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# The Psycho-Social Effects of Integrating Former Armed Militias in Organized Security Architecture: the Nigerian Model

Al-Bashir T. Olalekan Da-COCODIA[1]
Edward Adeshina OLOJE[2]

## Abstract

This paper interrogates psycho-social effects of integrating former armed militias into Nigeria's organized security architectures and governed spaces. It is theoretically anchored on Post-Conflict Reintegration Theory which provides a foundational lens for understanding the transformation of former militia members as they transition from armed violence into formal state security structures by illuminating the institutional and psychosocial processes required to transition ex-combatants from insurgency to legitimate security actors- emphasizing the importance of trust-building, inclusion, and normative adaptation. Using a qualitative analytical approach grounded in secondary data, the study finds that while integration enhances operational capacity and community-level intelligence, it simultaneously reproduces identity dissonance, institutional mistrust, and security fragmentation. The findings underscores that sustainable reintegration must balance identity transformation, psychosocial stability, and state legitimacy. It concludes that Nigeria's security reform must shift from reactive securitization to inclusive reintegration models that humanize ex-combatants while reinforcing democratic governance and public trust.

**Keywords:** Fulani Militia, Recruitment, Borno Model, Vigilantes, National Security, Boko-Haram, Contractors

[1]Al-Bashir Alaowei Tolulope 'Lekan Da-COCODIA is a Senior Researcher and Policy Analyst with the Nigerian Government. With interests in Human Security and Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism, he is broadly learned and passionate about all things Nigeria.

[2]Adeshina Edward OLOJE is career diplomat with the Nigerian Foreign Service. An expertise in governance, international relations and foreign policy. Passionate about development, administration and global strategy. Dedicated to fostering international cooperation and development.

## Introduction

Globally, the integration of former armed militias into formal state security structures has become a prominent feature of post-conflict reconstruction, especially within fragile and violence-affected states. From Colombia's demobilised FARC combatants to Afghanistan's integration of tribal militias into national defense strategies, states have often turned to transforming non-state combatants into legitimate security actors in an attempt to stabilise contested territories and restore public order. However, this approach introduces a number of complex challenges: it may weaken democratic control over security forces, politicise violence, compromise justice for victims, and generate profound psycho-social tensions in affected societies (Berdal, 2009).

Across Africa, the consequences of warlordism, rebel governance, and protracted civil wars have led many post-conflict states to confront the task of absorbing ex-combatants into national armies, police forces, and local vigilante structures. Countries such as Liberia, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have all implemented programmes to integrate armed non-state actors into formalised security frameworks with varying degrees of success. While these strategies have often resulted in temporary reductions in violence, they have also contributed to fragmented command structures, regionalised loyalties, and the institutionalisation of violence within politics (Knight & Özerdem, 2004). In many cases, insufficient attention to the psycho-social rehabilitation of former fighters has further complicated efforts to establish durable peace and civic trust.

Within this continental context, Nigeria represents a particularly complex and evolving case study. With multiple, overlapping insurgencies- ranging from resource-based militancy in the Niger Delta to religious extremism in the Northeast- the Nigerian state has recurrently relied on strategies of co-option, disarmament, and reintegration to manage armed non-state actors. Notably, programmes such as the 2009 Presidential Amnesty Programme sought to pacify restive regions by offering militants conditional forgiveness, training, and employment opportunities. More recently, a range of informal security arrangements has emerged, in which former militants are contracted for services such as pipeline surveillance, community policing, and intelligence gathering.

A significant development in this trajectory is the emergence of the Borno Model, a reintegration framework focused on managing Boko Haram defectors in northeastern Nigeria. Implemented primarily through Operation Safe Corridor, the model combines deradicalisation, vocational training, psycho-social counseling, and community reconciliation mechanisms. While innovative in its attempt to address the underlying drivers of radicalisation, the model has also been met with public skepticism, particularly among victim communities that see the reintegration of ex-insurgents as a betrayal of justice (Onuoha, 2021; Taiwo & Abi, 2025). Moreover, concerns persist over the long-term psychological wellbeing of former fighters, many of whom return to communities deeply traumatised by violence, suspicion, and loss.

