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Impunity or Progress? A Critical Discussion on Boko Haram Deradicalization and Justice in Northeast Nigeria

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Deradicalization remains a contested concept in theory, practice, and public perception. This study critically examines competing narratives surrounding Boko Haram's deradicalization and reintegration efforts in Northeast Nigeria, focusing on Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC). Drawing on qualitative data from five interviews and a focus group discussion, it assesses whether OPSC advances peacebuilding or entrenches impunity. Findings indicate a pronounced trust deficit between affected communities and the state, with victims perceiving OPSC as prioritizing perpetrators over those harmed, in tension with transitional justice principles. Although ex-combatants describe disengagement as genuine rejection of violence, persistent stigma underscores the limits of reintegration absent community reconciliation. Situated within restorative-retributive justice debates, the article argues that deradicalization risks reinforcing perceptions of state bias unless victim-centered, accountable, and community-led approaches are embedded.

Keywords Boko Haram, deradicalization, Operation Safe Corridor, radicalization, restorative justice, recidivism

Introduction

Boko Haram has become almost synonymous with violence and extremism in northern Nigeria, particularly in the northeastern region. Over the past two decades, the activities of this extremist group have severely disrupted security, resulting in the loss of thousands of lives and the destruction of property worth millions of dollars. The scale of the crisis has necessitated various governmental interventions, which have evolved over time. These interventions have ranged from local government efforts to state-level actions and federal involvement. Approaches have included military operations, social programs, economic interventions, and the establishment of internally displaced persons (IDP) camps

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to accommodate victims of Boko Haram's violence.

In addressing Boko Haram directly, the Nigerian government has encountered unique challenges, including identifying militants and dealing with the young age of some fighters. Over the years, solutions have generally fallen into three categories: extermination, imprisonment, and deradicalization. Extermination refers to military actions in which soldiers kill militants in combat zones. Imprisonment involves capturing, trying, and incarcerating militants for extended periods. However, the capacity of prisons and the legal system has been overwhelmed by the scale of Boko Haram's insurgency, leading to an increasing reliance on deradicalization programs. The efficacy, justice and morality of these programs, however, have been questioned (Adam 2020; Obiezu 2023).

In Nigeria's Northeast, Boko Haram combatants are processed through Operation Safe Corridor, a high-profile deradicalization initiative. While not the first such program in the country, it has attracted significant public attention and, like its predecessors, considerable backlash. Its mixed reception highlights a deeper, unresolved challenge: persistent questions surrounding the effectiveness of deradicalization efforts and their legitimacy in the eyes of society. de Montclos (2018) observes that discussions about the release of incarcerated ex-combatants into society raises complex and difficult questions: where will they go, who will monitor them, can they be prevented from returning to terrorism while in prison, and can the public tolerate any level of reoffending? (Horgan and Braddock 2010; Webber et al. 2017). Beyond the security concerns about changing terrorist behavior, there is also the added layer of resentment and feelings of injustice among victims, even when such issues are merely raised for discussion (Pettinger 2017).

While these concerns remain, in recent years an increasing number of states have begun to consider, either implicitly or explicitly, that their national security interests might benefit from exploring ways to facilitate and manage the reintegration of convicted ex-combatants into society (de Montclos 2018). This viewpoint is often expressed through efforts to modify terrorist behavior, primarily by "rehabilitating" or "deradicalizing" those detained for their involvement in terrorist activities. In some cases, these efforts have materialized as comprehensive behavior change programs, complete with formal titles and specific terminology (Salihu 2021, 28). These programs vary in approach and carry context-specific expectations about what constitutes a successful outcome. Nevertheless, at the core of each program lies the belief that ex-combatants can be engaged in a manner that reduces the risk of them returning to terrorism upon their release (Altier, Boyle, and Horgan 2021).

