RESOLVE NETWORK

Journeys through Extremism:

The Experiences of Forced Recruits in Boko Haram

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Research Report | 2022

ABOUT THE REPORT

This study provides exploratory research with forced recruits into Boko Haram, focusing on how they entered the organization, the conditions they experienced in camps and settlements, their exits from the group, their subsequent experiences in state hands, and their perspectives about future reintegration. These themes are particularly pertinent at the time of writing (spring 2022) given the mass disengagements currently being experienced by Boko Haram, and the extent to which federal and state systems lack the capacity to absorb and handle the large numbers involved. Our research was undertaken at Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC), which was established in 2016 by the Nigerian state to provide an off-ramp for members of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) deemed to be 'low risk' by military intelligence. We conducted thirteen in-depth interviews with OPSC 'clients' (as they are referred to by the program) who were purposively selected to achieve variance in their former roles in Boko Haram.

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ACRONYMS

CJTF	Civilian Joint Task Force
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
DRR	Deradicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration
ICG	International Crisis Group
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IS	Islamic State
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JAS	*Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad*
JIC	Joint Investigating Center
M&E	Monitoring & Evaluation
OPSC	Operation Safe Corridor
PCVE	Preventing & Countering Violent Extremism
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction & Key Findings

This study provides exploratory research with forced recruits into Boko Haram (more formally referred to as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, JAS)*, focusing on how they entered the organization, the conditions they experienced in camps and settlements, their exits from the group, their subsequent experiences in state hands, and their perspectives about future reintegration. These themes are particularly pertinent at the time of writing (spring 2022) given the mass disengagements currently being experienced by Boko Haram, and the extent to which federal and state systems lack the capacity to absorb and handle the large numbers involved. Our research was undertaken at Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC), which was established in 2016 by the Nigerian state to provide an off-ramp for members of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) deemed to be 'low risk' by military intelligence. Located at Mallam Sidi on the outskirts of Gombe, the OPSC program houses cohorts of around six hundred clients at any point in time. The services offered are tailored to personal needs, and include basic education, vocational training, psychosocial support, family and community visits, spiritual support, and various other activities. However, OPSC certainly is not without controversy, with critics highlighting alleged human rights abuses (primarily at Giwa Barracks where individuals are screened for eligibility, rather than within the Mallam Sidi facility itself), extensive delays in the process, and various other concerns.

We conducted thirteen in-depth interviews with OPSC 'clients' (as they are referred to by the program) who were purposively selected to achieve variance in their former roles in Boko Haram. Our respondents were male, with their ages ranging from twenty to thirty-four (six were minors at the time of their initial involvement in Boko Haram). The interviews were semi-structured, allowing us to delve into topics of particular interest while also ensuring we covered all core themes. We also conducted interviews with key stakeholders and observed clients participating in psychosocial, vocational, and drug awareness training while receiving a tour of the OPSC facility. Our principal findings include:

- **Key Finding #1: Despite being coercively recruited by Boko Haram, our respondents were forced into involvement through notably different means.**

While our respondents were all forced into involvement with Boko Haram (with one exception), this research revealed the extent to which these journeys varied. For instance, one respondent claimed that his Almajiri teacher escorted his entire class into the bush for involuntary incorporation into the group.[1] Another observed that his uncle tried to persuade him to enlist several times before eventually forcing him to join the group at gunpoint. Others reported that they were essentially captured during Boko Haram raids of their towns and villages, or that they were forced to join when the group seized control of their community. Many claimed that those who attempted to resist this forceable recruitment were killed.

1 Almajiri schools offer Islamic education for teenagers in Northern Nigeria.

- **Key Finding #2: Boko Haram assigned our respondents to a wide variety of roles in their camps and settlements, with degrees of fluidity in these posts.**

Our respondents included a military commander, members of the military police, foot soldiers, and individuals in a variety of civilian roles (medical officer, trader, tailor, butcher, and handyman). There were relatively high degrees of fluidity between these roles, with certain military respondents also performing civilian tasks on the side. Conversely, some of those in civilian roles were at least occasionally also forced to act as foot soldiers, with one respondent reporting that in his location it was compulsory for all members to actively participate in battle if required.

- **Key Finding #3: Boko Haram camps and settlements differ dramatically, both in terms of their conditions and in relation to the rules and regulations imposed by the group.**

While many respondents reported shortages of food, water, fuel, and medicine in their camps and settlements, others claimed that these remained in plentiful supply (frequently through the plunder of nearby settlements). The extent of ideological training provided by Boko Haram also varied substantially between contexts, with our respondents reporting that their religious guidance lasted anywhere between two weeks and six months. The group's policies and preferences regarding marriage and family life also varied between locations, with certain respondents claiming that the group compelled members to get married, and others asserting that they played no role in such matters.

- **Key Finding #4: State-sponsored communications campaigns via radio, leaflet drops from planes, and personal phone calls were highly influential in motivating and facilitating the exit of many of our respondents from Boko Haram.**

Most respondents claimed to have been aware of rehabilitation and reintegration opportunities available to former members of Boko Haram through radio messaging, leaflets dropped from planes, and (to a lesser extent) phone calls with family members or former members of the group. Some of these respondents accessed these means of communication in secret, as they were formally banned in many camps and settlements. These messaging campaigns highlighted 'success stories' of prior community reintegration after involvement in Boko Haram, and in certain cases suggested suitable routes and locations where members could surrender.

- **Key Finding #5: The accounts of how individuals were able to leave Boko Haram also varied substantially.**

Our respondents typically fled in relatively small groups of between five and twenty people, often accompanied by their wives and children, with two claiming that their exit parties numbered over a hundred. Most accounts involved nighttime escapes, and long journeys to facilities where they could surrender to security forces. Two respondents reported travelling to neighboring Cameroon to surrender, as this presented the most viable route through which to avoid Boko Haram. One claimed that his uncle arranged

for his safe passage with the military, with members of the OPSC team claiming that this occurred relatively often. Another respondent claimed that his escape party was recaptured by Boko Haram, but that they were able to bribe their captors to allow their continued passage.

- **Key Finding #6: Unsurprisingly, fear represented a key obstacle to disengagement from Boko Haram, with attempts to escape being punishable by death.**

Various respondents reported that it took them several years to leave Boko Haram because of the fear that they would be caught and punished, with others providing examples of those who had been put to death for such acts. While less common, other respondents asserted that disengagement was also inhibited by a fear of repercussions by the military and/or the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF).

- **Key Finding #7: Giwa Barracks represents a critical weak link in the state-sponsored exit pathway from Boko Haram, undoubtedly disincentivizing many from disengagement.**

Disengaged members of Boko Haram are processed and screened at Giwa Barracks, with those deemed to be low-risk then transferred to OPSC. However, the barracks is notorious for human rights abuses, and for extracting false confessions through violence. While our research was not designed to validate or discredit such claims, there is little doubt that this reputation alone continues to disincentivize disengagement from Boko Haram. Our respondents also reported having been detained at the barracks for up to five years, which undoubtedly also inhibits further disengagements.

- **Key Finding #8: The screening criteria to determine eligibility for OPSC has seemingly narrowed to the extent that it now excludes individuals who should certainly qualify for rehabilitation and reintegration.**

Previous research by USAID revealed that only around 50 percent of prior OPSC clients had been forced into involvement in Boko Haram, with the remainder motivated by ideology, status, adventure, economic incentives, peer pressure, and so on.[2] By contrast, the OPSC management team reported that the current cohort *only* includes individuals who had been forced into involvement, with just one obvious exception. *If* this is correct, this apparent narrowing of eligibility criteria is highly problematic given that it is essentially inconceivable that all those who are now ineligible for OPSC represent a current threat to public safety and/or were sufficiently involved in violence to warrant being referred to the judicial system.

2 USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation (DDRR) in Northeast Nigeria* (USAID, 2020), 25.

Continued Gaps in our Knowledge

This research was designed to collect information about personal journeys through Boko Haram. While it provides important insights into the state-sponsored off-ramp from this organization, it was certainly not intended to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the various stages of this process, nor the government's role in their implementation. In particular, there remains scant information about the communications campaigns designed to motivate and facilitate exits from this group, as well as the reception and screening phases that precede OPSC. It is also important to recognize that OPSC represents a single node in a far broader network through which former members of Boko Haram and ISWAP are either returned to their communities or transferred to prisons, depending on the nature of their involvement with these groups. Although the prison-based rehabilitation program has been suitably documented,[3] very little is known about the processing of 'high risk' individuals at a military base in Kainji, Niger State, the Sulhul initiative to facilitate defections of entire units through their commanders, and the recently established IDP camps in Borno State in which many individuals formerly associated with these groups are believed to reside. There is also scant information about the pathways of women through Boko Haram and ISWAP, reflecting the usual gender biases in this field.[4] These represent clear knowledge gaps for donors seeking to support and strengthen these processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

This research was originally designed as a pilot study to map personal trajectories out of 'Boko Haram' (more formally referred to as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad, JAS*) in relation to attitudinal and behavioral changes, drawing on interviews with current clients of Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC).[5] However, once at the Mallam Sidi facility where OPSC is implemented, the management team reported that the current cohort (unlike previous ones) only included individuals who had been forced into involvement in Boko Haram, with just one obvious exception. As such, our respondents had been hostile to the group from the outset, resulting in effectively no attitudinal change to measure. This being the case, we adapted the study to conduct exploratory research with this group, focusing on the following key themes:

- Joining Boko Haram
- Roles within the group
- Life under the group
- Leaving the group
- The road to reintegration

3 This program is described in Atta Barkindo & Shane Bryans, "De-Radicalising Prisoners in Nigeria: Developing a Basic Prison Based De-Radicalisation Programme," *Journal of Deradicalization* 7, (2016), 1–25.

