

THE REPENTANT BOKO-HARAM–MILITARY NEXUS: A RISKY PEACE-THROUGH-CO-OPTATION STRATEGY

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DOI:<https://doi.org/10.57233/zjpd.v6i1.11>

ABSTRACT

The Boko Haram insurgency has remained one of the most persistent security challenges confronting Nigeria since 2009, resulting in widespread violence, humanitarian crisis and regional instability across Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger Republic. While early counterinsurgency responses focused primarily on military force, the Nigerian government has increasingly adopted non-kinetic strategies aimed at encouraging defections and facilitating the rehabilitation of former insurgents. Central among these initiatives is Operation Safe Corridor (OSC), a deradicalisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration programme designed for repentant Boko Haram fighters. Although the programme is intended to weaken insurgent networks and promote peace, it has generated controversy over its security implications and legitimacy. This study examines the emerging nexus between repentant Boko Haram members and the Nigerian military institutions within the broader framework of peace-through-co-optation. Drawing on secondary literature, policy reports, and scholarly analyses, the study evaluates whether this strategy contributes to sustainable peace or introduces new risks. The findings suggest that while the programme has facilitated defections and reduced insurgent manpower, it raises serious concerns regarding community distrust, security vulnerabilities, and the erosion of justice for victims. The article concludes that peace-through-co-optation remains a fragile and potentially risky strategy unless accompanied by robust monitoring, vetting, accountability mechanisms, community reconciliation, and institutional transparency.

Keywords: Boko Haram, deradicalisation, Operation Safe Corridor, counterinsurgency, reintegration, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Insurgency has remained one of the most persistent and evolving forms of political violence in the contemporary international security environment. It refers to an organised and prolonged armed struggle by non-state actors seeking to overthrow a government, challenge state authority, secede from an existing state, or transform the political, social, or religious order through violence (Kilcullen, 2020; United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism [UNOCT], 2024). Since the end of the Cold War, insurgencies have shifted from ideologically driven nationalist and revolutionary movements to decentralised, transnational, and religiously motivated organisations that employ sophisticated technologies and irregular warfare tactics (Metz, 2021; Henshaw, 2023).

The emergence of transnational jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) after 2003 marked a significant transformation in the nature of modern insurgency. Unlike earlier insurgencies rooted in nationalism and Marxist ideologies, contemporary insurgencies are increasingly inspired by Salafi-jihadist doctrines advocating violent extremism and the establishment of Islamic governance (Kilcullen, 2020; Walter, 2022). The African Centre for Strategic Studies (2024) reports that Salafi-jihadist groups now operate in more than thirty-five countries, with Sub-Saharan Africa becoming the global epicentre of jihadist violence. These groups exploit digital technologies for recruitment, propaganda, financing, and coordination while increasingly employing improvised explosive devices, drones, cyber capabilities, and encrypted

communications to evade state security forces (Henshaw, 2023; NATO, 2024).

Contemporary insurgencies are also characterised by their transnational nature. They exploit porous borders, weak governance, criminal networks, refugee movements, and ethnic linkages to expand beyond their countries of origin, thereby posing regional and international security challenges (World Bank, 2023; Lindsay *et al.*, 2020). Boko Haram exemplifies this new generation of insurgencies. Originating in northeastern Nigeria in the early 2000s, the group evolved into a violent extremist organisation following its 2009 uprising and has since expanded its operations across Cameroon, Chad, and Niger within the Lake Chad Basin (International Crisis Group, 2024). Driven by Salafi-jihadist ideology, Boko Haram rejects secular governance and seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate, employing tactics such as suicide bombings, kidnappings, attacks on civilians and military installations, and digital propaganda, making it one of Africa's most devastating contemporary insurgent movements (African Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025; UNOCT, 2024).

The humanitarian consequences of the Boko Haram insurgency remain severe. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2026), approximately 7.9 million people across northeastern Nigeria require humanitarian assistance, while the wider Lake Chad Basin continues to experience one of the world's largest displacement crises. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023) estimates that more than 35,000 people have been directly killed, although broader conflict-related mortality including indirect deaths

resulting from hunger, disease, and displacement is substantially higher. Over 3 million people remain internally displaced, while approximately 8 million people across Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger continue to experience severe humanitarian needs, including food insecurity, disrupted livelihoods, limited healthcare, and inadequate access to education (OCHA, 2026).

