boko Haram militants cause suffering to the IDPs and the communities, as presented by the mean value and standard deviation ($\bar{\chi} = 2.53$, $SD = 0.973$).

On the concerns about potential re-engagement in violent activities, the respondents were asked to react whether the ex Boko Haram militants would reintegrate into society peacefully or resurgence into violence. In their reactions, 178 (44.7%) and 183 (46.0%) of the respondents strongly agree and agree to the assertion. However, 12 (3.01%) and 8 (2.01%) of the respondents disagree and strongly disagree to the assertion, while 17 (4.3%) of the respondent were neutral. This implies that ex Boko haram militants might likely re-engage in violent activities upon their reintegration into communities, as shown by the mean value and standard deviation ($\bar{\chi} = 2.56$, $SD = 0.921$). Their perspectives shed light on the complex dynamics surrounding the post-conflict environment and the challenges of ensuring a sustainable peace.

On the other hand, it was reported that 175 (44.0%) and 193 (48.5%) of the respondents strongly agree and agree that ex Boko Haram militants killed their relatives and love ones. However, 14 (3.5%) and 13 (3.3%) of the respondents disagree and strongly disagree with the assertion, while 3 (0.8%) of the respondents were neutral. This implies that ex Boko Haram militants killed many

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relative and love ones of the IDPs in Borno and Yobe States, as shown by the mean value and standard deviation ($\bar{\chi} = 2.58$, $SD = 0.943$). This outcomes agrees with what Amalu (2015) assert that Boko Haram members has killed so many people in the study area and also burned many people in social environment.

On the fourth item, 98 (39.8%) and 107 (45.8%) of the respondents strongly agree and agree that ex Boko Haram militants cannot be trusted, reflecting a significant apprehension among the surveyed individuals. In contrast, on the other respective reactions, 83 (20.9%) and 78 (19.6%) of the respondents disagree and strongly disagree with the assertion. This dissenting viewpoint suggests a divergence in opinions, with a notable portion of participants expressing skepticism or reservations about the stated assertion. Exploring these varied perspectives provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding public perceptions of ex Boko Haram militants.

While, 32 (8.0%) of the respondents were neutral. This skepticism underscores the persistent challenges in gaining public confidence regarding the rehabilitation and reintegration of former members of the Boko Haram group into society, as indicated by the mean value and standard deviation ($\bar{\chi} = 2.57$, $SD = 0.955$).

Furthermore, it was acknowledged that some ex Boko Haram militants were coerced to join the extremist groups. In respective reactions, 95 (23.9%) and 113 (28.4%) of the respondents strongly agree and agree with this assertion, shedding light on the acknowledged influence of coercion in recruitment. However, 69 (17.3%) and 97 (24.4%) of the respondents express disagreement and strong disagreement, suggesting differing perspectives on the extent of coercion. Additionally, 24 (6.0%) respondents remained neutral, emphasizing the complexity and varied opinions surrounding the circumstances of individuals joining such extremist group. This data distribution shows that a reasonable number of the respondents appears to recognize the coercive elements in the recruitment of ex Boko Haram militants, as verified by the mean value and standard deviation ($\bar{\chi} = 2.54$, $SD = 0.924$).

Drawing from personal connections, the data distribution indicates that a notable portion of respondents, comprising 159 (6.4%) and 127 (23.7%), strongly agree and agree that some members of ex-Boko Haram militants are their relatives. This insight provides a human dimension to the analysis, emphasizing the emotional and familial complexities involved in perceptions of the group. However, it's important to note that a segment of respondents, totaling 65 (3.8%) and 39 (2.5%), holds opposing views, disagreeing and strongly disagreeing with the assertion. Additionally, 8 (0.2%) respondents remained neutral, underlining the diverse range of opinions within the surveyed population. These nuanced findings highlight the intricate interplay of personal connections and differing perspectives when examining attitudes towards relatives associated with ex-Boko Haram militants, as shown by the mean value and standard deviation ($\bar{\chi} = 2.51$, $SD = 0.955$).

Soliciting for peace, as indicated by the survey results, is widely supported, with 187 (47.0%) and 198 (49.7%) of the respondents strongly agreeing and agreeing that, particularly in a region affected by the activities of ex-Boko Haram militants, it involves a collective and urgent appeal for reconciliation and tranquility. These findings underscore a strong consensus on the crucial need for concerted efforts to establish peace in the aftermath of conflict. However, a small percentage of respondents, comprising 6 (1.5%) and 5 (1.3%), express disagreement and strong disagreement with this assertion. Additionally, 2 (0.5%) respondents remained neutral. These nuanced

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perspectives highlight the complex nature of public opinion on soliciting for peace in regions impacted by the actions of ex-Boko Haram militants, emphasizing the challenges and varying attitudes within the surveyed population, as shown by the mean value and standard deviation ($\bar{x} = 2.59$, $SD = 0.946$).

