

JOURNEYS THROUGH EXTREMISM

The Experiences of Forced Recruits in Boko Haram

This fact sheet provides a snapshot of conclusions from exploratory research with forced recruits into Boko Haram, the first of a set of case studies on disengagement from violent extremist organizations (VEOs) conducted as part of the RESOLVE Network's Community-Based Armed Groups (CBAGs) Research Initiative. The research report focuses on how forced recruits 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. The 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. To learn more about the research methodology and detailed findings, please refer to the RESOLVE Research Report by James Khalil, MaryAnne Iwara, and Martine Zeuthen: [Journeys Through Extremism: The Experiences of Forced Recruits in Boko Haram](#) (2022).

KEY FINDINGS



Boko Haram forced recruits, despite being coercively enlisted, were forced into involvement through notably different means. For instance, one respondent claimed that a teacher escorted his entire class into the bush for involuntary incorporation into the group. Another observed that his uncle tried to persuade him to enlist several times before forcing him to join the group at gunpoint. Others reported that they were captured during Boko Haram raids of their towns and villages.



Boko Haram assigned forced recruits to a wide variety of roles in their camps and settlements, with degrees of fluidity in these posts. Among the research respondents, this 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.



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 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.



State-sponsored communications campaigns via radio, leaflet drops from planes, and personal phone calls were highly influential in motivating and facilitating the exit of forced recruits from Boko Haram. Most 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 phone calls with family members or former members of the group.



Accounts of how individuals were able to leave Boko Haram also varied substantially. While many fled in relatively small groups of between five and twenty people, often accompanied by their wives and children, others claimed 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, sometimes across national borders.



Fear represented a key obstacle to disengagement from Boko Haram, with attempts to escape being punishable by death. Some 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



Giwa Barracks represents a critical weak link in the state-sponsored exit pathway from Boko Haram, undoubtedly disincentivizing many from disengagement. The barracks is notorious for human rights abuses, and for extracting false confessions through violence.



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. 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.

MOVING FORWARD

- ▶ **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.
- ▶ **The issues** associated with Giwa Barracks must be resolved as a matter of priority, including its reputation for human rights abuses and its notorious delays in processing individuals through the center
- ▶ **Screening processes** should be made transparent and the eligibility criteria for OPSC should be relaxed.
- ▶ **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.
- ▶ **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.

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