Nigeria's response to Boko Haram initially relied heavily on military force. Large-scale counterinsurgency operations by the Nigerian Armed Forces, supported by regional partners through the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), succeeded in recapturing territories previously controlled by insurgents and degrading their operational capabilities (MNJTF, 2020). These operations disrupted insurgent supply lines and limited their ability to conduct large-scale attacks, though the group has continued to adapt through guerrilla tactics and asymmetric warfare (Lawal, Sanusi & Musa, 2025). Despite these operational gains, it became increasingly evident that military force alone could not fully eliminate the insurgency. Persistent recruitment, ideological indoctrination, and local grievances sustained the resilience of extremist networks in the region (UNDP, 2023). Consequently, the Nigerian government began to complement kinetic counterterrorism measures with non-kinetic approaches aimed at addressing the ideological and social dimensions of radicalisation.

Among the counterinsurgency (COIN) strategies adopted by the Nigerian government, is the reintegration and deradicalisation of former insurgents who voluntarily surrender or captured during

military operations. This approach gained prominence through initiatives such as 'Operation Safe Corridor', which was designed to rehabilitate repentant Boko Haram fighters through ideological re-orientation, vocational training and social integration. Rather than relying exclusively on military defeat, the programme seeks to encourage insurgents to surrender by offering them rehabilitation and eventual reintegration into society. Participants in the programme undergo psychological counselling, religious re-education, vocational training, and civic orientation before being released back into their communities (Suleiman & Akinola, 2025). This policy reflects a broader counterinsurgency strategy that recognises limitation to purely military response in addressing complex insurgencies. By encouraging defections and offering pathways for reintegration, governments aimed to reduce the manpower of insurgent groups while simultaneously gaining access to vulnerable intelligence regarding insurgent operations, recruitment network, and logistical structures.

The reintegration of former Boko Haram fighters into the society and their interaction with state security has generated significant intense debate among policymakers, scholars, and affected communities. Critics argue that the reintegration programme risks appearing as a reward for perpetrators of violence while victims and displaced persons continue to struggle with the consequences of insurgency (Atom, 2025). Others worry that inadequate monitoring mechanisms may allow rehabilitated fighters to return to insurgent networks or exploit state structures (Anjide&Saliu, 2022). Another

major concern relates to community acceptance. Research indicates that communities in northeastern Nigeria often resist the reintegration of former insurgents due to the traumatic experiences associated with Boko Haram violence. Many residents fear that returning fighters could threaten local security or revive extremist networks within their communities (Boye, Wakili & Audu, 2024). These fears highlight the social and psychological challenges of reintegration in post-conflict environments where trust between victims and perpetrators remains fragile. It is within the broader context; a complex relationship has begun to emerge between rehabilitated insurgents and Nigeria's security architecture.

Despite the growing implementation of the deradicalisation and reintegration programme in the region, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to examining security implication of the emerging relationship between repentant insurgents and military institutions. Much of the existing literature focuses on the effectiveness of deradicalisation programme or broader dynamics of Boko Haram insurgency, leaving a gap in understanding how co-optation strategies have reshaped security strategies. This study examines the dynamics of the repentant Boko Haram–military nexus within Nigeria's broader counterinsurgency strategy. In particular, it explores the factors that have influenced Nigeria's adoption of a peace-through-co-optation approach toward Boko Haram defectors, as well as the ways in which the interaction between repentant insurgents and the military shapes the country's counterinsurgency landscape. The study also investigates the potential risks and

broader implications of this strategy for long-term security, institutional stability, and sustainable post-conflict peace in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology based primarily on the analysis of secondary sources to examine the emerging nexus between repentant Boko Haram members and the Nigerian military within the framework of peace-through-co-optation. Data for the study were obtained from scholarly journal articles, policy documents, government reports, security publications, institutional reports, and credible media sources relating to Boko Haram insurgency, deradicalisation, Operation Safe Corridor, counterinsurgency strategies, and regional security in the Lake Chad Basin. The study employed a descriptive and analytical research design, allowing for a critical evaluation of the security implications, opportunities, and risks associated with the reintegration of former insurgents into society and their interaction with state security institutions. Theoretical interpretation was anchored on the opportunity–willingness Framework, which provided the analytical basis for understanding how structural opportunities and motivational factors shape insurgent behaviour, state responses, and the dynamics of intelligence sharing and co-optation. Through content analysis, the study systematically examined patterns, arguments, and empirical evidence from existing literature to assess whether the peace-through-co-optation strategy contributes to sustainable peace or generates new security vulnerabilities

within Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad Basin region.

THEORETICAL INTERPRETATION

The study adopts the opportunity–willingness framework developed by Benjamin Most and Harvey Starr (1980; 1989) to explain the emergence and implications of the repentant Boko Haram–military nexus within Nigeria’s counterinsurgency strategy. Rooted in International Relations, Strategic Studies, and Rational Choice Theory, the framework argues that violent conflict occurs only when two conditions coexist: willingness and opportunity. Willingness refers to the motivations, grievances, ideological beliefs, or political objectives that drive actors toward violence, while opportunity refers to the structural and operational conditions that make violence possible or advantageous. According to the framework, insurgent violence is not random but results from the interaction between motivation and enabling conditions.

