

Interrogating the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Ex-Boko Haram Terrorists into Local Communities

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Introduction

- ▶ Since 2002, Boko Haram terrorist group and its destruction of lives and properties continue to receive considerable global attention.
- ▶ The group stands for the rejection of western influences - Boko Haram meaning: western education is forbidden.
- ▶ Boko Haram is not an ethnic group neither is it a constitutionally recognized entity.
- ▶ They are adherent of the Salafist Islamic unit whose aim is not to only challenge the inherent corruption and hardship of the political class but also to unseat the ruling government.
- ▶ According to Mohammed Yusuf, its first leader, the group seeks to restore pristine Islamic practices in Northern Nigeria.
- ▶ Its transition from radical preaching to violent extremism started in 2009, after the death of Mohammed Yusuf in Police custody.
- ▶ Boko Haram insurgents pledge allegiance to al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban (British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC, 2015).

Introduction

- ▶ In 2002, Osama bin Ladin footed Boko Haram's budget to the tune of \$3 million, to promote the his brand of Salafist Islamism.
- ▶ Boko Haram members are prohibited from any form of interaction with the local Muslim population (Nwanaju, 2012).
- ▶ The sect's membership include but not limited to the following: politicians, bankers, drug addicts, university lecturers, almajiris, and migrants from neighbouring countries.
- ▶ The group is being financed through charities, donations from wealthy northerners, state funds, and proceeds from organised crimes such as, drug trafficking, kidnapping, robbery, fraud and identity theft (Eme & Ibietan, 2012).
- ▶ Ali Sanda Umar Konduga a.k.a Al-Zawahiri, a former spokesman of BH identified a former Nigerian ambassador, a serving senator, and some governors as sponsors of the group (Eme et al., 2012).
- ▶ Countering terrorism has failed because the soldiers have been stretched to the limit, demoralised, and poorly equipped (Oduah, 2021).
- ▶ Following the failure of counterterrorism, the reintegration of repentant ex-BH members becomes a new peace framework for addressing terrorism.

Understanding Disarmament, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration

- ▶ According to the UN Institute for Training and Research, DDR is a process through which members of armed forces and groups are supported to lay down their weapons and return to civilian life.
- ▶ It involves economic, social, political, security, and humanitarian perspectives towards creating an environment for reconciliation and sustainable development.
- ▶ DDR is a framework for peace process(es) following the end of an armed conflict or civil war.
- ▶ DDR is a post-conflict (after conflict/war) mechanism for peace or a 'medicine' for healing.
- ▶ Cases of DDR policy: Rwanda, Liberia, Nigeria, and Colombia, to mention a few.
- ▶ The DDR programme, as it were, in Rwanda and in most cases, was designed for ex-combatants that were not terrorist-related.

Prelude to Operation Safe Corridor Policy, 2016

- ▶ The inability of the MNJTF and CJTF to achieve a long-term solution to insurgency/terrorism necessitated the reintegration programmes.
- ▶ Partly responsible was the extended budgets accrued to the security sector: in 2015, national budget was 4.405 trillion while the SS was 0.99 trillion naira (2.36 billion dollars) (Jimoh et al., 2021).
- ▶ In 2016, national budget - 6.06 trillion, the SS was 1.07 trillion naira; and in 2017, when the budget was 7.44 trillion naira, the SS got 1.15 trillion (Jimoh et al., 2021).
- ▶ Despite the rise in budget, the security sector, could not significantly end terrorism.
- ▶ Thus, the evolution of three main deradicalisation programmes: the Kuje prison, the Yellow Ribbons Initiative by Neem Foundation, and Operation Safe Corridor.
- ▶ The Kuje prison deradicalisation programme took place in Abuja, in 2014, during Goodluck Jonathan's administration.

Prelude to Operation Safe Corridor Policy, 2016

- ▶ The Yellow Ribbon Initiative was located in Borno State. It was organized in 2017 by the Neem Foundation, a non-profit entity.
- ▶ The OSC was also set up by the Buhari administration in April 2016.
- ▶ Since 2017, six cohorts, about 2,160 persons graduated from the programme and return to their communities in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe.
- ▶ The OSC focuses on the DDR and addresses three issues: religious ideology, structural or political grievances and post-conflict trauma.
- ▶ OSC is majorly for the “low-risk” defectors. The low-risk is for rehabilitation and reintegration while the high-risk is for prosecution (Felbab-Brown, 2018).