4 Although, see, for instance, International Crisis Group, *Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency* (ICG, 2016); Hilary Matfess, *Women, and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses* (London: Zed Books, 2017); and Temitope B. Oriola, "'Unwilling Cocoons': Boko Haram's War Against Women," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, Is. 2 (2017): 99–121.

5 This would have relied on the approach outlined in James Khalil, John Horgan & Martine Zeuthen, "The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, Is. 3 (2022).

Regarding the first four of these themes, this research provides originality through relating personal stories covering a broad range of topics, many of which remain substantially underexplored or are essentially neglected by the literature. On the final theme, it offers up-to-date information (as of spring 2022) about the rapidly evolving OPSC program, drawing from our rarely-granted access to this facility and its clients. Placing our findings in context, Boko Haram has experienced major reversals over recent years, having lost its leader and much of its fighting force (as discussed in the subsequent section). These events have also contributed to mass disengagements from the group,[6] which the current federal and state systems (including OPSC) do not have the capacity to absorb. With such issues in mind, this study is designed to enhance our understanding of personal journeys into and out of violent extremism, with the objective of delivering actionable recommendations relating to disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration. Following on from this introductory section, we discuss the conflict in northeast Nigeria (Section 2) before outlining our research methodology (Section 3). We then deliver the main research findings (Section 4), with these sequentially covering the five core themes identified above. This is followed by a final discussion and our actionable policy recommendations (Section 5).

2. THE CONTEXT

The Rise of Boko Haram

Founded by Mohammed Yusuf in the north-eastern city of Maiduguri in Borno State, *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* (JAS, more popularly known as 'Boko Haram')[7] was a mass movement long before it turned to violence. While comprised predominantly of individuals from the locally dominant Kanuri ethnic group, the group represents 'a complex organization and a melting pot for a range of identities.'[8] In terms of ideology, it advocates a strict interpretation of Sharia Law, and the rejection of democracy and 'Western' education and influence. As observed by Boko Haram's subsequent leader, Abubakar Shekau:

> This is the area by which education is a source of destruction for our children, our friends, our daughters, and our brothers. This source of destruction is inscribed in the white man's philosophy of writing and the faith of its implementation. Followers of western education have usurped our hearts with a philosophy and method of thinking that is contrary to the demands of Allah.[9]

In November 2008, Borno State launched an anti-banditry program known as Operation Flush II, which Yusuf interpreted as a measure against Boko Haram.[10] In response, in June of the following year he delivered his notorious 'Open Letter to the Federal Government of Nigeria', in which he highlighted supposed

6 International Crisis Group, *After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria's Northeast* (ICG, 2022), 6.

7 The formal title translates to 'People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad.'

8 Zacharias P. Pieri & Jacob Zenn, "The Boko Haram Paradox: Ethnicity, Religion and Historical Memory in Pursuit of a Caliphate," in *Understanding Boko Haram: Terrorism and Insurgency in Africa*, ed. James J. Hentz & Hussein Solomon (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 54.

9 Quoted in Pieri & Zenn, "The Boko Haram Paradox", 47.

10 Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of An African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 132.

patterns of anti-Muslim violence, and called for an uprising.[11] On July 29, the security forces stormed Yusuf's compound and killed him, alleging that he had been trying to escape in the process.[12]

Having long encouraged Yusuf to follow a more hardline approach, Shekau assumed control of the movement. Between 2009 and its peak in early 2015, Boko Haram expanded its influence across much of northeastern Nigeria and parts of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, to ultimately control an area the size of Belgium.[13] Its attacks have primarily focused on soft targets, including markets, schools, healthcare centers, mosques, churches, police stations, and so on. It is also notorious for the abduction of women and children (with the case of Chibok achieving international notoriety), forced conscription, and child marriages. In March 2015, Shekau pledged loyalty to the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS), rebranding the organization as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).[14] However, in an apparent attempt to distance itself from Boko Haram's extensive violence under Shekau, IS then announced that ISWAP was formally under the control of Abu Musab al-Barnawi (believed by many to be Yusuf's son) the following year.[15] This action prompted Abubakar Shekau to establish a breakaway faction under the group's original name.

ISWAP expanded its power and influence after the split, with some commentators partly attributing this to its greater capacity to deliver governance to local populations. For instance, the International Crisis Group (ICG) claimed in 2019 that 'it has cultivated a level of support among local civilians that Boko Haram never enjoyed and has turned neglected communities in the area and islands in Lake Chad into a source of economic support.'[16] While ISWAP had an estimated 3,500 to 5,000 members at that point, Boko Haram had only 1,500 to 2,000.[17] Also commenting in 2019, Jacob Zenn reported that 'Boko Haram under Shekau's leadership is now a marginalized faction within the insurgency with its base areas relegated mostly to Sambisa Forest, whereas ISWAP is predominant around northern Borno State, in parts of Yobe State, and in southeastern Niger and on the islands of Lake Chad.'[18] Following years of confrontation, ISWAP caught and killed Shekau in Borno State's Sambisa Forest in May 2021. The ICG reports that when ISWAP 'offered him a path to surrender, he detonated a suicide vest, killing himself and wounding ISWAP fighters.'[19]

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11 Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 133-4.

12 Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 138.

13 Zacharias P. Pieri & Jacob Zenn, "Under the Black Flag in Borno: Experiences of Footsoldiers and Civilians in Boko Haram 'Caliphate'", *Journal of Modern African Studies* 56, no. 4 (2018), 646; & Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 228.

14 Pieri & Zenn, "Under the Black Flag in Borno," 645-647; Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 271-272; & Jason Warner & Stephanie Lizzo, "The 'Boko Haram Disaggregation Problem' and Comparative Profiles of Factional Violence: Challenges, Impacts, and Solutions in the Study of Africa's Deadliest Terrorist Group(s)," *Terrorism & Political Violence*: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2020.1860950

15 Warner & Lizzo, "The 'Boko Haram Disaggregation Problem'"; and Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 276–7.

16 International Crisis Group, *Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province* (ICG, 2019), 25.

17 International Crisis Group, *Facing the Challenge*, i.

18 Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's Factional Feuds: Internal Extremism and External Interventions," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, Is. 3 (2021), 21.

19 International Crisis Group, *After Shekau*, 4.

The State Response

The state response to Boko Haram is often characterized as being reliant on excessive and counterproductive force, beginning with the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf. One of the most infamous examples of state brutality occurred in April 2013, when the military allegedly killed over 200 civilians during the 'Baga massacre.'[20] In May 2013, then President Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency in the worst hit states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, with this lasting until November 2014 when the House of Representatives refused to grant any further extensions. As reported by Alexander Thurston:

> On the ground, the state of emergency translated into mass arrests of young men, especially in May and June 2013. Some raids resulted in deaths on the spot. The security forces took hundreds of other men to two military prisons, Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri, and Sector Alpha in Damaturu, a site also known as "Guantanamo." . . . In these prisons, suspected Boko Haram members were often tortured, sometimes to death. Other detainees died of starvation or disease.[21]

The year 2013 also witnessed the emergence of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), which are community-based armed groups to which the state still essentially 'outsources' much of its military response.[22] Corresponding with Boko Haram's peak of territorial control in January 2015, Jonathan deployed an intensive military response in the lead-up to national elections.

In 2016 the Nigerian state established OPSC, providing an off-ramp for those wishing to exit Boko Haram and ISWAP. While we discuss this program in more detail below (see Section 4), it is worth briefly introducing its key components for the purposes of the current discussion. Members of these groups who surrender to local security forces are transported to Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri for assessment (with others reportedly transferred to parallel state-run programs). Those deemed to be low-risk are then transferred in 'batches' of several hundred to OPSC at Mallam Sidi camp, located on the outskirts of Gombe. The services offered at Mallam Sidi are tailored to personal needs, and include basic education, vocational training, psychosocial support, family and community visits, spiritual support, and various other activities. While OPSC is federally administered, it is the states (supported by various international agencies) that assume responsibility for the subsequent reintegration of clients. As considered in greater detail below (again, see Section 4), this off-ramp is certainly not without controversy, with critics highlighting alleged human rights abuses (particularly at Giwa), extensive delays in the process, and various other concerns.