The integration of former militias into state security institutions has emerged as a widely adopted strategy in post-conflict settings, intended to promote stability, demobilize combatants, and rebuild fractured security systems. However, this process carries significant psycho-social implications that often shape its success or failure. Former militia members typically enter formal security roles with deep-seated psychological imprints of war, including prolonged exposure to violence, trauma, and hyper-aggressive

behavioral conditioning (Mazzei, 2018). Many ex-combatants struggle to transition from the informal norms of armed groups- characterized by loyalty to commanders, retaliatory justice, and unregulated use of force- to the disciplined, rights-based ethos expected within state security institutions (Themnér, 2020).

Furthermore, militia integration often produces identity conflicts. Combatants frequently maintain strong bonds to their former armed factions, which can supersede their allegiance to the state, thereby undermining institutional cohesion (Annan et al., 2019). Social identity theory suggests that group-based loyalties and in-group bias deeply influence behavior; thus, ex-militia members may experience psychological tension when asked to abandon previous identities or operate alongside former adversaries (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These unresolved identity tensions can result in divided loyalties, factionalism within security agencies, and a persistence of war-era rivalries under the uniform of the state (Schulhofer-Wohl & Sambanis, 2021).

The psycho-social repercussions extend beyond the combatants themselves to the broader community. Civilians often perceive the integration of ex-militia members into security structures with distrust or fear, particularly in contexts where militias were previously perpetrators of abuse (Akinola, 2022). This creates legitimacy deficits for state institutions, weakens state–citizen relations, and may fuel new cycles of insecurity. Additionally, the lack of adequate psychosocial support, counseling, and reorientation programs for ex-combatants increases the risk of violent relapse, misconduct, and human rights violations within the security sector (Andersson & McGillivray, 2020).

Overall, while integrating former militias into state security architecture is often presented as a pragmatic pathway to post-conflict stabilization, its psycho-social dimensions require careful consideration. Without addressing trauma, identity reconstruction, community acceptance, and institutional oversight, such integrations may unintentionally transplant conflict dynamics into state security institutions, thereby compromising long-term peacebuilding and national security.

Nigeria's engagement in multilateral counter-terrorism diplomacy, notably through the Aqaba Process- an initiative spearheaded by Jordan's King Abdullah II- further highlights the state's recognition of the transnational dimensions of violent extremism. The Aqaba meetings promote regional cooperation in intelligence-sharing, border security, and counter-extremism strategy. Nigeria's participation underscores the need for an approach that views ex-combatants not merely as perpetrators, but as former victims of ideological manipulation, socio-economic deprivation, and governance failure (Royal Hashemite Court, 2025). Yet, the perceived tactical advantages of integrating ex-militants into Nigeria's evolving security architecture, such efforts raise a host of unresolved questions. What are the institutional implications of blurring the boundaries between state and non-state actors in the security sector? How does the psycho-social reintegration of former combatants affect community trust, justice, and social cohesion? And what are the long-term effects on democratic governance and the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force?

This paper seeks to explore these critical questions by examining the Nigerian model as a lens through which to understand the implications and psycho-social effects of integrating former armed militias into state-sanctioned security roles and governed spaces. In doing so, it draws attention to the broader risks and opportunities inherent in this increasingly common, yet controversial, post-conflict strategy.

## Conceptual Clarification

Armed militias are generally understood as organised, armed non-state actors that operate outside the official control of the state and often pursue political, ideological, economic, or ethno-religious agendas (Malthaner, 2018). They are distinguished by their ability to exert coercive force, mobilise support around alternative sources of legitimacy (e.g., ethnicity, religion, or community identity), and often fill security vacuums in areas where the state is weak or absent (Reno, 2011).