Despite numerous studies on the deradicalization (Russell and Miller 1977; Wiegand 2009; Horgan, Meredith, and Papatheodorou 2020; Popal 2023), there is no consensus on how to define success in reforming a terrorist, let alone what constitutes reform in this context. There is also confusion about

whether rehabilitation necessarily equates to deradicalization (a term that lacks a clear conceptualization or definition) as opposed to other methods of eliciting behavioral change. Recent research (Raets 2024; Hall, Kenyon, and Carter 2025; Gkoutzioulis 2024) suggests that many who disengage or desist from terrorist activity might not necessarily undergo deradicalization as traditionally conceived (which involves a change in one's thinking or beliefs), and that such deradicalization might not be a prerequisite for ensuring a low risk of reoffending (Basra 2022; Sahar and Kaunert 2022). As a result, it has been exceedingly challenging to establish what is implied by or expected from programs claiming to deradicalize ex-combatants. Clubb et al. (2019) argue that none of these programs have formally identified valid and reliable indicators of successful deradicalization or disengagement, whether rooted in cultural, psychological, or other frameworks. Consequently, evaluating the effectiveness of these programs is riddled with conceptual and practical challenges. While officials associated with these initiatives regularly claim success, such assertions are typically based on vaguely defined low recidivism rates, making it difficult to determine not only whether a program is effective but also why it might be (Clubb et al. 2019; Islam 2019).

This study critically examines this problem within the specific context of the Nigeria and the terrorist group Boko Haram. It asks the core question: Does Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) represent a genuine advance in peacebuilding, or does it risk perpetuating impunity and reinforcing the social divisions that fuel violent extremism in Northeast Nigeria? Through the lens of social identity and conflict transformation theories, the article explores the historical context of deradicalization in Nigeria, its challenges, as well as its prospects as a strategy to address the growing challenges of insecurity within the country. While deradicalization operates across individual, group, and structural levels, this study focuses on the individual level because the core mechanism of OPSC, and the primary site of its perceived injustice, is the process of disengaging and reintegrating *individual* ex-combatants. Their personal narratives and the community's reception of them form the critical micro-foundations upon which the program's macro-level success or failure rests.

Literature Review: Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) and the Challenge of Legitimate Reintegration

The Global Landscape of DDR and Deradicalization

The concept of deradicalization has gained prominence as a key component of counter-terrorism strategies globally. Deradicalization programs aim to disengage individuals from extremist ideologies, preventing the perpetration of violence and fostering their rehabilitation into mainstream society. This

section critically examines the theoretical underpinnings, challenges, and ethical considerations associated with deradicalization, shedding light on its complexities and effectiveness. Abdullahi (2021) notes that deradicalization is rooted in the assumption that individuals drawn to extremist ideologies can be rehabilitated through targeted interventions. The underlying theories often draw from psychological, sociological, and criminological perspectives. Social learning theory posits that radicalization is a learned behavior, suggesting that exposure to extremist ideas can be countered through exposure to alternative narratives (Bjørgo and Ravndal 2019). Cognitive behavioral approaches focus on challenging and changing the cognitive distortions that underpin extremist beliefs, aiming to reshape individuals' thought patterns (Horgan, Meredith, and Papatheodorou 2020).

Kielsgard and Orina (2020), in their conceptual analysis, argue that despite the noble intentions behind deradicalization programs, they face formidable challenges that necessitate a nuanced evaluation. One of the primary challenges lies in accurately identifying individuals suitable for deradicalization. The heterogeneity of radicalized individuals, each with unique motivations and levels of commitment, complicates the task of developing one-size-fits-all interventions. Moreover, the covert nature of radicalization often makes it challenging to identify individuals until they engage in criminal activities. The efficacy of deradicalization programs is also a subject of scrutiny. Evaluating the success of these initiatives is inherently complex, as measuring changes in individuals' beliefs and attitudes is subjective and challenging to quantify (Altier, Boyle, and Horgan 2021).