While the OPSC team frames its intervention in terms of Deradicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DRR), programs of this nature are often viewed through reference to the Disarmament, Demobilization

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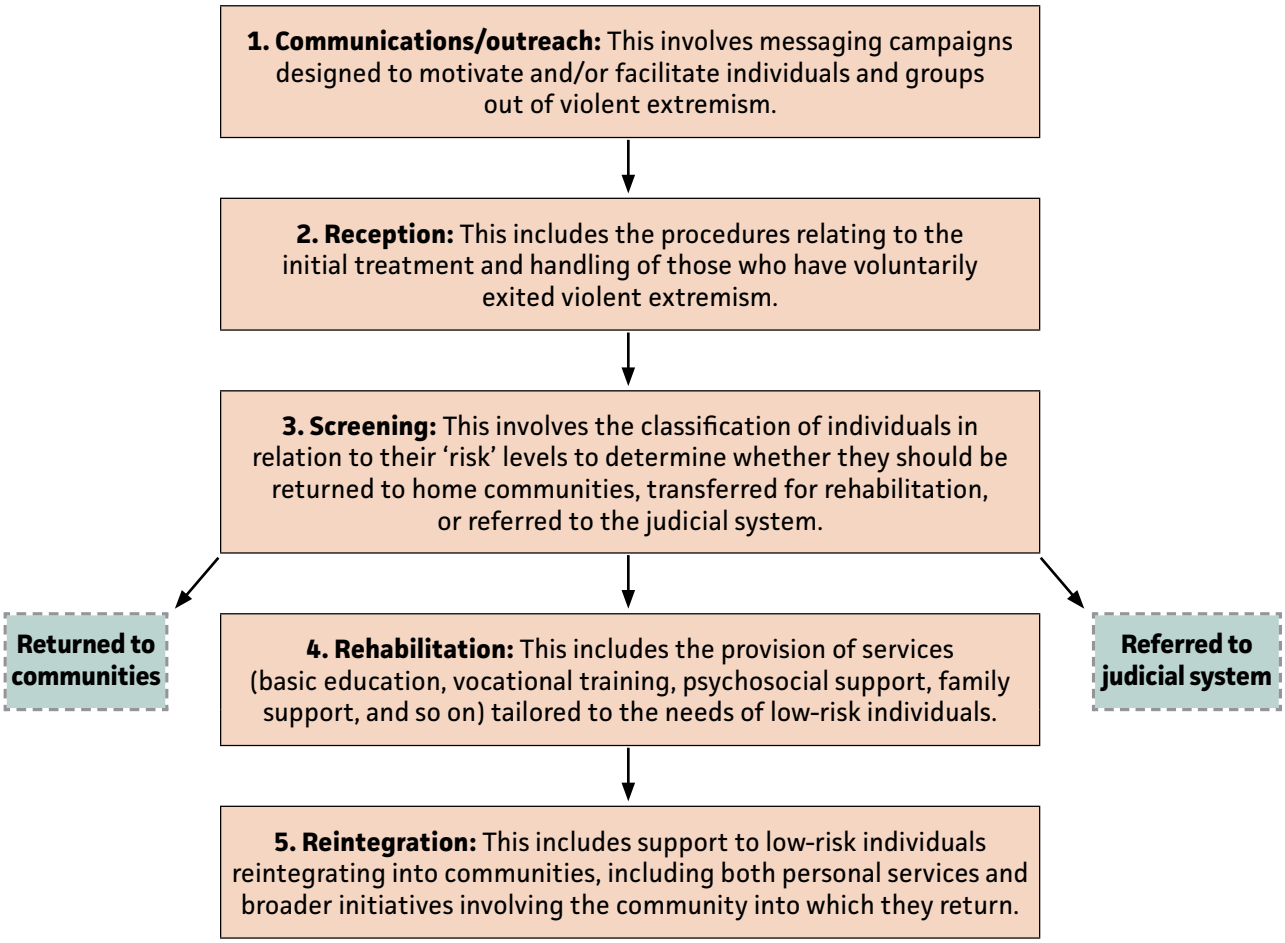
20 Olabanji Akinola, "The Elusive Quest for Peace: Boko Haram and the Hollowness of Nigeria's Counter-insurgency Strategy and Weak Security Architecture," in *Understanding Boko Haram: Terrorism and Insurgency in Africa*, ed. James J. Hentz & Hussein Solomon (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 136; and Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 200.

21 Thurston, *Boko Haram*, 204.

22 Idayat Hassan & Zacharias P. Pieri, "The Rise and Risks of Nigeria's Civilian Joint Task Force: Implications for Post-Conflict Recovery in North-eastern Nigeria," in *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency,* ed. Jacob Zenn (Combating Terrorism Centre at Westpoint, 2018), 74-86; and Thurston *Boko Haram*, 207–224.

Figure 1. Stages of Disengagement, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programming



and Reintegration (DDR) lens.[23] The DDR framework was originally designed for contexts in which sustained peace agreements had been achieved, but its scope gradually expanded to also include environments of ongoing conflict, such as Nigeria.[24] The OPSC team also draws insight from programs designed to rehabilitate violent extremists in correctional settings, with a key stakeholder interviewed for this research (S1) even observing that the services offered at Mallam Sidi were modelled on those provided by the Nigerian prison program. Yet, while it is important to draw certain 'lessons learned' from external interventions such as these, it is also necessary to acknowledge limits in the extent to which they represent the most pertinent of frameworks. In particular, it is worth noting that DDR and prison-based programs offer little or no guidance on how to design outreach campaigns to encourage exits from groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP, or the reception of individuals once they have disengaged. With such issues in mind, we adopt the five-stage model presented in Figure 1 to help frame the discussions throughout this paper. This draws heavily from Somalia's 'National Program for the Treatment and Handling of Disengaged Combatants',[25] and is intended specifically for contexts of active insurgency.

23 For instance, see USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*.

24 Robert Muggah & Chris O'Donnell, "Next Generation Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 4, no. 1 (2015), 1–12.

25 As described in James Khalil, Rory Brown, Chris Chant, Peter Olowo and Nick Wood, *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia: Evidence from a Rehabilitation Programme with Former Members of al-Shabaab* (UK: Royal United Services Institute, 2019).

3. METHODOLOGY

As already observed, this research was originally designed as a pilot study to map personal trajectories out of Boko Haram in relation to attitudinal and behavioral changes, drawing on interviews with current OPSC clients. However, once at the Mallam Sidi facility where OPSC is implemented, the management team reported that the current cohort of clients (unlike previous ones) only included individuals who had been forced into involvement in Boko Haram, with just one obvious exception. In practice, this meant that our respondents had been extremely hostile to Boko Haram from the outset, resulting in effectively no attitudinal change to measure. As such, we adapted the study to conduct exploratory research with this group, focusing on the following key themes:

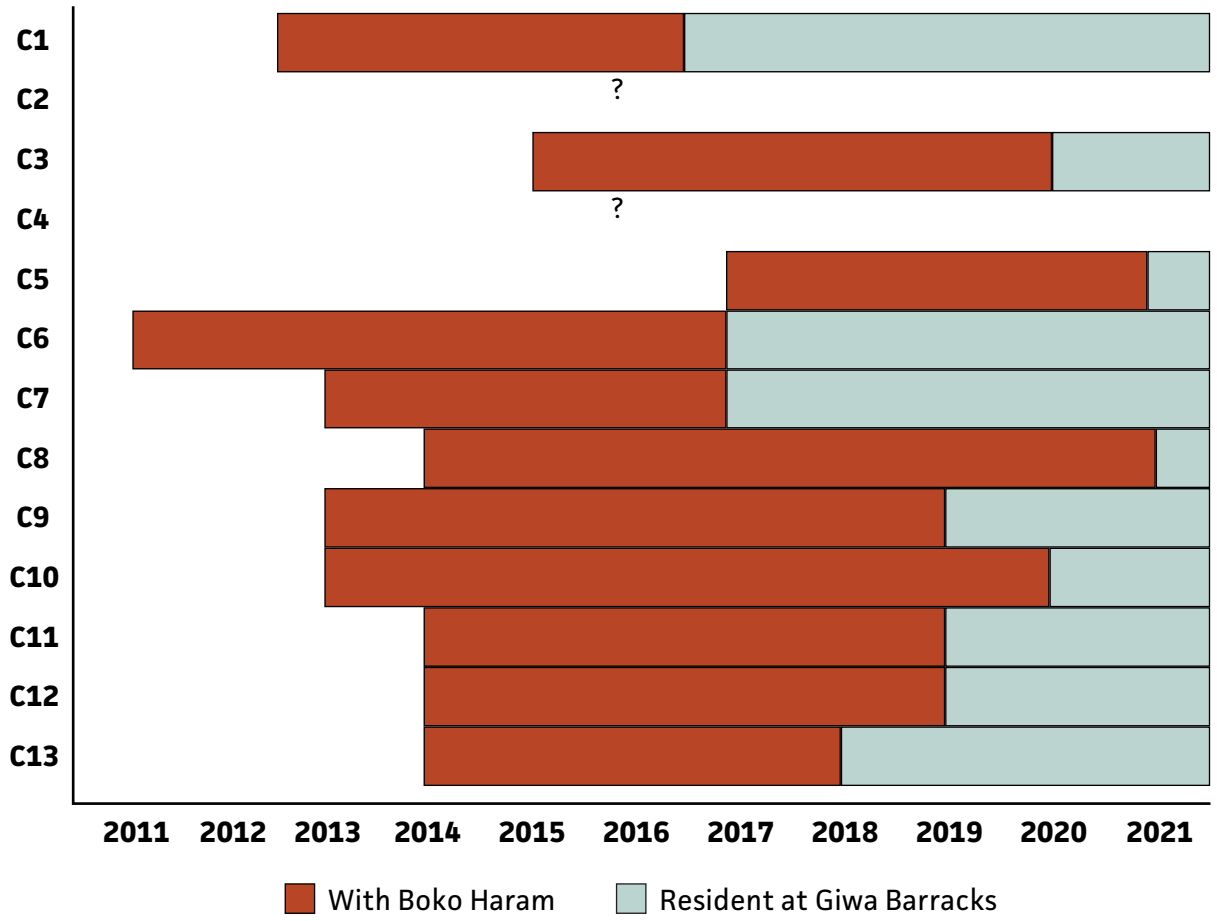
- Joining Boko Haram
- Roles within the group
- Life under the group
- Leaving the group
- The road to reintegration

We conducted thirteen in-depth interviews with OPSC clients in March 2022 (we label these C1 to C13 throughout the remainder of this report), whose approximate timelines prior to their arrival at Mallam Sidi are mapped in Figure 2. These interviewees were male, with their ages ranging from twenty to thirty-four (six were minors at the time of their initial involvement in Boko Haram). With support from the OPSC team, we purposively selected respondents to achieve variance in relation to their former roles within Boko Haram (as described in Section 4).[26] Our Research Assistant translated twelve of the interviews between English and Hausa, with an OPSC translator assisting in the remaining case with translation from Kanuri. The instrument (which was redesigned on the first day following the issues described above) was semi-structured, allowing us to delve into areas of specific interest while also covering the key themes. We collected extensive notes during the interviews, rather than record them, to help provide a comfortable environment in which the respondents were forthright and open. We also conducted interviews with four key stakeholders (we label these S1 to S4), and the OPSC team provided us with a tour of the facilities, which allowed us to observe clients participating in vocational training and drug awareness training.