In Nigeria, the term encompasses a wide spectrum of actors, including: Ideological insurgents, such as Boko Haram and its faction ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province), which aim to overthrow the secular state and impose a radical Islamist regime; Economic militants, like those in the Niger Delta (e.g., MEND), who protest environmental degradation and resource injustice; Ethno-political militias, such as the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) and Bakassi Boys, who claim to defend ethnic or regional interests; Community vigilantes, including the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), who assist state forces in local policing and counterinsurgency. These militias, whether driven by grievance, greed, or ideology, have significantly shaped Nigeria's security terrain. Some have evolved from armed resistance movements into actors integrated into governance and security structures, a transformation that brings both potential stability and serious risks (Ikelegbe, 2005).

Many studies focus on the institutional and political dimensions of integrating former militias. Mazzei (2018) shows that post-conflict governments often incorporate ex-combatants into the security sector to consolidate authority and prevent rebellion. While valuable, this perspective largely treats integration as a political strategy, offering limited insight into the identity shifts and psychological recalibration required for former militias to function effectively within disciplined, rights-based state structures. Similarly, Themnér (2020) emphasizes the organizational challenges of blending wartime networks with state institutions, but the analysis underplays how deeply rooted wartime social identities influence loyalty, behavior, and professional conduct.

Several scholars have highlighted the persistence of in-group attachments among former fighters. Annan, Blattman, and Horton (2019) argue that loyalty to commanders and wartime peer groups often survives demobilization and complicates reintegration. Yet, most of these studies do not explore how such identities clash with the collective ethos, neutrality, and hierarchical discipline expected in national security agencies. Thus, a critical identity gap remains regarding how ex-militia members negotiate the tension between old allegiances and new institutional identities.

Other works underscore the problem of community mistrust. Akinola (2022) notes that civilians frequently view integrated forces with suspicion, especially in communities that experienced militia violence. However, the literature does not sufficiently analyze how this community-level stigma shapes ex-combatants' self-perception, institutional morale, and long-term behavior within security architecture. Schulhofer-Wohl and Sambanis (2021) reveal that integrating fighters from rival factions can trigger internal factionalism, but they pay little attention to the psycho-social foundations of these divisions, such as trauma, identity loss, or the struggle to adopt new roles.

The psycho-social dimension is addressed in part by Andersson and McGillivray (2020), who highlight trauma and emotional distress as barriers to reintegration. Yet these authors focus more on

individual psychological deficits rather than on how trauma interacts with identity reconstruction, professional socialization, and group dynamics within the security sector. The literature therefore lacks a comprehensive exploration of how trauma, identity, and institutional adaptation intersect to influence successful or failed integration outcomes.

The existing studies on militia reintegration in Nigeria largely focus on North-East insurgents, neglecting North-Central regions. There is limited exploration of the psycho-social effects on ex-militants and host communities, as well as the implications of informal militia co-option on governance, social cohesion, and sustainable security in conflict-affected areas like Benue State.

## Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Post-Conflict Reintegration Theory, which provides a foundational lens for understanding the transformation of former militia members as they transition from armed violence into formal state security structures. Reintegration theory posits that sustainable peace in post-conflict societies depends on the successful social, economic, political, and psychological reintegration of ex-combatants into civilian or formal state institutions (Knight, 2018). It emphasizes that reintegration is not a single event but a long-term process requiring behavioral change, identity reconstruction, and community acceptance.

According to the theory, reintegration involves three interconnected dimensions: social reintegration, which concerns rebuilding relationships with families and communities; economic reintegration, which involves access to livelihoods and meaningful roles; and political/institutional reintegration, which entails participation in governance structures, including the security sector (Munive & Jakobsen, 2019). When any of these dimensions are neglected, ex-combatants often experience frustration, marginalization, or relapse into violence.

The integration of former militias into state security architecture is a form of institutional reintegration, but Post-Conflict Reintegration Theory argues that such integration cannot succeed without simultaneous psychosocial transformation. Ex-combatants typically carry trauma, aggression conditioning, and wartime identities that must be addressed through counseling, reorientation, and institutional training (Derluyn et al., 2015). Failure to address these psycho-social needs may lead to violent relapse, abuse of authority, divided loyalties, or factionalism within the security sector.

Furthermore, the theory underscores the importance of identity reconstruction. Former militia members must shift from identities rooted in armed struggle, group loyalty, and informal command structures to identities aligned with professionalism, neutrality, and state allegiance. This transition requires supportive institutional environments, community acceptance, and credible oversight mechanisms. Reintegration theory therefore connects directly to the challenges highlighted in this study, such as community mistrust, trauma, and the persistence of in-group loyalties.