Within the context of Boko Haram insurgency, the theory explains that the group’s willingness to engage in violence emerged from ideological radicalization, anti-state sentiments, socio-economic deprivation, unemployment, political marginalization, religious extremism, and rejection of Western education and secular governance. Mohammed Yusuf’s teachings portrayed the Nigerian state as corrupt and incompatible with Islamic governance, thereby encouraging strong ideological commitment among followers. However, these motivations alone could not sustain insurgency without structural opportunities such as weak governance, poverty, corruption, porous borders, poor

intelligence coordination, limited state presence, and the transnational networks of the Lake Chad Basin. These conditions enabled Boko Haram to expand its recruitment, mobility, and operational activities across Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.

The framework is particularly useful in explaining how intelligence leaks and institutional weaknesses contribute to insurgent resilience. Boko Haram attacks on military formations in places such as Metele and Marte suggest that insurgents sometimes possessed prior knowledge of troop movements and operational plans. Such intelligence leaks create opportunities that increase insurgent effectiveness by enabling ambushes, improvised explosive device (IED) deployment, relocation of camps, and tactical preparation before military offensives occur.

The Opportunity–Willingness Framework also explains Nigeria’s adoption of deradicalization and reintegration initiatives such as Operation Safe Corridor. Through this peace-through-co-optation strategy, the government seeks to reduce insurgents’ willingness to fight by encouraging defections and addressing some of the ideological and socio-economic factors sustaining insurgency. Deradicalization programmes employ religious re-education, psychological counselling, civic orientation, and vocational empowerment to weaken extremist beliefs and provide alternative livelihoods. Simultaneously, the programme seeks to reduce insurgent opportunities through intelligence extraction. Former insurgents often possess insider knowledge of Boko Haram’s leadership structures, logistics,

communication methods, and operational networks, which can assist security agencies in disrupting insurgent activities and locating hideouts in areas such as the Sambisa Forest and the Lake Chad Basin.

Despite these benefits, the framework reveals the paradox and risks associated with the repentant Boko Haram–military nexus. While reintegration programmes may reduce insurgent motivation among some defectors, they may also create new opportunities for infiltration, intelligence compromise, and renewed insurgent activity if proper monitoring and vetting mechanisms are absent. Cases of ex-fighters escaping with weapons and rejoining insurgent groups illustrate the potential dangers of poorly managed co-optation strategies. The framework further explains community resistance toward reintegration policies, as many victims perceive such programmes as rewarding perpetrators while communities continue to suffer displacement, trauma, and poverty. Weak reconciliation mechanisms therefore create opportunities for mistrust, stigmatization, and possible re-radicalization.

At the regional level, the theory highlights how porous borders and transnational networks across Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon enable insurgents to relocate, regroup, smuggle weapons, and sustain operations. Consequently, intelligence leakage or infiltration linked to the repentant Boko Haram–military nexus may generate broader regional security threats within the Lake Chad Basin. Overall, the Opportunity–Willingness Framework demonstrates that Boko Haram insurgency persists because of the interaction between ideological motivations and structural opportunities. It

therefore provides a comprehensive explanation for both the logic and risks of Nigeria’s peace-through-co-optation strategy, emphasizing that sustainable peace requires effective monitoring, accountability, and community reconciliation mechanisms.

THE EVOLUTION OF BOKO HARAM

The precise origins of Boko Haram remain contested in the literature, although the group became widely known in the early 2000s in Maiduguri, Borno State, northeastern Nigeria. Scholars such as Afzal (2020) and Gershon (2021) generally agree that Boko Haram evolved gradually from earlier Islamist movements operating in northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin. While the exact date of its formation remains uncertain, three dominant narratives explain the emergence of the group. The first narrative links Boko Haram to the legacy of the Maitatsine uprisings that occurred in northern Nigeria during the 1980s. Although Boko Haram did not directly originate from the Maitatsine movement, Olofinbiyi (2021) and Dahiru (2021) noted significant ideological similarities, including hostility toward Western education, rejection of secular authority, and the mobilization of marginalized urban youth. The Maitatsine movement demonstrated the potential for radical religious mobilization within northern Nigeria’s socio-economic and political context.