Regarding research ethics, we introduced ourselves to the respondents prior to the interviews, and presented the purposes of the study (see Appendix A). We also clarified that the process was entirely voluntary, and that they were free to skip particular questions or even to conclude the interview early for any reason. We asked the respondents to provide verbal consent prior to the interview, explaining that this involved accepting our use of information they offered in anonymized form. Throughout the interviews we attempted to avoid questions that could retraumatize the respondents, particularly given they had

26 The OPSC management team maintains case files that include such information, but we were not granted access to these during the research.

Figure 2. Respondent Timelines (Approximate)



been forced into participation by Boko Haram. While everyone involved had been fully vaccinated against Covid-19, precautions were taken to avoid close personal contact at all times. Of course, it is important to consider the limitations associated with our methods, and to comment on the extent to which these may influence the findings. We identify these as follows:

- **Resource constraints:** The findings we present below are based on the personal experiences and opinions of a limited number of respondents. This research was resourced as a pilot study, and as such it was not possible to draw from a bigger sample of clients or stakeholders. We also lacked access to the extensive program documents undoubtedly generated by the various agencies involved with OPSC and the wider off-ramp from Boko Haram (as represented in Figure 1).

- **Non-contemporary information:** Given that the conflict in Nigeria continues to evolve rapidly, and the average date when our respondents left Boko Haram was 2018 or 2019 (to the extent that this can be reliably ascertained), it is important to acknowledge that some information provided during the interviews may reflect conditions that no longer exist. For instance, this may relate to Boko Haram recruitment methods, conditions within their camps and settlements, their policies and preferences relating to family matters, and so on. It may also relate to conditions and treatment in the facilities through which clients passed prior to their arrival at Mallam Sidi.

- **Potential data reliability issues:** Respondents may provide misleading or even false information for a variety of reasons, including to be viewed favorably by others (widely referred to as social desirability bias), because they are ill-informed, to avoid perceived threats associated with divulging information, or because their memories are flawed.[27] Regarding our research more specifically, certain respondents may have downplayed the nature of their involvement with Boko Haram to avoid potential punishment by the state. Unlike many other forms of social science research, it was not possible to 'triangulate' the personal information generated through these interviews with data from other sources. As already observed, we attempted to mitigate such issues through providing reassurances about the nature of the research before the interviews began, as well as through asking validation questions where applicable.

- **The possible influence of OPSC staff:** With the research team reliant on OPSC staff for the identification of suitable respondents, it is also plausible that the latter intentionally selected clients they felt would be more likely to portray the program or other facilities *en route* to Mallam Sidi in a positive light. Members of the OPSC team were also present throughout much of the interviews, and this may also have influenced the responses provided by certain clients. On this basis, we relied heavily on secondary sources regarding findings relating to reception, screening, rehabilitation, and reintegration (representing stages 2 to 5 of our model in Figure 1).

4. FINDINGS

In this section we present the core research findings regarding how our respondents entered Boko Haram, their roles within the organization, the conditions that they experienced in camps and settlements, their disengagement from the group, and their trajectories through the stages of our model presented as Figure 1.

Joining Boko Haram

It is increasingly recognized that involvement in ideologically justified violence can be driven by the confluence of many different political, social, economic, psychological, and other 'variables', with these varying between locations and over time. Recent research on this subject has emphasized the notion of equifinality, which is the principle that given end-states (in this case involvement in this violence) may be driven by different factors or combinations of factors.[28] Yet, the debate in Nigeria tends to revolve more narrowly around a limited number of factors. It is clear that Boko Haram's interpretation of Islam plays a critical role for many, with Mercy Corps observing that 'religion was a thread that ran through many stories of youth choosing to join.'[29] The authors of this report elaborate that 'many recruits spoke about

27 James Khalil, "A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, no. 4 (2019).

28 See, for instance, Khalil et al, "The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model".

29 Mercy Corp, *Motivations and Empty Promises: Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigeria Youth* (Mercy Corps, 2016), 14.

wanting to become more devout, or being drawn to a promise of paradise.'[30] Indeed, among the respondents interviewed for this study, one individual (C13) from Gamboru in Borno State claimed to have been initially convinced by the message that his involvement would ensure his place in heaven. Importantly, while certain accounts downplay the relevance of ideology on the basis that certain members only have a rudimentary understanding of the Boko Haram belief system, Lorne Dawson correctly observes that the sincerity and strength of an individual's commitment to their chosen ideology matters far more than the depth of their comprehension.[31]

Certain accounts also emphasize the extent to which state repression, political exclusion, and inadequate service provisions have contributed to sympathy for Boko Haram.[32] For instance, drawing on interviews with members of both Boko Haram and ISWAP, Chitra Nagarajan highlights that these respondents reported that 'many community leaders are seen as corrupt, biased, ineffective, self-interested, politicized, and linked to (corrupt) politicians.'[33] However, this stance is contested, with USAID drawing on interviews with former OPSC clients to conclude that 'frustrations with the government did not appear to play a prominent role influencing individuals to join, with zero graduates identifying it as a reason why they joined.'[34] Economic incentives are also often identified as a driver, with Mercy Corps highlighting the role of loans provided by Boko Haram to new recruits.[35] Research also focuses on the extent to which psychosocial factors such as status, belonging and identity often drive involvement.[36] For instance, Nagarajan maintains that 'a number of respondents spoke of how they felt comfort and belonging as they were introduced to the group.'[37] The importance of personal contacts is also routinely observed, for instance, with Hilary Matfess, Graeme Blair, and Chad Hazlett highlighting that 'Boko Haram relies on social networks and peer-group influence to drive recruitment.'[38]

Of course, debates about the relative importance of such factors are somewhat tangential to this particular study, given our almost exclusive focus on those who were forced into involvement (see Section 3). This method is also routinely identified in the literature, for instance, with Matfess, Blair, and Hazlett reporting that 'there are widespread reports of intimidation to coerce membership,' and that 'many children become associated with Boko Haram due to direct or indirect physical coercion.'[39] Reporting in 2020, Amnesty International also claims that Boko Haram had become more reliant on this method over

30 *Ibid.*

31 Lorne Dawson, "Bringing Religiosity Back In: Critical Reflections on the Explanation of Western Homegrown Religious Terrorism (Part 1)," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15, no. 1 (2021), 5–6.

32 Mercy Corps *Motivations and Empty Promises*.

33 Chitra Nagarajan, *We Were Changing the World: Radicalization and Empowerment among Young People Associated with Armed Opposition Groups in Northeast Nigeria*, USAID (2018), 14.

34 USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 6–7.

35 Mercy Corp, *Motivations and Empty Promises*, 13.

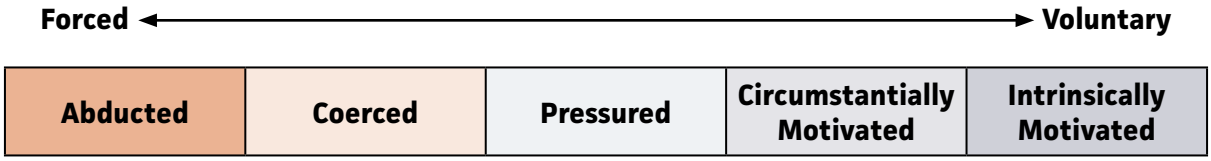
36 USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 25.

37 Nagarajan, *We Were Changing the World*, 18.

38 Hilary Matfess, Graeme Blair & Chad Hazlett, "Beset on all Sides: Children and the Landscape of Conflict in Northeast Nigeria," in *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict*, ed. Siobhan O'Neill & Kato van Broeckhoven (United Nations University, n.d.), 184.

39 Matfess et al, "Beset on all Sides," 182

Figure 3. Spectrum from Forced to Voluntary Involvement



time.[40] Importantly, while this phenomenon is often mistakenly interpreted in black-and-white terms (for instance, in UNDP's highly influential *Journey to Extremism in Africa* report),[41] the reality is that it is more accurately portrayed as representing a spectrum, with Mercy Corps explaining that 'the paths that youth take to joining Boko Haram defy neat categories of "voluntary" and "forced." '[42] These authors elaborate on this point through reference to a five-point scale, reproduced above as Figure 3. While the lack of definitions prevents us from firmly classifying our respondents according to this system, the majority would almost certainly have fallen within the 'abducted' category.