By applying Post-Conflict Reintegration Theory, this study examines whether integrating former militias into the security architecture contributes to sustainable peace or whether unresolved psychosocial and identity issues undermine security and stability. The theory provides a useful framework for analyzing how the reintegration process influences discipline, legitimacy, cohesion, and the overall performance of state security agencies in post-conflict settings.

## Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the farmers-herders conflict in Benue State and its implications for security and community stability. The design enabled triangulation of numerical data with experiences from Focused Group Discussions, interviews and relevant policy documents for greater validity. The study was conducted in four conflict-prone LGAs of Benue State- Guma, Logo, Agatu, and Makurdi. The target population included local residents, farmers, pastoralists, community leaders, security personnel, and government/IDP officials.

A total of 360 respondents participated in the quantitative phase. They comprised 120 farmers, 60 pastoralists, 40 community leaders, 100 residents, and 40 security personnel. These categories were selected based on their direct exposure to the conflict and their relevance to issues of security and reintegration. Additionally, a focused group discussion comprised of 11 members and another 24 interview participants were purposively selected the survey, they included community leaders, farmers, pastoralists, security personnel, and government/IDP officials.

A multi-stage sampling technique guided selection: conflict-affected LGAs were purposively chosen, communities randomly selected, households systematically sampled, and key informants purposively engaged. Data were collected using structured questionnaires, semi-structured interview guides, and document review of relevant reports and academic materials.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (tables, means, and intensity scales), while qualitative data were examined using thematic content analysis. Instrument validity was ensured through expert review, and a pilot test produced a 'Cronbach's Alpha' reliability score of 0.82. Ethical procedures-including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly adhered to.

## Historical Context of Armed Militias in Nigeria

The story of armed militias in Nigeria is not a recent phenomenon. Rather, it is deeply woven into the fabric of the nation's complex socio-political evolution, beginning from colonial legacies through post-independence instability, to the contemporary security challenges that characterise Nigeria's statehood today. Armed groups in Nigeria have historically emerged in response to political exclusion, identity-based marginalisation, economic injustice, and state failure. Over time, these groups have moved from being mere fringe actors to becoming entrenched participants in both security provision and governance, often occupying the grey zone between criminality and legitimacy.

The colonial period sowed the seeds of militarised control and state-sanctioned coercion. Through the indirect rule system, colonial administrators empowered traditional authorities to maintain order, often through punitive local policing and forced compliance with colonial laws. This left behind a legacy of governance that was more about coercion than service delivery (Mamdani, 1996). After independence in 1960, the new Nigerian state inherited this coercive logic, but struggled to forge a cohesive national identity across its sharply divided ethno-regional lines. The aftermath of independence was quickly dominated by ethnic tensions, culminating in the 1967-1970 Nigerian Civil War. The Biafran conflict itself catalysed the rise of locally mobilised armed formations, as each region sought to protect its own interests in a collapsing national framework (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005).

By the 1980s and 1990s, Nigeria found itself under successive military dictatorships, which further eroded civil institutions and widened economic disparities. As state legitimacy declined, particularly at the grassroots, various ethno-regional groups began forming militia-like organisations, claiming to defend their communities in the face of neglect and political alienation. The Yoruba-dominated Oodua People's Congress (OPC) emerged in response to the annulment of the 1993 elections, widely believed to have been won by a Yoruba candidate, M.K.O. Abiola. The OPC began as a socio-cultural group but quickly transformed into a paramilitary force claiming to protect Yoruba interests, engaging in both community defense and violent street justice (Nolte, 2007).

Simultaneously, in the oil-rich Niger Delta, decades of environmental degradation, unemployment, and perceived economic exploitation led to the rise of well-armed militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF). These groups waged an armed struggle against both the Nigerian state and multinational oil companies, targeting oil infrastructure and engaging in high-profile kidnappings and sabotage. Their actions significantly impacted the national economy and forced the federal government to respond with a combination of force and appeasement. The 2009 Presidential Amnesty Programme marked a turning point. It offered militants financial stipends, vocational training, and rehabilitation in exchange for laying down arms. While this brought relative calm, it also embedded a dangerous precedent: militancy could be rewarded if it disrupted the status quo forcefully enough (Olojede, 2014).