Approaches to rehabilitation and Reintegration of Former Terrorists

- ▶ Public awareness campaign to keep communities and ex-combatants informed about reintegration efforts.
- ▶ Social and mass media have been used to increase public awareness and sensitization about DDR activities (IDDRS 2014).
- ▶ The Borno State Government and Operation Hadin Kai launched television and radio campaigns to raise awareness of the plan that will benefit both OPSC graduates and the communities.
- ▶ The Borno State Commissioner for Women Affairs and Social Development makes regular visits to villages to share information about OPSC graduates' reintegration.
- ▶ The OPSC provides start-up kits to each graduate.

Approaches to rehabilitation and Reintegration of Former Terrorists

- ▶ Start-up kits aid individuals' reintegration into their environment and help to reduce tension and complaints (Bakare, May 2024).
- ▶ Family and community support are vital components of the rehabilitation and reintegration process.
- ▶ The OPSC has helped communities prepare to accept ex-fighters by conducting advance family tracing visits (Steenken and Langholtz, 2017).
- ▶ During the visit, the OPSC focuses on the reintegration of ex-terrorists with their families and communities.
- ▶ The OPSC deploys interfaith approach to reintegration. Religious and community leaders serve as interlocutors, promoting discussion and peace-building under the well-known Islamic framework known as Sulhu.
- ▶ The interfaith system promotes forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, trust, and community cohesiveness (Hassan, November 2023).

Approaches to rehabilitation and Reintegration of Former Terrorists

- ▶ The Nigerian military's Operation Safe Corridor addresses the mental health issues of ex-terrorists and affected community members.
- ▶ Former terrorists get mental health assistance and skill development under the OPSC, while affected community members have received counselling and psychological support from Medecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (Ezedike et al., 2020).
- ▶ An International Organisation for Migration (IOM) team travel to the village where the ex-combatants have been relocated in order to tell them about the returnees' new outlook and assist the community in preparing.
- ▶ The programme covers a 52-week intensive exercise based on deradicalisation therapies, religious re-education, and vocational training required for reintegration into society (Nwankpa, 2019; Felbab-Brown, 2018).

Terrorist Activities After the “Operation Safe Corridor”

- ▶ The release of ex-BH from the deradicalisation centre coincided with an increase in attacks in neighbouring Chad.
- ▶ In 2016, BH killed about 240 civilians (Ajakaye, 2016).
- ▶ In 2017, BH terrorists had 150 attacks as against 127 in 2016. approximately 900 people lost their lives.
- ▶ In 2019, more than 1,245 people were killed by BH in about 142 attacks (Omilana, 2020).
- ▶ In November 2020, Koshebe Massacre, about 110 farm labourers killed (*The Guardian*, 29 November, 2020).
- ▶ About 37 people were killed by Boko Haram on November, 2023 (*BBC News*, 2023).

Terrorist Activities After the “Operation Safe Corridor”

- ▶ In September, 2024, terrorists killed 130 people in the district of Tarmuwa in Yobe State (*The Punch*, September 3, 2024).
- ▶ In May 2025, terrorists killed about 57 people.
- ▶ Between November 2024 and April 2025, Boko Haram/ISWAP carried out 252 attacks that led to the death of 100 soldiers and 280 civilians, totaling 380 casualties (*Global Upfront Newspaper*, 2025)
- ▶ In the Lake Chad Basin, Boko Haram/ISWAP caused 3, 627 fatalities in 2024 (*The Guardian*, 2024)
- ▶ Since 2009, about 35,000 people have been killed and 2.6 million persons displaced.

Challenges of Reintegration of Ex-Boko Haram

- ▶ There is difficulty of developing a long-term legal and policy framework for demobilization and reintegration of high-risk level BH members.
- ▶ The programme focuses on the defection and rehabilitation of low-level BH members.
- ▶ The extent to which community voices inform the design of the reintegration programme appears limited.
- ▶ Very little or no involvement of the community in the design of the reintegration programme has fuelled a perceived lack of ownership of the process (Felbab-brown, 2018).
- ▶ The programme mainly targets “repentant insurgents” and not the community who suffered directly from the activities of Boko Haram.
- ▶ The top-down approach has significantly inform a lack of trust in the government institution that carries out the reintegration programme (Ike et al., 2021).
- ▶ The DDR project is not widely accepted because there was no proper consultation with local communities before its commencement.

Proponents of Reintegration and their Views

- ▶ Reintegration programmes can help end cycles of violence by offering a path out of terrorism for those who surrender. It can encourage others to lay down arms.
- ▶ Some fighters were forced into Boko Haram, especially children and women, so reintegration will be away out for this group of people.
- ▶ With proper rehabilitation (psychological, vocational, educational, etc.,) reintegrated terrorists can become productive citizens.
- ▶ Reintegration can be part of a broader counter-insurgency strategy towards undermining BH's manpower and influence over time.