Two respondents claimed that their involvement with Boko Haram began when the group seized control of their local communities. One of these individuals (C4) from Hong in Adamawa State maintained that the organization forced all youths from the community to enlist. Many others reported that they were essentially captured by Boko Haram during raids of their communities of residence. For instance, one respondent (C1) from near Maiduguri claimed that he was abducted with about fifteen other students at his school. Boko Haram had attacked a CJTF post on the edge of his community, with the combatants then shifting attention to his school, largely because of its proximity. Another respondent from Ngala (C9) claimed that the group abducted him and five friends who happened to be visiting town. The respondents consistently reported that they were forced to comply with Boko Haram demands, with several (C1, C3, and C8) adding that at least some who resisted were killed in the process.

One respondent from Bama (C5) reported that he received Islamic education for six years at an Almajiri school when the teacher (who happened to be his uncle) escorted the class to the bush for involuntary incorporation into Boko Haram. He claimed that his parents were unaware that this would occur, and that there had been no obvious prior indications. Another respondent from Ngala (C11) maintained that his uncle tried to persuade him to enlist several times before eventually forcing him to join the group at gunpoint. His uncle was a Boko Haram foot soldier, and he died in combat in 2018. While many of the respondents were presumably selected by Boko Haram simply as 'fighting aged males', this was not universally the case. For instance, one respondent (C7) reported that the group abducted him specifically to become a butcher in their territory, having seen him grilling meat in Kumche.

40 Amnesty International, *We Dried our Tears* (Amnesty International, 2020), 24.

41 For instance, United Nations Development Program, *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives, and the Tipping Point for Recruitment* (New York: United Nations Development Program, 2017), 5.

42 Mercy Corp, *Motivations and Empty Promises*, 11.

Roles within Boko Haram

Shifting our attention to the respondents' roles within Boko Haram, it is worth first reiterating that we make no claims about representativeness, due to both the selection processes and small sample size (as previously described in Section 3). Indeed, it seems likely that the positions occupied by our respondents (shown in Table 1) *may not* accurately reflect those of the broader membership *if* we assume that forced recruits are generally placed in lower value roles. That said, it is worth observing that certain respondents did achieve positions of authority, including the individual who was escorted into Boko Haram territory by his Almajiri teacher (C5). Having first received weapons training, he was assigned to a security detail before being tasked with defusing mines. Operating as an occasional foot soldier, he displayed particular bravery by refusing to retreat during battle, with this act being rewarded with promotion to military commander with thirty subordinates. Among the thirteen individuals consulted for this study, this respondent was the only one who also fought with ISWAP after the groups split.

Two respondents (C9 and C12) were assigned to the military police (*Hisbah*), having initially operated as foot soldiers, and with one claiming that his promotion was based on trust. As discussed in more detail shortly, the *Hisbah* is responsible for enforcing Boko Haram's strict Islamic code and maintaining public law and order.[43] Two other respondents were tasked with personal security roles, with one of these (C2) responsible for protecting the family of a local commander. He reported that this commander had first encountered him after Boko Haram seized control of his community in Adamawa State, and that he required him to convert from Christianity to Islam (changing his 'infidel' name in the process). The second individual (C4) asserted that he was initially attached to a medical unit, where he was responsible for dressing wounds. He was sent on operations while in this role but remained behind the lines to assist those injured in battle. He was eventually tasked with ensuring the personal security of the Chief Medical Director, with this promotion reportedly based on the perception that he was trustworthy and hardworking.

Among those in civilian positions, one respondent from Bama (C3) reported that he was provided with a sewing machine and assigned the role of tailor, with this reflecting his livelihood prior to being abducted. A respondent from Damboa (C6) claimed to have been used as a handyman, with his varied roles ranging from auto-mechanics to crushing millet. Another respondent from Bama (C8) reported that he worked as a trader, with this again reflecting his prior livelihood. Within Boko Haram he managed a kiosk selling items such as food and clothing, with his supplies coming from the central market in the settlement. He was not the only trader interviewed during the research, with another one (C11) claiming that he asked to be transferred into that role to avoid the violence he previously experienced as a foot soldier. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, he reported being allowed to remain a trader despite pressure from Boko Haram to return to his initial position.

43 Zacharias P. Pieri & Jacob Zenn, "Under the Black Flag in Borno," 662.

Table 1. Roles Assigned to Respondents within Boko Haram[44]

Involvement (Highest 'Value' Role)	#
Military commander	1
Military police	2
Personal Security	2
Foot soldier	3
Medical Officer	1
Trader	1
Tailor	1
Butcher	1
Handyman	1
TOTAL	**13**

It is worth highlighting the extent of fluidity in relation to roles, with certain military respondents performing civilian tasks on the side, including a former member of the military police (C9) who also operated as a food trader to generate income. Indeed, he reported that Boko Haram provided him with seed funding to start this business, and that he was allowed to buy goods from nearby markets that were not under the control of the group. The other respondent in the military police (C12) similarly claimed that he was engaged in farming, with some of his produce sold on the market in the settlement. Conversely, some of those in civilian roles were at least occasionally also forced to act as foot soldiers, with this including one of the traders (C8) and the butcher (C7). Indeed, the latter reported that in his location it was compulsory for all members to actively participate in battle if required, regardless of their role.

Life under Boko Haram

While certain respondents (C2 and C7) claimed to have spent some time in towns and villages under Boko Haram control, most were exclusively based remotely in camps and settlements. The size and composition of the locations in which they resided varied substantially, with a respondent from Ngala (C9) claiming that he and 2,000 other soldiers occupied a settlement that had previously been abandoned. By contrast, a respondent from Goza (C12) asserted that there were no solid structures in his camp, which housed around 500 military and civilian members of Boko Haram. While single men were assigned to tents, those who were married were allowed to reside in zinc huts with their families. The trader (C8) claimed that there were roughly 1,000 civilians in his settlement, with many more soldiers in surrounding camps (he was unable to provide an estimate). He added that the settlement had been captured by Boko Haram from prior occupants, and that it was fifteen kilometers from the nearest town. A foot soldier from Ngala (C11) claimed that there were around 1,000 other military members located in his camp, and that there had previously also been civilians, but that they had escaped.

44 We determine highest 'value' roles loosely in relation to each respondent's proximity to violence, and the extent to which they maintain agency over outcomes.

The respondents consistently reported that Boko Haram did not provide a salary, in notable contrast to groups such as IS and al-Shabaab.[45] However, the respondent from Hong in Adamawa State (C4) claimed that he could request money from his superiors as required, and that these were generally granted if justified. For instance, he claimed that on one occasion he received 40,000 Naira (around 100 USD) to repair damages to his house. While the broader subject of Boko Haram's financing is beyond the scope of this study,[46] various respondents highlighted the extent to which their resources were gained through pillage, although the procedures for dividing this loot varied substantially between locations. For instance, a former member of the military police (C9) claimed that plunder was split into three parts, with the senior commander receiving one of these, and the raid leader and foot soldiers distributing the remainder. Another former member of the military police (C12) maintained that in his settlement civilians received half of the bounty, with the remainder being shared between those involved in the raid. By contrast, a former foot soldier (C11) claimed that the local commander simply split the loot as he saw fit.

Amnesty International reports that the rate of pillage has increased over recent years, with this reflecting increased shortages in Boko Haram camps and settlements.[47] Our research lends weight to this thesis, with several respondents highlighting key supply issues towards the later stages of their involvement with the group. For instance, the trader (C8) claims that while conditions were generally satisfactory during his involvement, he observed severe shortages of food, fuel, and medicine prior to his departure in 2020 or 2021. A former member of the military police (C12) who fled around 2019 made similar assertions about food, fuel, and water. A former foot soldier (C11) likewise maintained that while water was in plentiful supply from a nearby lake, food, fuel, and medicine were scarce by the time of his departure in 2019. To be clear, this was not a universal trend, with the other former member of the military police (C9) claiming that there were no shortages at the time of his exit during the same year, with local land being fertile and other supplies often bought from nearby settlements.

The amount of ideological training provided to the respondents also varied substantially, ranging from two weeks (C10) to six months (C9). Much of this training involved condemning state corruption and explaining how heaven awaits those who kill 'infidels' (which often amounted to anyone outside of Boko Haram). The group also attempted to impose its social control through more direct means, administering punishments such as flogging for a failure to attend prayers, listening to music, using drugs (as reported by C9 and C11), and other crimes. Punishments were also inflicted on those who violated Boko Haram regulations regarding the means of communication (also see Box 1). Various respondents (C4, C5, C6, C7, C11, and C12) claimed that phones (or sim cards more specifically) were banned in their camps and settlements, although with most (C6, C7, C9, and C11) adding that some residents retained them in secret. Access to radio was more varied, with certain interviewees claiming no restrictions (C1, C7), and others stating that their usage was regulated or banned entirely (C4, C8, C11, and C12). Two respondents

45 Haid Haid, *Reintegrating ISIS Supporters in Syria: Efforts Priorities and Challenges* (International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, 2018), 11; & Khalil et al, *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*, 16.

46 On this topic, see for instance, Omar Mahmoud, "Local, Global, or In Between: Boko Haram's Messaging, Strategy, membership, and Support Networks," in *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency,* ed. Jacob Zenn (Combating Terrorism Centre at Westpoint, 2018), 87–114.