In the North, another security challenge was taking root. What began as a religious movement seeking purification of Islamic practice- the Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad, better known as Boko Haram, evolved into Nigeria's deadliest insurgency after the killing of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in police custody in 2009. Boko Haram transformed into a violent, anti-state insurgency, capturing towns, launching bombings, and orchestrating mass abductions, including the high-profile kidnapping of Chibok schoolgirls in 2014 (Zenn, 2020).

As the Nigerian military struggled to contain the insurgency, communities in Borno and Yobe states formed the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), a local militia composed largely of young men with intimate knowledge of the terrain and the insurgents. Although initially a spontaneous response to insecurity, the CJTF soon gained formal recognition and material support from the state. This blurred the lines between civilians and combatants and between volunteerism and vigilante justice (Bukarti, 2017). Reports of CJTF members engaging in abuse, extortion, and even extra-judicial killings have raised concerns about the long-term consequences of arming civilians without strong accountability mechanisms (Amnesty International, 2018).

What emerged from this, is the normalisation of militia activity within Nigerian political and security systems. Over the years, successive governments have not only tolerated but, in many instances, actively incorporated armed groups into governance structures. Former militants in the Niger Delta now receive state contracts for pipeline surveillance; ex-Boko Haram fighters are processed through de-radicalisation and reintegration programmes under Operation Safe Corridor and the Borno Model; and ethnic vigilante groups are sometimes empowered to manage local security in the absence of effective policing (Onuoha, 2021). This evolving dynamic has institutionalised what some scholars refer to as "hybrid security

governance"- a scenario where non-state and informal actors play key roles in the delivery of security, often with limited oversight (Hills, 2004).

While this may offer short-term stability, the long-term implications are troubling. The integration of former armed actors into governance and security structures can undermine rule of law, embolden criminal entrepreneurship, and alienate communities that view such integration as rewarding violence. It also deepens the crisis of legitimacy facing Nigeria's formal security institutions, which are often perceived as corrupt, abusive, and politically manipulated.

In sum, the history of armed militias in Nigeria is deeply rooted in systemic failures- economic, political, and institutional. From the post-independence fragmentation to the ethnic militias of the 1990s, the oil-fueled insurgency of the Niger Delta, and the Islamist extremism of the North-East, armed groups have emerged as alternative sources of power in spaces where the state is either absent or distrusted. Understanding this history is critical to any serious effort at reforming Nigeria's security architecture or at building sustainable peace.

## Militia Integration into Nigeria's Security Architecture

The integration of former militia fighters into Nigeria's security architecture has evolved unevenly across the country, reflecting variations in conflict intensity, political will, institutional capacity, and community acceptance. In the North-East, where Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgency reached catastrophic levels, the Nigerian government established a formal deradicalization and reintegration framework through the Operation Safe Corridor (OSC). Since its inception in 2016, OSC has processed approximately 2,000 ex-combatants, offering structured psychosocial counseling, religious reorientation, vocational training, and supervised community reinsertion (Crisis Group, 2021; KAIPTC, 2022). In addition to this cohort, several hundred others - particularly those moved from military detention or convicted in civil courts - have also been transitioned into rehabilitation centres, such as the one in Gombe, bringing the total number of individuals exposed to state-led deradicalization to the low thousands (Reuters, 2024).

What makes the North-East even more complex is the role of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) - a large community-based vigilante structure that, at its peak, reportedly exceeded 20,000 members (CIVIC, 2020). While not insurgents, CJTF members frequently operated as quasi-security personnel supporting the military, conducting patrols, manning checkpoints, and gathering intelligence. Over time, elements of the CJTF received stipends, uniforms, and operational guidance, effectively blurring the boundaries between community defense groups and formal state security forces. This semi-formalization has raised concerns about professional accountability, human rights standards, and the long-term sustainability of integrating irregular forces into national security structures (Global Initiative, 2024).