Deradicalization efforts are further complicated by the evolving nature of extremist ideologies. Adaptable and resilient, extremist beliefs may mutate or re-emerge in different forms, making it difficult to predict and prevent recidivism (Borum and Rowe 2021). Additionally, the influence of online radicalization poses a significant challenge, as individuals may continue to engage with extremist content even after undergoing deradicalization programs. Deradicalization initiatives require a delicate balance between national security imperatives and respect for individuals' rights. Coercive or draconian measures, such as detention without trial or excessive surveillance, can undermine the ethical foundation of deradicalization programs. There is a risk that overly punitive measures may exacerbate grievances and reinforce a sense of injustice, potentially hindering the desired outcomes of rehabilitation (Pettinger 2017).

Furthermore, questions arise regarding the voluntariness of participation in deradicalization programs. In some cases, individuals may be compelled to undergo such initiatives under the threat of legal consequences, raising concerns about the effectiveness and ethical implications of interventions that lack genuine engagement (Basra 2022). Respecting individuals' autonomy and ensuring that deradicalization efforts are consensual are essential ethical considerations. Another ethical dilemma concerns the potential stigmatization

of certain communities. If deradicalization initiatives disproportionately target specific ethnic or religious groups, they can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and exacerbate social divisions (Abdullahi 2021). The ethical imperative lies in developing programs that are inclusive, culturally sensitive and that avoid reinforcing discriminatory narratives.

These challenges, as Webber and Kruglanski (2017) argue, stem from the fundamental reality that effective deradicalization cannot occur in isolation from the broader community. Community engagement is pivotal, as local communities often possess nuanced insights into the dynamics of radicalization and can play a crucial role in rehabilitation efforts.

DDR in Nigeria's Context: Operation Safe Corridor

To understand DDR in Nigeria, especially in the context of OPSC, it is critical to understand the origins and development of Boko Haram. Emerging in the early 2000s as a Salafist sect opposed to Western education and secular governance, the group capitalized on longstanding socioeconomic marginalization, state fragility, and ethno-religious tensions in Northeast Nigeria (Higazi 2015). Under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf and later Abubakar Shekau, it evolved from a localized Islamist movement into a violent transnational insurgent and terrorist organization, formally pledging allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015 (de Montclos 2016; Zenn 2020). This transformation was not merely ideological but deeply embedded in a political economy of conflict, where recruitment often blurred the lines between voluntary extremism, economic coercion, and outright abduction, particularly affecting youth, women, and children (Matfess 2017). Consequently, the Nigerian state's deradicalization efforts, particularly OPSC, must contend with a profoundly heterogeneous population of ex-associates, including ideologically committed fighters, economically coerced recruits, and abducted civilians within a landscape of pervasive communal trauma and institutional distrust. The program's failure to adequately dissect this complex historicity and the divergent motivations of its participants risks treating deradicalization as a technical, depoliticized process rather than a transformative one that must engage with the very socio-political conditions that fueled the insurgency.

This complex lineage and composition of Boko Haram directly shaped the creation and implementation challenges of OPSC. Established in 2016, the program was a strategic response by the Nigerian government to the growing impracticality of purely military and judicial solutions to an insurgency involving thousands of fighters and associates with varying levels of culpability (Ugwueze and Onuoha 2020). OPSC's design, focusing on deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration for so-called "low-risk" defectors, implicitly acknowledged the mixed nature of the group's membership. Its implementation, however, has been fraught with the difficulties inherent in its origins. The program's centralized,

security-heavy model, administered primarily through the military, has struggled to adapt to the nuanced local realities and deep-seated grievances from which Boko Haram emerged (Ogunnubi and Aja 2022). Furthermore, by offering a pathway to defection without a parallel, robust framework for victim justice and community reparations, OPSC has been perceived as a top-down imposition that overlooks the very community-level grievances and traumas that are central to the conflict's history. Thus, the program's operational shortcomings cannot be divorced from its foundational challenge: implementing a standardized deradicalization template on a conflict landscape defined by historical complexity, moral ambiguity, and unresolved social wounds.

OPSC was launched in 2016 by the Nigerian government as a deradicalization, rehabilitation, and reintegration program aimed at Boko Haram defectors. The initiative is designed to provide a safe pathway for low-risk insurgents to defect from Boko Haram, focusing on helping them reintegrate into society rather than relying solely on military action to quell the insurgency (Adam 2020). Although well-intentioned, OPSC has garnered both praise and criticism since its inception, and its effectiveness has been a matter of ongoing debate.