47 Amnesty International, "We Dried our Tears," 7, 28–29.

(C4 and C7) also maintained that the penalty for possession of state-produced leaflets dropped by plane was death, while others reported that Boko Haram simply warned them to disregard their message.

Boko Haram's policies and preferences regarding marriage and family life also varied substantially between locations. This subject has already received considerable attention in the literature,[48] for instance, with ICG reporting that 'Boko Haram used women and girls as rewards to fighters, a significant enticement since raising the resources for marriage is not easy.'[49] By contrast, one of the former medical officers in our sample (C4) claimed that Boko Haram forced him to marry a woman who had also been abducted. A former member of the military police (C9) similarly claimed that they compelled single people to wed 'to avoid fornication', and that they funded their marriage ceremonies. He added that men were allowed to choose their brides, with many selecting multiple wives. Indeed, one of the former foot soldiers (C10) claimed to have had nine wives, with this totaling only four at any one time in accordance with Sharia Law. Yet, other respondents (C11 and C12) claimed that Boko Haram played absolutely no role in family matters, and that they also did not finance marriage ceremonies. One of these (C12) elaborated on a typical traditional process within a Boko Haram settlement, in which he first spoke to the younger brother of his future wife, before providing a dowry to her father. While some respondents (C4 and C10) reported that Boko Haram had abducted their future wives, the design of this research did not allow us to meaningfully explore marriage from a female perspective.[50]

Leaving Boko Haram

Many studies focusing on exits from violent extremism rely on the binary distinction between 'push' and 'pull' factors. For instance, Mary Beth Altier and her colleagues treat the former as including unmet expectations, disillusionment with the strategy or actions of the organization in question, disillusionment with personnel, difficulties with the clandestine lifestyle, an inability to 'cope' with violence, loss of faith in the ideology, and 'burnout.'[51] In the latter category they include competing loyalties, employment or educational demands or opportunities, family demands and desires, positive interactions with 'moderates', financial incentives, and amnesties. By contrast, James Khalil and his colleagues divide many of these same drivers into the categories of structural motivators, individual incentives, and enabling factors.[52] Drawing on interviews with former members of Boko Haram and community actors throughout the Lake Chad Basin, Fonteh Akum and his colleagues more specifically emphasize the extent to which disengagement is motivated by disillusionment with the organization, misalignment between personal objectives and those of the group, and the lack of consistency between Boko Haram messaging and their internal practices.[53]

48 See, for instance, Matfess, *Women, and the War on Boko Haram*.

49 ICG, *Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency*, 8.

50 While essentially beyond the scope of this report (see Section 1), marriage has been considered from a female perspective elsewhere. See, for instance, Amnesty International, "We Dried our Tears"; & Matfess et al, "Beset on all Sides," 196.

51 Mary Beth Altier, Christian Thoroughgood & John Horgan, "Turning away from Terrorism: Lessons from Psychology, Sociology and Criminology," *Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol. 51, no. 5 (2014).

52 Khalil et al, "The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model".

53 Fonteh Akum, Remadji Hoinathy & Malik Samuel, *Managing the Journey out of Violent Extremism in the Lake Chad Basin* (Institute for Security Studies, 2021).

Without overlooking that our respondents never wanted to become involved with Boko Haram in the first place, it is worth observing that several (C5, C6, C7, C10, and C11) emphasized how they were repulsed by the violence perpetrated by the group, and the extent to which this reinforced their desire to exit. For instance, one former foot soldier (C10) stated that 'they killed people like animals', with reference to specific attacks on a mosque and marketplace. Such matters were particularly personal for the handyman (C6) and the trader (C8), who respectively reported that Boko Haram had killed a friend and a brother who had tried to escape. The respondent tasked with providing security for the Chief Medical Director (C4) also emphasized how he was motivated by the risks to his personal safety, poor living conditions (especially the lack of food), inadequate treatment by his commanders, and because he missed his family. The butcher (C7) claimed that he was partly motivated by the 'tribal' nature of Boko Haram, adding that he felt discriminated against as a Hausa. Critically, eight of the thirteen respondents (C1, C3, C4, C6, C7, C8, C9, and C11) were also explicit that they had been partly motivated to disengage by the provisions offered by OPSC (see Box 1).

Of course, accounts of disengagement must also consider obstacles to these journeys,[54] with many reports focusing on the pervasive fear of Boko Haram responses to such efforts. For instance, Mercy Corps observes that 'most former members we interviewed described a harrowing process of escaping the group, either fleeing during the chaos of battle or slipping out at night,' adding that 'many worried they would be killed in the process, and spoke soberly of companions who tried unsuccessfully to escape.'[55] Drawing on interviews with minors, Hilary Matfess and her colleagues similarly report that:

> Would-be defectors or escapees were threatened with death nearly constantly, according to multiple children interviewed; some even reported witnessing the insurgents kill those who had been caught during an attempt to flee. . . . A number of children formerly associated with Boko Haram, even now that they've left the group and are living in IDP camps, expressed fear that Boko Haram would find them.[56]

This was certainly supported by our research, with the trader (C8) claiming that his brother was killed by Boko Haram for trying to escape shortly after they were abducted together. The medical officer (C1) similarly reported that his first attempt to flee with six others was thwarted largely because they were unfamiliar with the bush, with the ringleader executed as punishment. While less common, certain respondents (C6 and C10) maintained that disengagement was also inhibited by a fear of repercussions by the security forces or CJTF (although this was contested by C8 and C11).

Our respondents typically fled their camps and settlements in relatively small groups of between five and twenty people, with two (C4 and C7) claiming that their exit parties numbered over a hundred. One of the foot soldiers (C10) maintained that he began planning his escape around 2015 (having joined Boko Haram in 2013), and that he only achieved exit five years later. Two of his wives also based in the settlement had threatened to leave him if they remained much longer. While with Boko Haram, he retained

54 Khalil et al, "The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model".

55 Mercy Corp, *Motivations and Empty Promises*, 16.

56 Matfess et al "Beset on all Sides," 192.

Box 1. Spreading information about OPSC

Those tasked with supporting OPSC must ensure that current members of Boko Haram and ISWAP are aware of the rehabilitation provisions provided through this program, and how it offers a potential avenue towards their eventual community reintegration (with this outreach element corresponding to Stage 1 of Figure 1). Among the thirteen study respondents, five (C1, C6, C8, C9, and C11) claimed that they had heard about these provisions through radio messages,[a] with two of these (C8 and C11) elaborating that the campaign involved former members recounting their personal stories, including the benefits they received via OPSC. Nine respondents reported that they had heard about these provisions through leaflets dropped from planes (C1, C3, C4, C6, C7, C8, C9, C11, and C12), with two (C7 and C11) observing that they displayed pictures of former members of the group. One of these respondents (C11) alleged that the images were not updated between 2015 and 2019, and was critical of this fact.

While certain respondents claimed that phones (or at least sim cards) were banned in their camps and settlements (as also discussed in the main text), others (C6 and C10) maintained that this provided a key avenue through which family members based outside of Boko Haram control helped motivate or facilitate their disengagement. OPSC also exploited this means of communication through their voluntary 'ambassadors' initiative, which involves encouraging certain former clients to reach out to current members via phone (C5, C11, S1). The study respondents generally deemed other sources of information to be less relevant, including television and word-of-mouth.

a On this issue, also see International Crisis Group, *An Exit from Boko Haram? Assessing Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor (2021),* 4; & USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation,* 28.

phone communications with a family member who identified a place where he could surrender in Maity. He fled with nineteen other individuals, including women and children, of which fifteen were recaptured during the escape. One of those who successfully achieved exit was sufficiently young for the authorities to release him directly back to the community, where he was subsequently killed by Boko Haram. By contrast, the trader (C8) left his settlement with nine others at midnight, before waiting until daybreak to surrender to the military at Pulka. He claimed that he knew where to surrender as he had heard on the radio of locations that had already been liberated (see Box 1).

A former member of the military police (C9) claimed that he was among a large group that arranged for a forward party of around twenty people to surrender in Cameroon. From there, the Cameroonian military (despite having a reputation as being ruthless) contacted their Nigerian counterparts to collect them, with the remaining party also escaping roughly eight months later. The tailor (C3) stated that his escape party of eight people was actually caught by Boko Haram, but that he bribed their captors for passage with 40,000 Naira (with this money having been earnt tailoring on the side). The handyman (C6) claimed he had heard about the provisions provided by OPSC through the radio and leaflets, and that he had confirmed the validity of these claims through a phone call with an uncle. This uncle then arranged for his safe passage with the military when he exited with two friends in 2017. Although this was the only instance of safe passage being reported during our research, OPSC staff (S1) claimed that

such arrangements were relatively common. Two respondents (C5 and C11) recounted the influence of an OPSC 'ambassador' (again, see Box 1), who helped motivate both to exit by phone. In one case (C5), this individual then ferried fifteen escapees from Cameroon on a motorbike, carrying three at a time. Two others highlighted the importance of knowing the local terrain, with one (C1) escaping with a foot soldier who was familiar with the bush, and the other (C4) relying on local famers.