Furthermore, to complement the quantitative data, senior staff of operation safe corridor, State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) Borno and Yobe States Offices and non-governmental organization, El-Kanemi Memorial Foundation (EMF) were interviewed. It was thematically emphasized that there has long been significant concern about potential stigmatization of the thousands of children, women, and men who seek to return to their communities after having been associated with Boko Haram militants. Difficulty reintegrating and the potential for rejection rather than being accepted to the society pose a challenge. The senior staff of State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) Borno office maintained that “SEMA with other sister agencies are making all their effort to see they convinced people to accept Boko Haram’s militants who has genuinely repent. He explained that they were doing an enlightenment campaign by telling people that some of the Boko Haram militants were innocent; some were forced to join the group while some were brainwashed while some join the group because of poverty, so when they have something doing, they would not be tempted to join the group again”. This underlines the fact that the IDPs in and around Borno and Yobe States seem very receptive to individuals coming out of Boko Haram returning to their communities.

Similarly, a senior officer of operation safe corridor expressly discussed that “government and NGOs are engaged in the reconstruction of marketplaces, shelters, and other social environments that were vandalized by Boko Haram. Additionally, they are providing essential supplies (food stuffs) to Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs) and offering monthly salaries as part of efforts to encourage acceptance of the Boko Haram Repentance programme”.

A representative of El-Kanemi Memorial Foundation (EMF) narrated that “there is an ongoing effort by both the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-Boko Haram militants. Notably, they are offering scholarships and financial assistance to enable former militants to pursue education and acquire essential skills”. This multifaceted approach reflects a commitment to providing ex-militants with the necessary tools to reintegrate into society successfully. By investing in education and skill development, the government and NGOs aim to empower these individuals, fostering their transformation into productive members of the community and promoting long-term stability in Borno and Yobe States.

Table 1

Willingness to accept or reject ex-Boko Haram Militants by the IDPs in Borno and Yobe States

S/N	Assertions	SA	A	N	D	SD	Descriptive	Statistics
		f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
1.	Cause of suffering	147 (36.9)	167 (42.0)	5 (1.3)	62 (15.6)	17 (4.3)	2.53	0.931

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2.	Resurgence of violence	178 (44.7)	183 (46.0)	17 (4.3)	12 (3.0)	8 (2.0)	2.56	0.939
3.	Killing our relatives and love ones	175 (44.0)	193 (48.5)	3 (0.8)	14 (3.5)	13 (3.3)	2.58	0.943
4.	They cannot be trusted	98 (39.8)	107 (45.8)	32 (8.0)	83 (20.9)	78 (19.6)	2.57	0.941
5.	Some are coerce to join the group	95 (23.9)	113 (28.4)	24 (6.0)	69 (17.3)	97 (24.4)	2.54	0.934
6.	They are our relatives	159 (39.9)	127 (31.9)	8 (2.0)	65 (16.3)	39 (9.8)	2.51	0.927
7.	Soliciting for peace	187 (47.0)	198 (49.7)	2 (0.5)	6 (1.5)	5 (1.3)	2.59	0.946

Source: Fieldwork 2023

Conclusion

The reintegration of ex-Boko Haram militants in Nigeria presents a multifaceted challenge, as revealed by surveys and interviews in Borno and Yobe States. Concerns among Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) about potential risks associated with the reintegration, including fears of a return to violence, are prevalent. Notably, personal connections between respondents and ex-militants, who are sometimes relatives, add emotional complexity to perceptions. Despite these concerns, there is a strong collective desire for peace among respondents, emphasising the need for reconciliation in regions affected by Boko Haram. Stakeholders, including Operation Safe Corridor, State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA), and NGOs, are actively engaged in reintegration efforts. These encompass reconstruction projects, supply provisions, financial aid for education and skills development, demonstrating a commitment to addressing root causes for sustainable reintegration.

However, challenges and skepticism persist, highlighting a nuanced landscape of opinions and experiences. Success in reintegration depends on ongoing collaboration between the government, NGOs, and local communities to foster understanding, address concerns, and build trust. Recognising the resilience and healing potential within these challenges is crucial for steering Nigeria toward a future marked by forgiveness, understanding, and a collective yearning for lasting peace.

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