One of the key successes of OPSC has been its ability to provide a viable exit route for Boko Haram defectors. As of 2021, over eight hundred defectors had completed the program, with many expressing gratitude for the psychosocial support, literacy classes, and vocational training they received (Hassan and Routley 2022). The program operates in a repurposed facility in Gombe State, where participants spend six months undergoing rehabilitation. OPSC has also played a role in demystifying Boko Haram's extremist ideology by exposing participants to alternative political and religious visions. Many defectors cited the dangerous conditions within Boko Haram, rivalries among fighters, and their families' well-being as reasons for leaving the group. By providing defectors with the knowledge that they would not face execution upon surrender, OPSC has successfully facilitated the disengagement of militants from the conflict (Ogunnubi and Aja 2022).

Owonikoko (2022), through rigorous field work, pieced together the OPSC process of deradicalization. He found that upon apprehension, these individuals are taken to Giwa Barracks, where they undergo a process of screening, profiling, documentation, and classification aimed at determining their level of risk and involvement in insurgent activities. Based on this assessment, the individuals are categorized as either high-risk or low-risk ex-combatants. High-risk individuals are arraigned and prosecuted in court for terrorism-related offences, and, if convicted, they serve custodial sentences. Following the completion of their jail terms, or in cases where they are discharged and acquitted, these individuals may still be processed for participation in post-release reintegration initiatives. In contrast, low-risk ex-combatants bypass the judicial process and are referred directly to OPSC for DDR. This framework reflects a bifurcated approach to

dealing with former insurgents, one that seeks to balance punitive measures for those deemed most culpable with rehabilitation efforts for those assessed as posing minimal threat (ibid.). Although not officially reported, this structure suggests that the program accounts for the different categories of ex-militants and seeks to adequately handle them accordingly.

The Critical Gap: Justice, Identity, and Community Legitimacy

Despite some of its successes, OPSC has faced significant criticisms related to its implementation, community acceptance, and long-term sustainability. One of the most glaring issues is the distrust many Nigerian communities feel toward the program because it is perceived to reward ex-Boko Haram members with support and rehabilitation while neglecting justice and reparations for victims (Obiezu 2023). From the start, there were protests and suspicions regarding OPSC, with some accusing the government of attempting to reward former jihadists. This suspicion is partly rooted in the fact that many Nigerians, particularly those in conflict-affected areas, have suffered immensely at the hands of Boko Haram and are understandably wary of welcoming back individuals who may have perpetrated violence against them (Nnam et al. 2020).

Community acceptance remains a significant hurdle. Many OPSC graduates struggle with stigmatization upon reintegration into society. Local communities, particularly in Northeast Nigeria, often refuse to fully embrace former Boko Haram fighters, making reintegration difficult. In a survey of social media sentiments, Ugwueze, Ngwu, and Onuoha (2022) found that an overwhelming number of individuals did not believe that the country needed an agency dedicated to rehabilitating ex-Boko Haram combatants. This online survey conducted on Facebook and Twitter measured Nigerians' perceptions of OPSC, and the majority of respondents expressed opposition to such an agency. On Facebook, 14,076 respondents voted "NO," far outweighing the 1,224 who voted "YES," while on Twitter, 5,481 voted "NO" compared to 483 who voted "YES" (ibid.). The pattern indicates a strong public sentiment against the rehabilitation of Boko Haram members through a dedicated agency, with social media feedback showing the most pronounced rejection. This overwhelming resistance suggests deep-seated distrust and disapproval of state-led reintegration initiatives for former insurgents (ibid.). This challenge is exacerbated by a lack of effective communication and outreach between the government, communities, and OPSC graduates, hindering the broader societal acceptance that is crucial for long-term success. In Owonikoko's (2022) study, he found that community members also had negative connotations regarding the program and did not perceive it as being fair.