The Road to Reintegration

Many individuals who escape from Boko Haram are transferred to Giwa Barracks for screening by the Joint Investigation Center (JIC), which is comprised of military intelligence personnel.[57] Despite often disengaging from the group in relatively large groups, they are individually screened into one of the following three categories (also see Figure 1):[58]

- **Innocent:** These individuals are allowed to return to the community or IDP camps.
- **Low-risk:** Those in this category are transferred to OPSC for rehabilitation.
- **High-risk:** These individuals are referred to the judicial system through Kainji Barracks.

This process is regularly criticized for its lack of transparency, with USAID observing that 'there is still little visibility into the details of the screening,' and Amnesty International reporting that that the process remains 'opaque.'[59] Indeed, even key stakeholders (S1 and S2) directly involved in running OPSC claimed they knew little about the process. While this lack of transparency limits our ability to draw firm conclusions about screening, the issues we encountered through the sampling for this research are certainly suggestive of major problems, as we return to in the subsequent section.

These concerns aside, our respondents (C4, C8, C10, C11, and C12) reported relatively short processing times between their initial surrender and arrival at Giwa Barracks, with this typically lasting less than one week. However, this contrasted dramatically with the time they spent at Giwa, with detentions at these barracks lasting up to five years (C7). To be clear, some of these individuals voluntarily acted as informants while at the barracks (C1, C5, and C10), with this seemingly extending their residency. Nevertheless, while we acknowledge that screening can be a time-consuming process, these extensive delays undoubtedly represent an important disincentive to disengagement. More importantly, although our research was not designed to validate or discredit such claims, Giwa Barracks is also notorious for human rights abuses. Although several of our respondents claimed that the conditions were adequate, we cannot discount the hypothesis that these responses may have reflected the presence of OPSC team members during our interviews. Indeed, it is perhaps revealing that the only respondent who was openly

57 Certain sources suggest that screening also occurs prior to Giwa Barracks, including Amnesty International "We Dried our Tears", 38.

58 Akum et al, *Managing the Journey*, 19; Amnesty International "We Dried our Tears," 38-39; International Crisis Group, *An Exit from Boko Haram,* 6; & USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 11–12.

59 Amnesty International "We Dried our Tears," 38, 59; Vanda Felbab-Brown, *The Limits of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism: Nigeria Case Study* (Institute for Integrated Transitions & United Nations University, 2018), 21; & USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 8, 11.

critical of the barracks expressed his views when these team members temporarily left the room. He reported overcrowded conditions, sleeping on a concrete floor (often without a mat), and periods of up to two months without a shower.[60]

Switching our attention to OPSC, while the clients spoke positively about the services and conditions at Mallam Sidi, we must again be cautious with the information provided given the presence of staff during the interviews. It is also worth reiterating that this research was not designed as a formal evaluation (as discussed in Section 3), and so our ability to draw firm conclusions are constrained by our lack of access to the extensive documentation that such programs invariably generate. The services provided at OPSC are tailored to personal needs, and include basic education, vocational training, psychological and psychosocial support, family and community visits, spiritual support, civic education, drug awareness training, art therapy, and recreational activities. Considering these in turn, Amnesty reports that:

> Several aspects of Safe Corridor have had a meaningful impact. Many men and boys, particularly those who grew up in Boko Haram-controlled areas, arrive with limited or no formal education; some are illiterate. Several boys and younger men told Amnesty International they learned the ABCs, counting, and spelling at Safe Corridor, along with basic grammar, during weekly adult education classes.[61]

It is notable that several of our respondents claimed that they intended to continue with their 'Western' education after leaving OPSC (C4, C8, C9, and C12). The vocational training includes hairdressing, carpentry, laundry services, leatherwork (shoe making), tailoring, welding, weaving, and farming, with the latter being compulsory.[62] Drawing on interviews with over one hundred program graduates, USAID reports that 70 percent claimed that they were earning a living through the training provided by OPSC.[63] Several of our respondents also claimed that once back in their communities they intended to generate income through their newly acquired skills (C4, C5, C7, C8, C9, and C11). It is worth also noting that while Amnesty stressed the physical dangers associated with training to produce soap and related products,[64] this option is no longer offered. Moving on to the psychosocial support, Amnesty also claims that:

> Several men and boys formerly detained at Safe Corridor mentioned a positive impact of the psychosocial programs. Encouragingly, every person interviewed by Amnesty International said most sessions were one on one, with an interpreter as needed, and that soldiers and military intelligence respected privacy and confidentiality – remaining outside the room where psychosocial professionals and detainees spoke.[65]

Helping to prepare for the subsequent reintegration of beneficiaries, OPSC facilitates visits by family members, community and religious leaders, government officials, and CJTF representatives. Unfortunately,

60 We have not referenced the respondent in the main text due to his apparent desire for discretion.

61 Amnesty International, "We Dried our Tears", 62.

62 Akum et al, *Managing the Journey*, 20.

63 USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 5.

64 Amnesty International, "We Dried our Tears", 66.

65 Amnesty International, "We Dried our Tears", 62.

these provisions were largely curtailed on health grounds during the Covid-19 pandemic (C8, S1), particularly for families. Regarding the ideological training at the facility, Audu Bukarti and Rachel Bryson report that resident imams 'focus on Islamic textual authorities that relate to forbidding violence and enjoining peaceful and harmonious co-existence.'[66] Of course, the relevance of such efforts is somewhat open to question for clients who never subscribed to the Boko Haram system of beliefs in the first place. This is not to suggest that they are entirely redundant, but rather that they are more pertinent for individuals who joined voluntarily (those located towards the right of Figure 3), and particularly those who were ideologically motivated.

As already observed, the responsibility for reintegration falls on the individual states, with support from agencies such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM). In practice, this often results in graduates spending additional time at 'transit centers', including Shokari in Borno State, which was opened for this specific purpose in September 2020.[67] This compounds delays already experienced during the screening (at Giwa) and rehabilitation (at Mallam Sidi) phases.[68] A lack of prior planning certainly also contributed to problems with reintegration during the early years of OPSC, with ICG reporting that:

> In Safe Corridor's early days, the process of reintegration was messy. When the first batches of graduates were released from the program, the Borno state government had to improvise, setting up graduates at the Umaru Shehu rehabilitation camp in Maiduguri. . . . In some cases, graduates encountered public hostility when they arrived. In one famous episode, authorities tried to bring a large group of graduates originally from Gwoza local government area to a Maiduguri displaced persons' camp and then to their homes, but in both places residents protested, forcing authorities to send the graduates again to Umaru Shehu, until they could be relocated again.[69]

However, USAID reports that this experience 'led to improvements in community preparation and sensitization activities.'[70] In particular, the USAID authors observe that OPSC and Borno state representatives 'have taken to television to raise awareness about OSC [OPSC] and advocate for community acceptance with radio shows like Dandal Kura,' and that the former have 'hosted dialogues with community leaders in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa to discuss reintegration and reconciliation.'[71] Yet, the extent to which communities support reintegration remains subject to considerable debate, with the evidence somewhat contradictory. Commenting in 2018, Vanda Felbab-Brown asserted that:

> Community members from areas where Boko Haram has operated, and some journalists openly say that they do not want to accept back either Boko Haram members or those who lived under Boko Haram rule. The consistency of rejection of those associated with Boko Haram in any way and the

66 Audu Bulama Bukarti & Rachel Bryson, *Dealing with Boko Haram Defects in the Lake Chad Basin: Lessons from Nigeria* (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2019), 18.

67 USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 11.

68 Amnesty International, "We Dried our Tears", 60; & USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 18.

69 International Crisis Group, *An Exit from Boko Haram*, 10.

70 USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 45.

71 USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 45.

> extreme distrust of returnees appears in many surveys and focus group studies. A typical view is that those who lived under Boko Haram rule, even if they had been abducted by the group, must have been brainwashed.[72]

More recently, while observing that many clients 'are welcomed back into their communities,' ICG also highlights broad opposition 'to the idea that any former Boko Haram recruit should benefit from government forgiveness and donor support.'[73] By contrast, USAID paints a more positive picture, reporting that:

> Only 21% of community members strongly agreed that DDRR [demobilization, disassociation, reintegration, and reconciliation] beneficiaries are dangerous and should not be accepted [back into the community], while 37% strongly agreed that DDRR beneficiaries are victims. In addition, 59% of community members believe their fellow community members have mostly or fully accepted DDRR beneficiaries. … [Furthermore] over 75% of community members completely or somewhat agree that DDRR beneficiaries are sincerely seeking forgiveness.[74]

Our respondents consistently claimed that they expected to be welcomed back 'with open arms', with several adding that this was because their communities understood that they had been abducted (C3), or because their time spent rehabilitating at OPSC offers the necessary reassurances that they pose no risk (C8). Of course, we cannot reject the possibility that, in at least certain cases, such responses may have been designed to help prevent further delays in the process by providing reassurances to the OPSC team members in attendance.

5. DISCUSSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

Research that draws from interviews with former members of groups such as Boko Haram often downplays or even entirely neglects the extent to which personal experiences vary. Even though our respondents were all coercively recruited by the group (with one exception), they were forced into involvement through notably different means. This variance was also apparent in relation to the roles performed by these individuals within Boko Haram, including in relation to their involvement in violence. Striking differences were also apparent regarding the conditions experienced within the various camps and settlements, the rules and regulations imposed in these locations, and how our respondents were able to escape. These pronounced differences underscore the need to ensure that communication campaigns designed to promote exit from Boko Haram (represented by Stage 1 of Figure 1) should be tailored to local contexts. They also underline why the services provided through programs such as OPSC (Stage 4) must be tailored to reflect the particular social, economic, psychological, and other needs of each indi-

72 Felbab-Brown, "The Limits of Punishment," 10.

73 International Crisis Group, *An Exit from Boko Haram*, 9–12.

74 USAID, *Demobilization, Disassociation, Reintegration, and Reconciliation*, 6.

vidual client. While the package of services offered at Mallam Sidi is comprehensive, the management team should continue to explore additional options, particularly given the rapidly evolving nature of this programmatic field.