A second narrative traces the roots of Boko Haram to 1995, when a group known as Sahaba (Muslim Youth Organization) reportedly emerged in Maiduguri under the leadership of Abubakar Lawan. According

to this account, Mohammed Yusuf later assumed leadership when Lawan travelled to Saudi Arabia for Islamic studies. Under Yusuf's leadership, the movement expanded in size and ideological orientation, gradually evolving into a more radical organization (Zenn & Pieri, 2017). The third narrative attributes the emergence of Boko Haram to a doctrinal split between Mohammed Yusuf and his mentor Sheikh Ja'afar Mahmud Adam, a prominent Salafi cleric. Yusuf had previously been associated with Islamic reformist circles advocating the implementation of Sharia law in northern Nigeria. However, disagreements emerged regarding the appropriate strategy for achieving Islamic governance. While Adam favoured gradual religious reform within the existing political system, Yusuf increasingly advocated confrontation with the Nigerian state (Thurston, 2018; Zenn, 2020).

Despite these competing narratives, there is broad scholarly consensus that Mohammed Yusuf was the central figure in the consolidation and transformation of Boko Haram into a coherent movement. Born in Yobe State in 1970, Yusuf emerged as a charismatic preacher whose sermons resonated strongly with marginalized populations across northeastern Nigeria and the wider Lake Chad Basin. His anti-establishment rhetoric attracted followers from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly unemployed youth, students of Qur'anic schools, and individuals disillusioned with corruption and governance failures (Thurston, 2018). Yusuf's preaching emphasized the rejection of Western-style education and governance, which he argued had corrupted Muslim society. He

advocated the establishment of a society governed strictly by Islamic law and portrayed secular institutions as illegitimate colonial impositions. Although popularly known as Boko Haram, meaning "Western education is forbidden," the group officially identified itself as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad) (Walker, 2016; Zenn, 2020).

Between 2000 and 2003, Yusuf established a mosque and Islamic education Centre known as Markaz Ibn Taymiyyah in Maiduguri. The complex served as a hub for religious instruction, recruitment, and social welfare activities. It attracted followers not only from northeastern Nigeria but also from neighbouring countries such as Chad, Niger, and Cameroon (Pieri & Zenn, 2016). Yusuf also introduced welfare programs that provided financial assistance and small loans to members, thereby strengthening loyalty and expanding recruitment among economically marginalized populations.

From the perspective of the Opportunity–Willingness Framework, the rise of Boko Haram can be explained by the interaction between structural opportunities and motivational factors. Structural opportunities included weak state presence in peripheral regions, widespread poverty and unemployment, porous borders, and limited government service delivery. These conditions created an enabling environment for the emergence of radical movements. At the same time, Yusuf's ideological messaging generated the willingness component by framing the Nigerian state as corrupt and illegitimate, thereby mobilizing followers who were already experiencing socio-economic

grievances (Stewart, 2017; Salkida, 2026). Tensions between Boko Haram and state authorities escalated throughout the 2000s, culminating in the July 2009 uprising. The crisis began after a confrontation between Boko Haram members and security forces in Maiduguri and rapidly escalated into coordinated attacks on police stations and government facilities across several northern states. The Nigerian security forces responded with overwhelming force, leading to a five-day military crackdown between 26 and 31 July 2009, during which more than 800 people were killed, most of them members of the sect (International Crisis Group, 2019).

During the crackdown, Mohammed Yusuf was captured by the military and handed over to the police, where he was subsequently killed extrajudicially while in custody. Although the killing temporarily weakened the group, it also contributed to the radicalization of surviving members and intensified their hostility toward the Nigerian state. Following Yusuf's death, Boko Haram reorganized under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, who initiated a new phase of violent insurgency beginning in 2010. Under Shekau, the group adopted more extreme tactics, including suicide bombings, mass kidnappings, and attacks on civilian populations. One of the group's earliest operations during this period was the September 2010 prison break in Bauchi, during which more than 700 inmates were freed, including many Boko Haram members (Zenn, 2020). This attack signalled the group's resurgence and the beginning of a sustained insurgency across northeastern Nigeria.

The Boko Haram insurgency rapidly expanded beyond Nigeria due to the

interconnected nature of the Lake Chad Basin, where porous borders and transnational ethnic networks facilitate mobility across Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Existing social, economic, and cultural ties allowed Boko Haram to diffuse its ideology and operational activities across the region. Several empirical examples illustrate this diffusion. By 2013–2014, Boko Haram fighters had established operational bases in the Mandara Mountains along the Nigeria–Cameroon border, enabling cross border raids and recruitment activities. Similarly, the group conducted attacks in Diffa region in Niger, targeting security forces and civilian communities (International Crisis Group, 2019).

In Chad, Boko Haram launched major attacks in 2015, including bombings in the capital N'Djamena, demonstrating the group's capacity to project violence across national boundaries. These cross-border attacks were facilitated by the region's transnational trade routes, pastoral migration networks, and ethnic linkages particularly among the Kanuri communities distributed across the Lake Chad Basin (Thurston, 2018; Zenn, 2020). From a diffusion perspective, these networks enabled the transmission of insurgent tactics, ideological narratives, and recruitment strategies across multiple states. Consequently, Boko Haram evolved from a localized insurgency into a regional security threat.