Another major criticism is the program's lack of transparency and clear selection criteria for participants. The designation of "low-risk" insurgents has been questioned, with some suggesting that the program may inadvertently allow individuals who committed serious crimes to avoid prosecution. This issue

further undermines the trust of affected communities and contributes to the perception that the government is being too lenient on former militants.

Additionally, OPSC has been criticized for its limited focus on women and children, who represent a significant proportion of Boko Haram's victims and recruits. Many women have been coerced into joining Boko Haram and have played diverse roles within the group. The program, however, does not adequately address the unique needs of women and children in the deradicalization and reintegration process, potentially leaving a substantial portion of former members without the necessary support for successful reintegration (Hassan 2022).

Operational and institutional challenges further complicate OPSC's implementation. The program is heavily reliant on the Nigerian military, which runs the rehabilitation camp in Mallam Sidi (Ogunnubi and Aja 2022). While the military's involvement is crucial for security, it has also led to an overmilitarization of the deradicalization process. This focus on security has at times overshadowed the psychological and social dimensions of rehabilitation, which are essential for successful reintegration. Moreover, the involvement of the military raises concerns about the program's perceived legitimacy among civilians, who may view it as part of the same force responsible for violence and human rights abuses in their communities (ibid.).

Funding and resource limitations have also impeded the scalability of OPSC. As of 2021, only about eight hundred individuals had been processed through the program, a fraction of the estimated 8,000 to 12,000 Boko Haram fighters in Nigeria. Without increased funding and expanded facilities, OPSC will struggle to make a significant dent in the overall insurgency, especially as Boko Haram factions continue to recruit new fighters (ibid.).

The long-term sustainability of OPSC is uncertain. While the program has achieved some success in rehabilitating former fighters, its impact on reducing Boko Haram's overall strength is limited. The insurgency remains active, with its factions continuing to carry out attacks across northeastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin (defined by the area of land that drains into Lake Chad, spanning parts of Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Algeria, and Libya). Furthermore, the reintegration of OPSC graduates into society is hampered by ongoing violence in the region, which makes it difficult for defectors to return to their communities or find meaningful employment.

While the global literature on DDR highlights recurring challenges in legitimacy, recidivism, and community acceptance, Nigeria's OPSC presents a critical case where these issues converge with acute intensity. The program's implementation in a context marked by deep-seated communal trauma, state-community distrust, and unresolved victim grievances amplifies the inherent tensions between security-centered deradicalization and justice-centered reconciliation. Although existing studies have documented operational shortcomings and public skepticism toward OPSC, few have systematically examined how the

program's design and perception affect intergroup relations and social cohesion through a theoretical lens. Moreover, there remains a scarcity of qualitative, multi-perspective research that centers the voices of ex-combatants, security actors, and affected communities in a single analytical frame. This study seeks to fill that gap by critically interrogating whether OPSC advances post-conflict healing or entrenches cycles of impunity, using social identity theory to explore how state-led reintegration shapes and is shaped by the contested identities and justice narratives in Northeast Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework: Social Identity Theory and the Problem of Post-conflict Reintegration

To analytically frame the contested dynamics of Nigeria's deradicalization program, this study employs social identity theory (SIT) as its primary theoretical lens. SIT provides a powerful explanatory tool for understanding how group memberships, perceived injustices, and intergroup hierarchies shape the success or failure of reintegration efforts in post-conflict settings. While conflict transformation theory offers complementary insights into changing conflict structures, SIT is uniquely positioned to unpack the micro-sociological and psychological barriers to reconciliation observed in Northeast Nigeria—specifically, the entrenched trust deficit and the perception that OPSC reinforces, rather than dissolves, destructive group boundaries.

Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, SIT posits that individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups (Tajfel and Turner 2004). This process involves social categorization (dividing the social world into "in-groups" and "out-groups"), social identification (adopting the identity, norms, and values of the in-group), social comparison (evaluating the in-group positively relative to out-groups to enhance self-esteem). In conflict zones, these processes become rigid and polarized. Groups such as victims, perpetrators, communities, and the state are cast in oppositional terms. When these categories are linked to unequal access to resources, justice, or security, intergroup competition and hostility are exacerbated (Scheepers and Ellemers 2019).