Proponents of Non-Reintegration and their Views

- ▶ “Boko Haram killed my husband while he was praying inside the mosque, two of my brothers were slaughtered; they should find a place to keep [the former fighters], but not in our society, please.”
- ▶ Living side-by-side with the ex-insurgents would be too painful for the community.
- ▶ “People like Gabage (an ex-Boko Haram member currently in the rehabilitation programme) were the ones who killed my brother; how can they bring such a person to where I live?
- ▶ Whoever destroys your family..., I don’t think it is wise to live with them.”
- ▶ How come a killer, in a civil society, goes to jail or is being killed by hanging, a rapist goes to jail and serve 14 years term, and a BH terrorist who has committed similar and even worst crimes is forgiven and asked to re-join the community he terrorised without being punished.
- ▶ It sends wrong message - that People can join BH, commit terrible acts, repent, be forgiven, and get rewarded.

Proponents of Non-Reintegration and their Views

- ▶ Government's first responsibility is to protect its law abiding citizens
- ▶ They are forgiven but have not repented. Some of them are brought back to prisons after being forgiven. They do more harms and believe that if they are arrested will eventually get amnesty.
- ▶ There is no guarantee that BH terrorists have truly repented. No convincing metric to justify repentance other than their testimonies or a surrender of arms which they may pick up again.
- ▶ I do not support the idea because terrorists are trained militias, with the knowledge of handling weapons, and can regroup to challenge constituted authority.
- ▶ They are indoctrinated and their views are at variance with societal beliefs and practices.
- ▶ They are unfit to be reintegrated because of their radical and violent lifestyle.
- ▶ High-level officers may ask some low-level members to surrender with the intent to get useful information.

Discussion

- ▶ The public apologies and promises to embrace peace made by the former terrorists do not resolve the traumatic situations of victims. This points to the fact that the OSC does not in clear terms address the plights of victims.
- ▶ There is a general belief that the programme is a twist that will favour former terrorists and promote their cause.
- ▶ In 2021, for example, Babagana Zulum, Borno State Governor, called for a review of the programme, saying ex-terrorists spy on communities and then rejoin the group.
- ▶ The OSC's focus on low-risk members with little or nothing on high-risk members has little or no effect on the operations of BH.
- ▶ Repentance is a thing of the mind. Someone can pretend to have repented because the conditions to express himself otherwise are not there.

Discussion

- ▶ There will always be resistance from local communities because they do not believe the programme can impact their lives and that it has not prevented more recruitment and deadly attacks in the north.
- ▶ There is a disconnect between the period of repentance and the implementation of the DDR. Reconciliation of both parties never took place before re-union.
- ▶ Since insurgency is on-going, reintegration process becomes an unending venture as there is tendency that former terrorists may return to the group due to high incentives from the latter.

The Implications of Reintegration

- ▶ National security threat: several experts and community members emphasize the problem of recidivism - a situation in which ex-terrorists return to violence (BH or banditry).
- ▶ The lack of trust on the part of civilians may inform retaliatory tendencies against ex-terrorists.
- ▶ Reintegrated persons has the capability to influence indolent youth, promoting another cycle of re-radicalization or spread of radical beliefs.
- ▶ Renewed trauma or psychological misery of civilians having to live with celebrated criminals/killers.
- ▶ Repented and reintegrated terrorists may create religious tension since they still uphold BH's Islamist ideology.
- ▶ Forceful co-existence may create social tension, division, and displacement of civilians.

The Implications of Reintegration

- ▶ Former fighters may return to violence due to stigma, isolation, and segregated livelihoods.
- ▶ A failed process may expand extremist networks
- ▶ Reintegration of BH terrorists may be seen as a reward for crime.
- ▶ reintegration undermines justice and the rule of law.
- ▶ If well organized, monitored, and managed, reintegrated terrorists can be agents of peace and development in terms of intelligence-gathering.
- ▶ A fully/well reintegrated ex-terrorists (trained in vocational skill) can contribute to the local economy.

Recommendations

- ▶ Reintegration should be inclusive. Victim-Centered framework with restorative justice mechanisms and reparations for civilians before and during reintegration.
- ▶ Local communities should be adequately consulted in the whole process to build trust and encourage local ownership of reintegration.
- ▶ Designated agencies should strictly monitor, assess, and support both victims and former fighters.
- ▶ Development projects should be encompassing to address different parties including IDPs, victims/communities, and ex-terrorists.
- ▶ On military actions: the borders of concerned states should be thoroughly militarised.
- ▶ Declare war on terrorism.