NIGERIAN RESPONSE TO BOKO HARAM SINCE 2009

Since the outbreak of the Boko Haram insurgency in 2009, the Nigerian government has adopted a combination of military (kinetic) and non-military (non-

kinetic) strategies aimed at suppressing the insurgency and stabilizing the northeast region. These responses have evolved over time, reflecting shifts in insurgent tactics, regional security dynamics, and domestic political priorities. Despite significant investments in military operations and counter-terrorism initiatives, Boko Haram continue to pose significant security threats in the Lake Chad Basin. The Nigerian response has broadly evolved through three phases: Initial military suppression (2009–2014); Large-scale counterinsurgency and regional cooperation (2015–2019); and combined kinetic and non-kinetic approaches including deradicalization and reintegration (2016–present).

INITIAL MILITARY SUPPRESSION AND COUNTERTERRORISM MEASURES (2009–2014)

The Nigerian government's first major response to Boko Haram occurred during the 2009 uprising in Maiduguri, when security forces launched a large-scale military crackdown on the group following violent clashes with militants. The confrontation resulted in the death of hundreds of people and the extrajudicial killing of Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf, an event that transformed the group from a local religious movement into a violent insurgency (Omotuyi, 2022). Following the resurgence of attacks under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, the Nigerian government adopted a predominantly military approach, including: deployment of the Joint Task Force (JTF) in northeastern Nigeria, declaration of state of emergency in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states in 2013 and large-scale military offensives aimed

at dismantling insurgent strongholds. Despite these measures, Boko Haram intensified attacks on civilian communities, schools, and government facilities, culminating in globally significant incidents such as the 2014 abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls, which drew international attention to the crisis (Ayandele&Aniekwe, 2024). This period revealed limitations in Nigeria's early counter-insurgency strategies, including weak intelligence coordination, inadequate military equipment, and the insurgents' ability to exploit porous borders and local grievances.

COUNTERINSURGENCY ESCALATION AND REGIONAL COOPERATION (2015–2019)

From 2015 onward, Nigeria adopted a more coordinated counterinsurgency strategy, combining domestic military restructuring with regional security cooperation. One of the most significant developments during this phase was the strengthening of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), a regional military coalition involving Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Benin, tasked with combating Boko Haram across the Lake Chad Basin. (Ekene, 2025). The MNJTF conducted numerous joint operations targeting insurgent strongholds in the Sambisa Forest and the Lake Chad islands. For example, joint offensives sought to disrupt Boko Haram logistics networks and eliminate militant bases across border regions (MNJTF, 2020).

Nigeria also reorganized its internal military operations through initiatives such as: Operation Lafiya Dole (2015); Operation Fireball (2019) and Operation Sahel Sanity. These operations aimed to

clear insurgent enclaves, recover occupied territories, and protect civilian populations. Nevertheless, Boko Haram adapted its strategy by adopting asymmetric warfare tactics, including suicide bombings, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and ambushes against military convoys. ACLED data indicate that between 2015 and 2024 there were at least 176-armed clashes between Boko Haram factions and the MNJTF, demonstrating the persistence of violent confrontation despite intensified counterinsurgency operations (Ayandele&Aniekwe, 2024). The continued resilience of insurgent groups during this phase highlighted the limitations of purely military approaches to counterinsurgency.

NON-KINETIC STRATEGIES AND DERADICALIZATION PROGRAMMES (2016–PRESENT)

Recognizing the limitations of a purely kinetic strategy, the Nigerian government introduced non-military approaches aimed at reducing insurgent recruitment and encouraging defections. One of the most significant initiatives is Operation Safe Corridor (OSC), established in 2016 to provide deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration for repentant Boko Haram fighters. According to Boye, Wakili and Audu (2024), Operation Safe Corridor is designed to: de-radicalize former insurgents through religious re-education and counselling, provide vocational training and psychosocial rehabilitation, and also to facilitate reintegration of former fighters into civilian communities. The program reflects a broader shift toward counterinsurgency approaches that combine military pressure with psychological operations and reintegration incentives.