Globally, DDR and deradicalization programs aim not only to promote individual behavioral change but also to transform group identities. Successful reintegration requires the gradual dissolution of the ex-combatant's out-group status and their assimilation into a shared, peaceful community identity—that is, a new, inclusive in-group. As scholars note, however, this process often fails when programs are perceived as privileging one group over another, thereby reinforcing existing social comparisons and grievances (Kaplan and Nussio 2018).

SIT helps explain why technical, top-down DDR programs can backfire. If

ex-combatants are seen as receiving material benefits that victims are denied, the state is effectively recategorizing them into a *state-favored* in-group. This perceived re-ranking of group status, in which perpetrators are elevated above victims, violates principles of distributive and retributive justice, leading to what Galtung (1969, 171) termed "structural violence." The resulting resentment fuels further intergroup discord, undermining the very social cohesion that peacebuilding seeks to create (Autesserre 2021).

This study uses SIT as an analytical framework to interrogate the Nigerian case by asking the following questions:

- How does OPSC influence social categorization? Does the "repentant" label create a new, stigmatized out-group, or does it facilitate a pathway to a shared "citizen" identity?
- How do perceived distributions of resources and justice affect social comparison? Do community members view OPSC benefits as an unfair reward that elevates ex-combatants' status, thereby deepening the victim identity and grievances of community members?
- How do state actions shape intergroup relations? Does the program's opacity and alleged impunity reinforce a meta-conflict between the state and beneficiaries, on one side, and neglected communities and victims, on the other?

By anchoring the analysis in these questions, SIT moves the inquiry beyond a simple evaluation of program logistics to a deeper examination of the identity-based conflict dynamics that OPSC inadvertently sustains. The theory guides our interpretation of key findings such as community resistance, perceptions of impunity, and conditional reintegration, framing them not merely as operational failures but as symptoms of a flawed approach to post-conflict social identity management.

Methods

This study adopts an interpretivist perspective, reflecting a desire to garner community perspectives on the subject matter. Adopting an interpretivist approach implies that the researchers' role is not only to collect data but also to engage with participants in a way that uncovers the deeper meanings behind their responses. The study relies on qualitative methods such as interviews and observations, which are well-suited to capturing the subjective realities of participants (Alharahsheh and Pius 2020).

To maximize the breadth of knowledge and perspectives on the subject matter, three categories of respondents were interviewed. The first category comprised ex-Boko Haram members, of whom three individuals who had gone through the OPSC process were interviewed. Second, two members of the armed

forces stationed in the Northeast were interviewed. From the third category of respondents, three community members in Maiduguri, Borno state, participated in a focus group discussion (FGD).

This study employs a qualitative approach to capture the nuanced, lived experiences and perceptions that quantitative surveys or statistical inference alone cannot reveal. While large-N studies excel at identifying broad patterns, the complex issues of trust, impunity, and social reintegration at the heart of OPSC's legitimacy crisis are fundamentally relational and interpretive. In-depth interviews and FDG allow us to probe the *why* behind the *what*, to understand how community resentment is articulated, how ex-combatants navigate stigma, and how security personnel rationalize program shortcomings.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between July 10 and July 13, 2025, in person across Maiduguri, Borno State, and Gombe, Gombe State. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes, conducted in private settings chosen by participants to ensure comfort and confidentiality, with all sessions audio-recorded following explicit consent. To protect participant identities, pseudonyms were systematically assigned using a coding framework. The codes are used throughout the discussion to refer to participants (see Table 1): ex-Boko Haram combatants who had undergone deradicalization through Operation Safe Corridor were coded as BH1, BH2, and BH3; Armed Forces of Nigeria personnel were coded as AF1 and AF2; and community members participated in a single FDG coded as FGD, comprising eight participants drawn from neighborhoods where deradicalized individuals had been reintegrated. The full citations for each participant are as follows: BH1 (Boko Haram ex-combatant, personal communication, Maiduguri, July 10, 2025); BH2 (Boko Haram ex-combatant, personal communication, Maiduguri, July 10, 2025); BH3 (Boko Haram ex-combatant, personal communication, Maiduguri, July 11, 2025); AF1 (Armed Forces of Nigeria personnel, personal communication, Gombe, July 12, 2025); AF2 (Armed Forces of Nigeria personnel, personal communication, Gombe, July 12, 2025); and FGD (FDG with eight community members, personal communication, Maiduguri, July 13, 2025).