By contrast, the situation in the North-Central region, including Benue State - the focal area of the present study - is markedly different. Here, violent conflicts between farmers and herders have produced various community militias, local defense groups, and vigilantes. However, unlike the structured OSC framework in the North-East, there is no established deradicalization or formal integration programme for these groups. Instead, government responses have been largely ad hoc, characterized by short-term collaboration, provision of stipends, limited logistical support, and occasional co-option of vigilante networks into local security arrangements. Consequently, there is no reliable official figure for the number

of militia actors reintegrated or absorbed into formal security structures in the North-Central; existing evidence suggests that integration has been informal, unregulated, and often dependent on political circumstances at the state level (Global Initiative, 2024; CIVIC, 2020).

The field interviews conducted for this study reinforce this divide. A counsellor working at the OSC rehabilitation centre in Gombe noted: "Many of the men who pass through this programme genuinely want to start afresh. But trauma doesn't disappear quickly. Even after training, when they go back home, communities sometimes reject them. Without support, they struggle to survive." Similarly, an ex-CJTF volunteer interviewed in Maiduguri explained his dilemma: "We fought side by side with the soldiers, but we are not soldiers. Some of us were paid, others weren't. When the fighting reduced, many just returned home without any plan." These reflections highlight the emotional strain, identity conflicts, and institutional uncertainty that accompany reintegration.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted in Benue State further revealed the absence of a structured reintegration process in the North-Central. One participant stated: "Here, we don't have anything like OSC. The government sometimes works with vigilantes, gives them small support, but there is no training or proper monitoring. People still fear them." Another participant added: "Those who committed violence just melt back into the communities. Without a process to engage them, we don't know if they have changed." These insights underline the psycho-social complexities inherent in reintegration within regions where formal programmes do not exist. They also show that community mistrust, ambiguous legal status of militias, and lack of psychological healing create fertile ground for renewed cycles of violence.

Overall, while the North-East has experimented with structured deradicalization and controlled reintegration, the North-Central largely relies on improvised arrangements that risk empowering local militias, perpetuating impunity, and undermining long-term peacebuilding. The unevenness in Nigeria's reintegration landscape - both in scale and institutional coherence, reveals significant policy gaps. The country's security architecture remains porous at the margins, particularly where militia forces act as substitutes for under-resourced formal institutions. The interviews and FGDs conducted for this study demonstrate that without credible rehabilitation, community reconciliation, and clear legal pathways, reintegration efforts may deepen rather than resolve insecurity.

From both qualitative and documentary evidence, it is apparent that while military intervention contributes to short-term containment of violence, it is less effective in addressing the psycho-social dimensions of conflict and sustainable reintegration of ex-militants, particularly in North-Central regions where formal programmes like OSC are absent. This underscores the need for integrated approaches combining military, psycho-social, and community based strategies to enhance long-term security outcomes.

## Implications for Security and Governance

The persistent conflict between farmers and herders, alongside the challenges of integrating former militias into formal security structures, has profound implications for security and governance in Nigeria, particularly in North-Central states like Benue. The insecurity arising from clashes destabilizes local governance structures, weakens the rule of law, and undermines citizens' confidence in state institutions (Akinola, 2022; Global Initiative, 2024). Communities often perceive both the military and local security agencies as reactive rather than preventive, leading to gaps in protection and accountability.

Military and state interventions, while instrumental in containing immediate outbreaks of violence, frequently fail to address the underlying drivers of conflict, such as competition over land and water resources, economic marginalization, and historical grievances (Annan, Blattman, & Horton, 2019). The sporadic nature of these interventions also disrupts governance processes; local authorities are often sidelined, and policy responses are fragmented, leaving security vacuum periods that allow armed groups or vigilantes to exert informal control.