Scholars argue that these measures have contributed to increased defections from Boko Haram, particularly when combined with sustained military pressure from Nigerian forces and the MNJTF (Odo, 2024). In addition to formal rehabilitation programmes, community-based security initiatives have become an essential pillar of Nigeria's counterinsurgency strategy against Boko Haram, particularly within the broader shift toward non-kinetic approaches since 2016. Among these, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) stands out as a critical grassroots actor that complements both military operations and soft counterterrorism strategies. The emergence of the CJTF reflects the limitations of purely kinetic (military) approaches in addressing insurgency. Scholars emphasize that effective counterterrorism requires a combination of hard and soft strategies, including deradicalization, rehabilitation, and community engagement to tackle the root causes of extremism (Anjide&Saliu, 2022). Within this framework, the CJTF functions as a bridge between local populations and state security forces, embedding counterinsurgency efforts within the social fabric of affected communities.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE REPENTANT BOKO HARAM–MILITARY NEXUS

The protracted nature of the Boko Haram insurgency compelled the Nigerian government to adopt a combination of military and non-military strategies aimed at weakening insurgent networks and restoring stability in northeastern Nigeria. While early counterinsurgency efforts relied heavily on kinetic military operations, the persistence of the conflict

gradually encouraged the adoption of alternative strategies that emphasize defection, deradicalization, and reintegration of former insurgents (International Crisis Group, 2021; UNDP, 2023). Within this evolving counterinsurgency landscape, a complex relationship has emerged between security institutions and former insurgents who have surrendered or defected from Boko Haram.

This relationship, often conceptualized in this study as the repentant Boko Haram-military nexus, refers to the institutional and operational interactions between security agencies and former militants within rehabilitation, intelligence gathering, and reintegration frameworks. Such interactions are intended to weaken insurgent organizations by encouraging defections and extracting intelligence from former fighters. However, they also generate significant security concerns, including the potential for infiltration, intelligence leakage, and the reproduction of insurgent opportunities within state-managed security programs. Understanding the emergence of this nexus is therefore critical for evaluating the broader implications of Nigeria's counterinsurgency strategy and the risks associated with the co-optation of former insurgents.

EXPLAINING THE NEXUS THROUGH THE OPPORTUNITY-WILLINGNESS FRAMEWORK

The emergence of the repentant Boko Haram-military nexus can be analytically interpreted through the Opportunity-Willingness Framework, which posits that violent conflict occurs when structural opportunities for violence converge with

motivational factors that generate willingness among actors to participate in violence (Most & Starr, 1989; Stewart, 2017). From this perspective, reintegration programs aim to reduce insurgent willingness by addressing the motivations that drive individuals to join or remain within insurgent organizations. Deradicalization programs attempt to challenge extremist ideologies, while vocational training and economic support provide alternative livelihoods that reduce the incentives for returning to insurgent activity. Simultaneously, these programs seek to reduce insurgent opportunities by extracting intelligence from defectors that can disrupt insurgent operations. Information provided by former fighters may reveal the location of insurgent camps, supply routes, recruitment channels, and operational strategies. In theory, this intelligence can significantly improve the effectiveness of military operations against insurgent networks.

However, the framework also highlights the potential for unintended consequences. If former insurgents retain ties with militant networks or exploit their proximity to security institutions, reintegration policies may inadvertently create new opportunities for insurgent infiltration or intelligence leakage. Under such conditions, the nexus between former militants and security agencies could produce outcomes that undermine rather than strengthen counterinsurgency efforts.

THE REPENTANT BOKO HARAM-MILITARY NEXUS

The institutionalization of deradicalization and reintegration policies in Nigeria has produced multiple layers of interaction between security agencies and former

insurgents. These interactions form the operational core of the repentant Boko Haram–military nexus and are evident across intelligence, persuasion, and community reintegration domains. One of the most significant forms of interaction involves intelligence extraction and debriefing. Former insurgents often possess insider knowledge of command structures, logistics, recruitment pathways, and tactical operations of Boko Haram and its splinter groups. As highlighted by Jacob Zenn (2020) and the International Crisis Group (2021), Nigerian security agencies systematically debrief defectors to obtain actionable intelligence. For example, intelligence gathered from surrendered fighters has contributed to mapping insurgent camps in the Sambisa Forest and the Lake Chad Basin. In several military operations between 2019 and 2022, defectors reportedly provided details about weapons caches, supply routes, and leadership hideouts, which enabled targeted offensives and the rescue of abducted civilians (Zenn 2020). Additionally, debriefings of high-value defectors such as former commanders have helped security agencies understand factional divisions within Boko Haram, thereby informing more nuanced counterinsurgency strategies (Zenn, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2021).