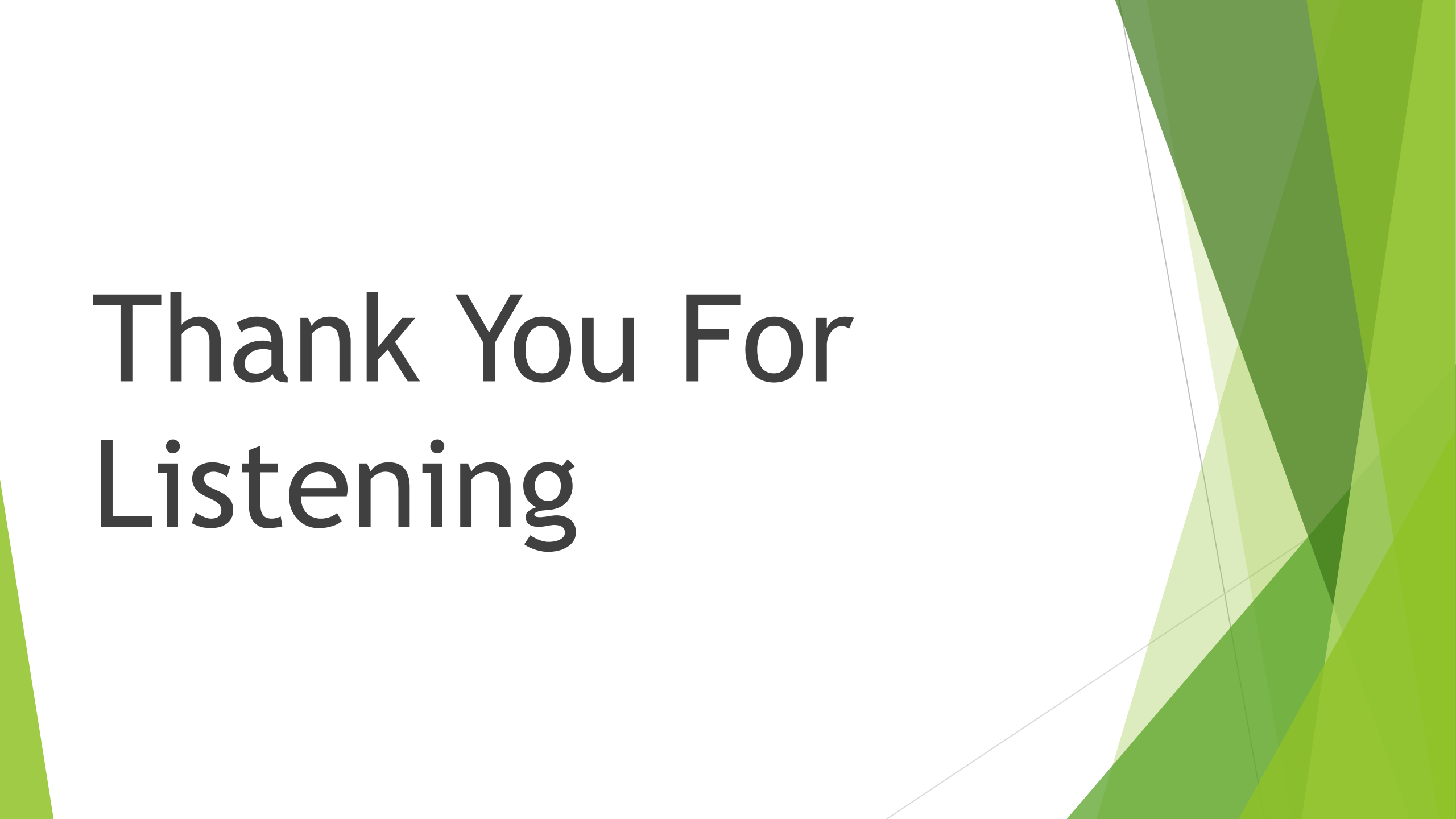
Conclusion

- ▶ Despite the “Operation Safe Corridor” policy, Boko Haram remains a serious security threat in northern Nigeria and the country as a whole.
- ▶ The reintegration of repentant terrorists has not significantly reduced the number of attacks and killings in north east Nigeria.
- ▶ Ex-terrorists escape punishment, re-join terrorist groups and act as spies
- ▶ A holistic reintegration requires a form of community/transitional justice, transparent legal frameworks, survivor-centered healing, and rigorous monitoring rather than blanket amnesty.
- ▶ The fight against BH is on-going and this, in a way, makes the operation safe corridor or reintegration policy problematic.
- ▶ Defeating terrorism should not be replaced with reintegration

Conclusion

- ▶ While rehabilitation or reintegration is important in post-conflict context, justice should precede forgiveness.
- ▶ Reintegration of BH terrorists without accountability is not only premature but dangerous.
- ▶ Prosecuting those responsible for atrocities and supporting the true victims of terrorism should not be ignored.

Thank You For
Listening

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