This methodological choice generates the contextual depth necessary to analyze the social processes and identity dynamics theorized by SIT, thereby complementing the existing quantitative literature with rich, explanatory insights into the program's on-the-ground realities.

Participant Profiles and Positions

To ensure the credibility and depth of perspectives, interviewees were selected based on their direct involvement with or experience of the OPSC program. The sample included three low-risk former ex-Boko Haram combatants (BH1, BH2, and BH3) who had voluntarily surrendered, completed the six-month OPSC rehabilitation program in Gombe State, and been reintegrated into their

Table 1. Interview Participants and Questions Asked

Interviewee	Code	Questions Asked
Ex-Boko Haram Combatants	BH1 BH2 BH3	1) Can you describe your experience during the deradicalization program, and how it has impacted your life? 2) What motivated you to participate in the deradicalization process, and what was the most challenging part for you? 3) How has the reintegration into society been for you since completing the deradicalization program? 4) What kind of support (social, financial, emotional) have you received since being reintegrated into the community? 5) From your perspective, what could be improved in the deradicalization program to better support people like yourself?
Community Members	FGD	1) How would you describe the level of trust among community members since the reintegration of former Boko Haram members? Have you noticed any changes in relationships or social dynamics? 2) Do you believe that certain groups within the community feel discriminated against, particularly with the reintegration of ex-combatants? If so, how does this affect the overall social cohesion? 3) How effective do you think local law enforcement has been in maintaining security since the reintegration of ex-Boko Haram members? Are there any areas where you feel law enforcement could improve? 4) In your opinion, to what extent does corruption in local governance affect the success of the reintegration process? Do you think local authorities are trustworthy and transparent in their actions related to security? 5) How safe do you personally feel in your community since the introduction of deradicalization programs? Have there been any noticeable changes in the level of physical security? 6) Have you observed any changes in the occurrence of violent crime in your community since former Boko Haram members were reintegrated? If so, what types of crime are most prevalent? 7) Are there still any concerns about the presence or activities of armed groups or militias in your community? How does this affect the reintegration of ex-combatants? 8) How easy is it for victims of violence in your community to access legal recourse? Do you think perpetrators of violence, including former Boko Haram members, are held accountable for their actions, or is there a sense of impunity?
Armed Forces Personnel	AF1 AF2	1) What role do you play in supporting the disarmament and reintegration of former Boko Haram members through the deradicalization program? 2) How do you balance security concerns with the need to reintegrate ex-combatants into society? 3) What challenges do you encounter when working with deradicalized individuals, and how do you address these challenges? 4) How effective do you think the deradicalization programs are at reducing the threat of recidivism or returning to violence? 5) How do you collaborate with OPSC personnel and local communities to ensure a successful reintegration process for ex-combatants?

Source: Authors.

communities for at least one year prior to the interviews. The sample also included two armed forces personnel (AF1 and AF2). AF1 was a senior officer stationed in Maiduguri with direct operational oversight of OPSC security and coordination between military and civilian components. AF2 was a field intelligence officer involved in the initial screening, profiling, and risk assessment of surrendered insurgents prior to their admission into OPSC. Both personnel had been engaged with OPSC for over two years, providing insider perspectives on its implementation, challenges, and internal evaluations. In addition, a FDG was conducted with three community leaders from Maiduguri, Borno state—a religious leader, a women's association representative, and a youth leader—each of whom had firsthand experience with the reintegration of ex-combatants in their localities.