Beyond intelligence gathering, repentant fighters also participate in counter-radicalization and persuasion initiatives designed to encourage further defections and their credibility as former members of the insurgency allow them to communicate more effectively with active fighters (Routley & Hassan, 2022). For instance, under Nigeria's deradicalization framework, particularly Operation Safe

Corridor, rehabilitated ex-fighters have been involved in outreach efforts, both directly and indirectly by sharing testimonies about the hardships of insurgent life, internal conflicts, and disillusionment with extremist ideology. There have been documented cases where surrendered fighters used personal networks or family connections to persuade active members to lay down arms. In the Lake Chad region, security reports indicate that some defections especially mass surrenders recorded from 2021 onward were partly influenced by communication channels involving former insurgents who reassured fighters about the possibility of amnesty and humane treatment upon surrender (Akpan, 2021; PRNigeria, 2021; MNJTF, 2020). These efforts align with broader psychological operations (PSYOPS) strategies aimed at weakening insurgent morale and cohesion.

Furthermore, reintegration programmes increasingly involve former fighters in community-level engagement aimed at rebuilding trust and social cohesion. As noted by Onuoha (2021), reintegrated individuals are sometimes introduced to local leaders, religious authorities, and community-based security actors as part of reconciliation processes. For example, in parts of Borno State such as Maiduguri, Bama, and Konduga, traditional rulers and religious clerics have facilitated dialogue sessions where repentant fighters publicly renounce violence and seek forgiveness from community members. In some instances, ex-combatants have participated in vocational and community development programmes such as farming cooperatives and skills acquisition schemes designed to promote social acceptance and economic reintegration (ILO, 2010). Additionally,

local vigilante groups like the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) have, in certain circumstances, collaborated with community leaders to monitor reintegrated individuals and ensure compliance with peace agreements (Onuoha, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2021). These initiatives demonstrate how reintegration extends beyond rehabilitation centres into the social and security fabric of affected communities.

EMERGING SECURITY RISKS

The development of the repentant Boko Haram–military nexus has generated sustained debate among scholars and security analysts, particularly regarding the unintended risks associated with integrating former insurgents into counterinsurgency and deradicalization frameworks. One major concern involves the possibility of infiltration within security institutions. Empirical evidence from northeastern Nigeria suggests that insurgent groups have historically exploited insider access to undermine military operations. For instance, the International Crisis Group (2021) reports that Boko Haram have repeatedly benefited from intelligence leaks originating from within or around security formations, including advance warnings of troop deployments and planned offensives. A notable example includes attacks on military bases in Borno State - such as those in Metele (2018) and Marte (2020) where insurgents appeared to possess prior knowledge of troop positioning and logistics, raising suspicions of compromised intelligence channels. While not all such leaks can be directly traced to repentant fighters, analysts warn that incorporating insufficiently vetted defectors into intelligence processes

increases the risk of “double agents” who may relay sensitive information back to insurgent networks (International Crisis Group, 2021). Besides leaking of operational plan, some of the repentant ex-fighter gathers intelligence under the guise of cooperation, only to return to the bush and rejoin insurgent cells. As Yakubu Mohammed (2024) reported, 13 ex-fighters of Boko Haram escaped with rifles and motorcycles given to them by the Borno government, which coopted them to join the military operations in fight against the insurgent in the state. These 13 were among thousands of former Boko Haram and their families who had surrendered to the government. This risk is compounded by the fluid and decentralized structure of Boko Haram, which enables covert communication between active fighters and former members.

Another critical concern relates to community resistance toward reintegration programmes. Evidence from field reports and development agencies highlights strong local opposition in several affected communities. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023), communities in Borno State including areas around Maiduguri, Bama, and Gwoza have expressed dissatisfaction with initiatives such as Operation Safe Corridor. For example, in 2022, residents in Bama reportedly protested the planned reintegration of former insurgents, arguing that victims of Boko Haram atrocities had not received comparable support. Similarly, testimonies from internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps around Maiduguri indicate that many survivors particularly women formerly abducted by insurgents, fear stigmatization and renewed insecurity if ex-combatants are

resettled in their communities. In some cases, community leaders have refused to accept returning ex-fighters without formal justice or reconciliation mechanisms, citing unresolved grievances over killings, destruction of property, and sexual violence. These reactions underscore a perceived imbalance in government priorities, where ex-insurgents receive vocational training, stipends, and psychosocial support, while victims remain underserved (UNDP, 2023). Such dynamics risk eroding trust in state institutions and weakening the legitimacy of reintegration programmes.