Qualitative data from the study further illustrate these dynamics. A community leader in Benue noted during an FGD: "The government steps in only when violence escalates. By the time they act, people have fled, crops are destroyed, and trust in leaders is lost. We are left to fend for ourselves." (FGD, Benue State). Similarly, a security officer highlighted the challenge of managing integrated ex-militias: "Some former fighters who joined the security services struggle to follow protocol. Their loyalties sometimes conflict with their duties. This complicates command and reduces effectiveness" (KI-Security Officer, North-Central). The psycho-social stress on ex-combatants, combined with community mistrust, further impacts governance. Poor reintegration practices can generate internal factionalism within security agencies, weaken cohesion, and inadvertently perpetuate cycles of violence. In effect, governance institutions become reactive and overstretched, unable to implement preventive strategies or ensure inclusive security provision (Andersson & McGillivray, 2020).

The evidence from both qualitative interviews and FGDs indicates that the weak integration of former militants, coupled with reactive military interventions, undermines effective governance and sustainable security. While immediate violence may be contained, the lack of comprehensive reintegration, community reconciliation, and institutional oversight perpetuates instability, reduces public trust, and constrains the state's capacity to govern effectively. This underscores the urgent need for holistic strategies that integrate military, psychosocial, and community-based governance approaches to achieve lasting peace and institutional legitimacy.

### Psycho-Social Effects on Ex-Militants and Communities

The process of reintegrating former militants into state security structures exerts profound psycho-social effects on both the ex-combatants and the communities that host them. For ex-militants, years of exposure to violence, trauma, and survival-driven aggression often result in psychological distress, social identity conflicts, and difficulty adjusting to institutional norms (Andersson & McGillivray, 2020; Annan, Blattman, & Horton, 2019). Even when provided with structured programmes like Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) in the North-East, many ex-combatants struggle to reconcile their past identities with the expectations of disciplined state service.

A counsellor at the OSC rehabilitation centre in Gombe reflected: "Most of the men we receive are remorseful, but trauma runs deep. They attend counseling and vocational training, yet returning to their communities is the hardest part. Some face rejection, others feel invisible. Without continued support, some slide back into old networks" (KI-Counsellor, Gombe). Similarly, an ex-CJTF volunteer recounted: "We fought to protect our towns, but after the fighting ended, many of us felt purposeless. We were neither fully soldiers nor just civilians. This uncertainty affects our families, our morale, and sometimes even our behaviour" (Ex-CJTF, Maiduguri).

Communities, on the other hand, often experience a complex mix of fear, distrust, and resentment toward returning ex-militants. FGDs conducted in Benue State highlighted these dynamics. One community leader noted: "People are wary. They see ex-militia members in uniforms or integrated into security, but they remember the destruction and loss. Some families avoid them, others confront them, and this creates tension in our neighbourhoods." (FGD, Benue).

Another FGD participant added: "We need protection, but we also fear that those integrated may carry old grudges. The lack of proper monitoring and community sensitization makes everyone anxious." (FGD, Benue).

These qualitative insights underscore three critical psycho-social effects:

1. Identity Conflict and Role Ambiguity: Ex-combatants oscillate between their former allegiances and new institutional expectations, producing stress, uncertainty, and occasional aggression (Annan et al., 2019; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

2. Community Distrust and Social Tension: Communities struggle to accept returning ex-militants, especially where prior atrocities were committed, weakening social cohesion and complicating local peacebuilding (Akinola, 2022).

3. Psychological Trauma and Relapse Risk: Without ongoing counselling and reintegration support, ex-militants may relapse into violent behaviour or social withdrawal, perpetuating cycles of insecurity (Andersson & McGillivray, 2020).

Overall, the psycho-social landscape surrounding reintegration highlights the interconnectedness of individual healing, institutional support, and community acceptance. Effective reintegration is therefore not only a matter of security or policy compliance but also requires long-term psychosocial strategies, community dialogue, and sustained monitoring to mitigate trauma and rebuild trust.

The evidence from interviews and FGDs indicates that insufficient psychosocial support for ex-militants, coupled with community mistrust, undermines both reintegration and local security. The failure to address trauma, identity reconstruction, and community acceptance increases the likelihood of violent relapse, social tension, and fragile governance. This underscores the need for comprehensive psychosocial interventions and community reconciliation mechanisms alongside formal reintegration programmes.