Considering the off-ramp from Boko Haram more broadly, we can conclude with some certainty that Giwa Barracks represents a critical weak link. Despite some apparent improvements in conditions at the barracks over time, human rights abuses remain widely reported in the literature. For instance, Amnesty International makes allegations about physical violence, insufficient food and water, inhumane sanitation, and extreme heat at Giwa, with these frequently resulting in the death of detainees.[75] Fonteh Akum and his colleagues from the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) also observe that:

> Former detainees told the ISS that they spent between three months and four years in the barracks in very poor conditions that included overcrowding; lack of hygiene, a proper bed or ventilation; and a hostile reception from members of the JIC. These conditions fuel the spread of rumors, including that those who surrendered would be condemned to death.[76]

Of course, our research was not designed to validate or discredit such claims, particularly given the presence of OPSC staff during the interviews. Indeed, it is perhaps revealing that the one respondent who was openly critical of Giwa expressed his views when these team members temporarily left the room. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that this reputation alone continues to disincentivize disengagements from Boko Haram, with this compounded by the extensive delays in the screening processes. Former detainees themselves have effectively also drawn such conclusions, with Amnesty reporting that 'many former child detainees said that, after their experience, they would not counsel others to come out from the bush.'[77] Akum and his colleagues also reported that 'some ex-associates told the ISS that at the JIC facility, they gave up hope of freedom and regretted surrendering.'[78]

While the lack of transparency limits our ability to draw firm conclusions about the screening process through which eligibility for OPSC is determined, we certainly agree with ICG's argument that individuals who did no more than continue to remain in locations that happened to come under Boko Haram control should be categorized as 'innocent.'[79] As previously discussed, this classification would allow them to return to their communities (or often IDP camps if these communities have been destroyed or remain in Boko Haram hands). However, this was not applicable to any of the respondents in our sample, with all effectively falling under the direct command of Boko Haram, including those in civilian roles. That said, we also believe that several of our interviewees should potentially still have been categorized as innocent based on their assertions that they had not been ideologically motivated, and as they had never directly contributed to violence. By instead treating them as 'low-risk', the authorities raise the numbers who pass through OPSC and increase the extent to which it provides a bottleneck in the broader off-ramp

75 Amnesty International "We Dried our Tears," & International Crisis Group, *An Exit from Boko Haram.*

76 Akum et al, *Managing the Journey*, 20.

77 Amnesty International, "We Dried our Tears", 8.

78 Akum et al, *Managing the Journey*, 20.

79 International Crisis Group, *An Exit from Boko Haram.*

from Boko Haram. Of course, this is particularly problematic in the current context of mass disengagement from the group.

More concretely, it is hard to avoid concluding that the methods applied to distinguish between 'low' and 'high-risk' individuals are flawed. As previously observed, the OPSC team maintained that the most recent cohort of beneficiaries only included those who had been forced into involvement in Boko Haram, with only one clear exception. *If* this information is correct, it means that those originally driven by adventure, status, economic incentives, peer pressure, and so on, were ineligible for Mallam Sidi. This is problematic as it is essentially inconceivable that all such individuals represent a current threat to public safety, and/or that their involvement in violence was sufficient to warrant referral to the judicial system. By way of comparison, former members of al-Shabaab are eligible for rehabilitation at equivalent facilities in Somalia if they (a) have voluntarily disengaged, (b) have denounced the group's ideology, and (c) are not seen to pose a future risk to public safety.[80] We suggest that this represents a far more robust and defensible means through which to determine eligibility as it correctly emphasizes the current attitudes of the individuals in question, rather than their historical motives for involvement.

Policy Recommendations

In presenting our policy recommendations, it is worth reiterating that the issues considered in this report are particularly pertinent at the present time given the mass disengagements currently being experienced by Boko Haram, and the extent to which the federal and state systems lack the capacity to absorb and handle the large numbers involved. Our key recommendations are as follows:

- **Communication campaigns that aim to promote exit from Boko Haram and ISWAP should appeal to varied motives and should be tailored to local contexts in terms of both their message and media.** Even those who are forced into involvement often leave such groups for a variety of reasons, and those tasked with designing communications campaigns should attempt to appeal to multiple of these motives simultaneously. For instance, these may include a desire for enhanced security outside of a conflict context, improved living conditions, the prospects of reuniting with family, community reintegration, opportunities to earn a living through newly acquired vocational skills, and so on. With conditions and regulations varying substantially between Boko Haram camps and settlements, they should also ensure that both the messages and the means of communication (radio, leaflets, phone, and so on) are appropriate to local contexts.

- **The issues associated with Giwa Barracks must be resolved as a matter of priority.** While our research was not designed to validate or discredit claims of human rights abuses at this facility, there is little doubt that this reputation alone (alongside the notorious delays in processing individuals through the center) continues to disincentivize many still in Boko Haram camps and settlements from disengaging. The relevant authorities should ensure that human rights

80 Khalil et al, *Deradicalisation and Disengagement in Somalia*, 2.

abuses have entirely ceased across all facilities, while also promoting greater transparency in the process to provide reassurance that this has occurred. Given the extent of the reputational issues, they should also consider identifying alternative facilities at which disengaged members of Boko Haram and ISWAP can be processed.

- **The screening processes should be made transparent and the eligibility criteria for OPSC should be relaxed.** As reported by the OPSC management team, the recent batch of program beneficiaries included only those who were forced into involvement with Boko Haram, with only one obvious exception. *If* this information is correct, it means that those originally driven by adventure, status, economic incentives, peer pressure, and so on, were ineligible for OPSC. This is problematic as it is essentially inconceivable that all such individuals represent a current threat to public safety, and/or that their involvement in violence was sufficient to warrant being referred to the judicial system. This excessively high threshold also almost certainly disincentivizes many who remain in the bush from disengaging.

- **While the rehabilitation services offered at OPSC are comprehensive and are seemingly suitably tailored to individual needs, the management team should continue to explore additional options.** As observed, current services include basic education, vocational training, psychological and psychosocial support, family and community visits, spiritual support, civic education, drug awareness training, art therapy, and recreational activities. As with many similar programs in other locations (including those in prison settings), the OPSC team should continue to explore novel means to pursue rehabilitation through additional intervention types. Critically, they should also ensure that the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes are sufficiently robust to help guarantee that each individual component is optimally designed to contribute to the broader objectives of the program.

- **The relevant authorities should continue to 'upscale' their disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration programming to help ensure that those who disengage from Boko Haram and ISWAP return to their communities in a timely manner.** This is necessary not only on moral grounds, but also because continued delays in the processing disincentivize many who remain in the bush from disengaging. In practice, this upscaling is likely to involve enhancing the capacity of existing facilities, as well as increasing the number of facilities used for such processes. It will also involve substantial efforts to build the technical capacity of the increased numbers of staff required for these interventions. It may also involve a greater emphasis on community-based models of rehabilitation that do not involve extended residency at facilities tailored for this purpose.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Introduction

The following information was provided to each respondent prior to interviews:

We are conducting independent research to try and improve our understanding of how and why people like yourself join and leave Boko Haram. We hope to turn the research findings into a report, with the idea that it can help improve programs that aim to counter Boko Haram and similar organizations by encouraging people to leave these groups.

We are interested to hear more about your story, as an interesting and relevant example of a journey out of Boko Haram. I want to clarify that absolutely no personal details will appear in the report. These personal details are not important to telling your story.

However, please be aware that if you provide us with information of immediate national security concerns (e.g., about an imminent attack), we will be required to report that. Please also be aware that members of the OPSC team will be present throughout the interview, and there is chance that they may share information that you provide.

This process is entirely voluntary. If any questions make you feel uncomfortable, please let me know and we can move on. Similarly, you are free to stop the interview at any point if you do not wish to proceed.

Do you have any questions before we start?

Do you agree to take part in this discussion?

Appendix B: Respondent List

	Location of Origin	Highest 'Value' Role in Boko Haram	Period Active with Boko Haram (Approximate)
C1	Maiduguri, Borno State	Medical Officer	2013–2016 (3 years)
C2	Uba, Adamawa State	Personal Security	?
C3	Bama, Borno State	Tailor	2015–2020 (5 years)
C4	Mangali, Adamawa State	Personal Security	?
C5	Bama, Borno State	Commander	2017–2021 (4 years)
C6	Damboa, Borno State	Handyman	2011–2017 (6 years)
C7	Bama, Borno State	Butcher	2013–2017 (4 years)
C8	Bama, Borno State	Trader	2014–2021 (7 years)
C9	Ngala, Borno State	Military Police	2013–2019 (6 years)
C10	Undisclosed	Foot soldier	2013–2020 (7 years)
C11	Ngala, Borno State	Foot soldier	2014–2019 (5 years)
C12	Goza, Borno State	Military Police	2014–2019 (5 years)
C13	Ngala, Borno State	Foot soldier	2014–2018 (4 years)

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