Finally, the nexus creates strategic dilemmas for policymakers, particularly regarding the use of defectors as intelligence assets. While defectors have provided valuable operational insights such as identifying insurgent hideouts in the Sambisa Forest and Lake Chad Basin, there are documented cases where reliance on such intelligence has produced mixed outcomes. For instance, security analyses referenced by the International Crisis Group (2021) note that some military operations based on informant intelligence have resulted in ambushes or failed raids, suggesting the possibility of misinformation, incomplete disclosure, or deliberate deception. In addition, studies on counterinsurgency in Nigeria indicate that some defectors provide selective intelligence to secure short-term benefits (reduced sentencing or access to rehabilitation programmes) without fully disengaging from insurgent networks. There are also concerns about recidivism: reports have documented instances where “rehabilitated” individuals later rejoined insurgent factions, particularly in areas with weak post-reintegration monitoring

and limited economic opportunities. These examples illustrate the inherent trade-off: while human intelligence from defectors can enhance tactical effectiveness, overdependence without robust verification mechanisms may create long-term vulnerabilities, including compromised operations and renewed insurgent activity.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY

The implications of the repentant Boko Haram–military nexus extend well beyond Nigeria’s domestic counterinsurgency strategy, particularly within the Lake Chad Basin, where insecurity is deeply transnational. The porous borders linking Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon create a fluid operational environment in which both insurgents and security risks easily spill across national boundaries. One key implication is the potential regional diffusion of security vulnerabilities arising from reintegration programmes. For instance, large-scale defections of fighters in northeastern Nigeria especially between 2021 and 2023 led to concerns among neighbouring countries that inadequately monitored ex-combatants could relocate across borders into areas such as Diffa (Niger) or the Lake Chad islands (Chad), where state presence is weaker. Reports cited by the International Crisis Group (2019) indicate that insurgents frequently exploit these cross-border zones to regroup after military pressure in Nigeria. This raises the possibility that repentant fighters who are not effectively tracked could either rejoin insurgent factions or transmit sensitive information beyond Nigeria’s jurisdiction, thereby undermining regional security coordination.

Another major concern relates to the transnational operational networks of Boko Haram and its splinter faction, ISWAP. These groups maintain established logistical and communication channels across the Lake Chad Basin. For example, insurgents have historically used the Lake Chad waterways to transport weapons and fighters between Nigeria, Chad, and Niger, taking advantage of difficult terrain and limited border surveillance. Similarly, recruitment networks have extended into refugee and IDP populations across Cameroon and Niger, enabling continuous replenishment of fighters. There have also been documented cases where insurgents fleeing Nigerian military offensives crossed into Cameroon's Far North region or Niger's Diffa region, where they launched subsequent attacks on local communities and security forces. These patterns demonstrate how insurgent groups operate as a regionalized threat rather than a purely national one (International Crisis Group, 2019).

Therefore, the risk of intelligence leakage becomes particularly significant. If sensitive information such as military strategies, troop movements, or surveillance methods is accessed by inadequately vetted former insurgents, it can be rapidly disseminated through these transnational networks. For instance, analysts have pointed to cases where insurgent attacks on multinational forces in the Lake Chad region appeared to reflect prior knowledge of patrol routes and base vulnerabilities, suggesting the possibility of shared intelligence across borders. Given the interconnected nature of insurgent factions, even localized intelligence breaches in Nigeria could have cascading effects in Chad, Niger, or

Cameroon. Furthermore, these dynamics complicate the work of regional security frameworks such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which relies on intelligence sharing and coordinated military operations among member states. If trust deficits emerge due to concerns over compromised intelligence or poorly managed reintegration processes, cooperation among Lake Chad Basin countries may weaken. This could reduce the effectiveness of joint operations and create gaps that insurgents can exploit.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigeria's strategy of rehabilitating and reintegrating repentant Boko Haram fighters represents a significant shift in its counterinsurgency approach. By combining military operations with deradicalisation, rehabilitation, and reintegration programmes such as Operation Safe Corridor, the government aims to weaken insurgent networks, encourage defections, and promote long-term peace in the conflict-affected northeastern region. This approach reflects a broader recognition that insurgencies cannot be defeated solely through military force but require complementary political and social strategies.

However, the emergence of a repentant Boko Haram–military nexus highlights the complexities and potential risks associated with peace-through-co-optation strategies. While the reintegration of former insurgents may contribute to short-term security gains, it also raises concerns regarding institutional vulnerabilities, community distrust, and unresolved grievances among victims of insurgency. These challenges underscore the need for a

balanced approach that integrates security considerations with justice, accountability, and community reconciliation.

For Nigeria's reintegration strategy to contribute effectively to sustainable peace and stability, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. Enhance transparency and accountability in the implementation of deradicalisation and reintegration programmes.
2. Provide support and justice for victims through compensation, rehabilitation, and reconciliation initiatives.
3. Promote community-based reintegration by involving local leaders and civil society in the process.
4. Strengthen monitoring mechanisms to prevent recidivism and ensure security oversight of rehabilitated fighters.
5. Address socio-economic drivers of insurgency through development, education, and employment opportunities in affected regions.
6. Improve regional security cooperation among countries in the Lake Chad Basin to combat cross-border insurgent activities.

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