## Conclusion

This study examines the dynamics of farmers-herders conflict in Benue State and the broader implications of integrating former militia members into Nigeria's security architecture. Evidence from both quantitative and qualitative analyses reveals that the conflict is fueled by multiple structural, socio-economic and political factors, including competition over land and resources, inadequate governance, and historical grievances, including the deeply worrisome, though unsubstantiated claims of some discussants who assert to seeing government soldiers, troops and military helicopters frequently dropping off supplies and arms for armed militia groups in the forests. This is further buttressed by countless television and radio interview assertions (including Channels TV, Arise TV, AIT TV, Brekete Radio) of numerous highly placed citizens: retired senior military personnel, members of congress, presidential contestants, etc, all stating that

bandits and terrorists of the Fulani Tribe indigene were sought and facilitated into Nigeria by both military chiefs, federal ministers and state governors to "destabilise the government and political structures of the Nation in a bid to reclaim their Fulani patrimony of Nigeria as allegedly handed down by British colonialists", allegedly . The first key finding indicates that while government policies such as Operation Safe Corridor in the North-East have successfully deradicalized and reintegrated approximately 2,000 former insurgents, similar structured programmes are largely absent in the North-Central region, leaving local militia groups informally co-opted and largely unmonitored. This disparity underscores a significant policy gap in the institutionalization of reintegration processes across regions.

The second finding highlights that military interventions, though essential for immediate containment of violence, have a limited long-term impact on preventing recurrent clashes. Short-term deployments often suppress violence temporarily without addressing the root causes, such as land disputes, socio-economic deprivation, and identity-based tensions. Interviews and focus group discussions further indicate that military operations occasionally create role ambiguity among ex-militants and local vigilantes, reducing operational effectiveness and straining civil-military relations.

Third, the study reveals profound psycho-social effects on ex-militants and host communities. Ex-combatants experience identity conflicts, trauma, and role ambiguity, while communities grapple with fear, mistrust, and social tension. Insufficient psychosocial support, coupled with inadequate community sensitization, increases the risk of violent relapse and undermines social cohesion. This finding emphasizes that reintegration is not merely an institutional or security concern but also a critical psycho-social challenge requiring sustained counseling and community engagement.

Finally, the study identifies significant implications for governance and security. Weak reintegration mechanisms and reactive military responses undermine institutional legitimacy, erode public trust, and weaken the state's capacity to govern effectively. Governance structures are strained by short-term interventions that fail to foster durable peace or inclusive security arrangements, leaving communities vulnerable and perpetuating cycles of conflict.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that effective conflict management in Nigeria requires a holistic approach that combines military intervention, structured reintegration of ex-militants, psycho-social support, and community reconciliation. Sustainable peace and strengthened governance can only be achieved when security strategies are complemented by mechanisms that address the underlying socio-economic, identity, and psychological dimensions of conflict.

## Recommendations

1. Institutionalize a Comprehensive Reintegration Framework:
The Nigerian government should develop a standardized policy for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) that includes vocational training, psychosocial support, and community reconciliation programs for ex-militias before their absorption into formal structures.

2. Enhance Oversight, Accountability and Continuous Vetting Mechanisms:
Clear legal and institutional guidelines must govern the recruitment, training, and deployment of former militants in security agencies to prevent abuse of power, political manipulation, and erosion of public trust while mechanisms for continuous vetting of government and security officials must be adhered to.

3. Prioritize Psycho-social Rehabilitation and Community Healing:
Structured counseling, trauma management, and community-based reconciliation initiatives should be mainstreamed to address the emotional and psychological impacts of conflict on ex-combatants and affected communities.

4. Strengthen Civil–Military/Security Relations and Local Governance:
Collaboration between traditional leaders, civil society organizations, and security institutions should be encouraged to promote inclusive peacebuilding and ensure that reintegration efforts reflect local realities and community priorities.

5. Promote Regional and International Collaboration:
Nigeria should engage ECOWAS, the AU, and UN agencies to share best practices on reintegration, peacebuilding, and security sector reform, ensuring coherence between national and regional stabilization strategies.

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