

Improving Community Acceptance of Returnees from Boko Haram in Nigeria: What Role Do Trusted Authorities Play?



How can communities be encouraged to accept former members of violent extremist groups who demobilize from conflict and begin the process of reintegration? Working in communities affected by Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria, researchers examined whether messages from religious leaders—widely trusted in the region—could influence attitudes and intended behaviors, as well as shift perceived social norms, related to community support for the reintegration of former Boko Haram members. The study found that the messages from these leaders increased people’s support for reintegration and willingness to interact with the ex-fighter in social, political, and economic life, and made people perceive that others in their community were more supportive of reintegration. The study suggests that trusted authorities can be effective messengers for promoting peace.

Policy Issue

The reintegration of former members of violent extremist groups is an issue of growing policy concern. There are many barriers to reintegration, among them the anger community members feel toward former members, and the fear that former members still maintain ties and ideological allegiances to the groups. In many conflict and post-conflict settings, policymakers are faced with the question of how to reintegrate former combatants and others associated with armed groups back into their communities.

In some places, especially after intensive reintegration campaigns, fighters are welcomed home,¹ while in others, communities remain understandably unwilling to accept fighters returning from violent extremist groups. If former members are rejected when they try to return to civilian life, they are left with few options and may return to violence.² More immediately, current armed group members who are aware that communities are not accepting of returnees may decide to stay in the group — even if they would otherwise prefer to leave.

There is a growing body of literature that suggests that cues from elites, moral authorities, and group leaders and messages from these trusted authorities can be effective in both changing people’s attitudes and shifting social norms. Specifically, people often form beliefs and make decisions based

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on cues from their leaders,³ with leaders' words and actions serving as signals of social norms. Group members also may assume that others in their community will observe and be influenced by their leaders' messages or actions, which in turn can shift people's own attitudes and behaviors.⁴

This study aimed to shed light on the extent to whether messaging interventions from trusted authorities can be applied to the difficult problem of improving attitudes and intentions toward accepting former violent extremists back into the community.

Evaluation Context

Community acceptance of former Boko Haram members is a pressing policy concern in northeastern Nigeria. Thousands of fighters are being detained by the government before being allowed to return. Additionally, thousands more women and children, who were not directly involved in the violence but played other roles within Boko Haram (e.g. cooks, cleaners, etc.), are trying to return. Yet many communities remain understandably unwilling to accept returning members even after they complete rehabilitation programs. Barriers to acceptance include memories of large-scale campaigns of violence against civilians, an indoctrination and radicalization process that communities fear has irrevocably changed members.

This study sought to identify whether trusted leaders can influence attitudes and intended behaviors, as well as shift perceived social norms, related to community support for the reintegration of former Boko Haram members. The research team previously conducted qualitative interviews and focus groups to identify salient authority figures within the communities, which revealed that community members have a high level of trust towards religious leaders. Moreover, at the time of the study, many religious leaders participated in efforts to prepare communities for reintegration by including messages about the importance of forgiveness in their sermons and on radio programs.

Details of the Intervention

Researchers evaluated the impact of audio messages from religious leaders that highlighted religious tenets of forgiveness. Participants were randomly assigned to listen to either a placebo radio message or a message from a trusted religious leader. The research team partnered with a senior Islamic sheikh to collaboratively develop a message on reintegration. (For the small sub-sample of respondents who were Christian (6 percent), they also recorded a message by the Catholic Bishop of Borno State.)

The sheikh recorded the message in his own voice, in the two predominant languages of the area, Kanuri and Hausa. The message conveyed three key elements: emphasizing the importance of forgiveness in religious texts; announcing that the religious leader would forgive repentant former Boko Haram members; and calling on followers to forgive as well. The placebo comparison message was about hygiene practices and unrelated to Boko Haram and was not delivered by a religious leader.

After listening to the message, participants completed a distraction task. They were then given a short vignette about a hypothetical ex-Boko Haram fighter. Characteristics of the ex-fighter's profile were randomly assigned, such as his age, length of time in Boko Haram, and whether he is described as repentant, to ensure that any responses were not dependent on the particular characteristics of the

hypothetical ex-fighter.

Participants were then asked to respond to questions that measured personal attitudes towards the hypothetical ex-fighter, intended behaviors (such as whether they would trade with him), and perceptions of social norms about the willingness of their neighbors, community leader, and local imam or pastor to accept the ex-fighter back into the community.

Results and Policy Lessons

The study's findings suggest that trusted authorities can be effective messengers for promoting peace. Researchers found that the religious leader message significantly increased people's support for reintegration and willingness to interact with the ex-fighter in social, political, and economic life (8 to 10 percentage points). The message also made people believe that others in their community were more supportive of reintegration (6 to 10 percentage points). The religious leaders' message also shifted attitudes, intended behaviors, and perception of community norms toward two additional hypothetical Boko Haram members: a man and a woman described as being abducted into the group.⁵

These results suggest a scalable solution to difficult problems faced by communities during and after violent conflict: elevating the voices of leaders who promote tolerance and reconciliation. Their messages can reach tens of thousands or more through low-cost radio programs, in-person speeches, and social media. Indeed, the case of reintegration of former Boko Haram members is a case-in-point: religious leaders have, since our study began, widely shared messages of forgiveness and encouraged acceptance. Recent data published by United Nations University's Management Exits from Armed Conflict project collected in Maiduguri suggest attitudes and intended behaviors in the region are warming to forgiving repentant former fighters and allowing them to come home.

To read more, see the published data set [here](#).

Sources

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5. The main analyses exclude the small number of Christian respondents (n = 90), who were randomized separately and whose treatment differed from the Muslims in the study (they received a message on reintegration from a Catholic bishop). Results do not change with their inclusion.

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