Data Analysis Process

All interviews and the FDG were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The process followed five steps. First, familiarization involved repeated reading of the transcripts to gain an immersive understanding of the data. Second, initial coding entailed line-by-line coding to identify meaningful units related to perceptions of justice, security, trust, and program efficacy. Third, theme development involved grouping codes into preliminary themes (distrust, impunity, recidivism) and refining them through iterative comparison. Fourth, themes were reviewed and refined against the dataset to ensure consistency and relevance, resulting in the five final analytical themes presented in the findings. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the research question and theoretical framework (SIT) to generate coherent conclusions.

Findings and Results

Five themes emerged from the inductive coding and sentiment analysis on the data collected, as outlined in Table 2.

Theme 1: Trust Deficit and Community Resistance

The deep-seated distrust between local communities and reintegrated ex-Boko Haram members represents one of the most significant barriers to successful deradicalization in Northeast Nigeria. This resistance stems from a complex interplay of historical grievances, perceived injustice, and institutional failures that have left communities feeling betrayed by the government's approach.

At the heart of this distrust lies the painful reality of unaddressed atrocities. Community members express outrage at what they see as a lopsided system that prioritizes perpetrators over victims. "They killed our people," one FGD

Table 2. Coding and Theme Generation

Sample Occurrence in Interviews	Initial Code	Refined Code	Sub-theme	Theme
"They killed our people… now govt gives them money" (FGD)	Victim resentment	Perceived perpetrator rewards	Community grievances	Trust Deficit
"Discrimination/stigma still shown" (BH1)	Social rejection	Ostracization	Social reintegration barriers	
"People observe their movements" (FGD)	Surveillance	Conditional acceptance		
"They feel above the law" (FGD)	Lack of consequences	Accountability avoidance	Justice system failures	Accountability Gaps
"DDR should follow prosecution" (AF1)	Military critique	Prosecution first approach	DDR sequencing debate	
"Some still pick up arms" (AF1)	Return to violence	Recidivism patterns	Program effectiveness	Security Concerns
"Kidnappings linked to repentants" (FGD)	Community suspicions	Informant networks	Security threats	
"How do you vet ex-combatants?" (AF2)	Screening doubts	Risk assessment flaws	Program credibility	
"No budget line for OPSC" (AF2)	Financial opacity	Corruption risks	Governance failures	Institutional Failures
"IDPs live in squalor" (AF2)	Victim neglect	Resource imbalance	Priority contradictions	
"We get advice but no capital" (BH1)	Broken promises	Economic instability	Reintegration fragility	Conditional Success
"Borno Model improved trust" (FGD)	Local adaptation	Community engagement	Model effectiveness	

Source: Authors.

participant lamented, "and now the government has forgiven them, giving them money, capital, and arms, while those that they killed their relatives, the government did nothing for them." This sentiment is widespread, with many noting the bitter irony that, in the words of another FGD participant, "the same people that killed your parents now move around the community eating with you." The government's focus on reintegrating former combatants without parallel efforts to support victims has created a dangerous perception that violence is being rewarded rather than punished.

Social stigma and ostracization further complicate reintegration efforts. Even when ex-combatants are technically accepted back into communities, they

often face silent but powerful rejection. "Some [community members] show hatred, some show resentment… There's a need for a change in the mindset of the public, because discrimination and stigma are still shown," observed BH1, a former combatant (BH1, interview, Maiduguri, Nigeria, July 11, 2025). This discrimination manifests in very practical ways, particularly regarding marriage prospects, which community members cite as a particularly sensitive issue. The FGD revealed that while some ex-combatants, like BH2, claim "we were well accepted" (BH2), the reality appears more nuanced, as community members admit that many "observe their movements" and remain deeply uncomfortable with their presence (FGD).

A critical dimension of this trust deficit is the widespread mistrust of government deradicalization programs themselves. OPSC faces particular skepticism due to its opaque operations. "The program is so closed that CSOs (Chief Security Officers) have little information…. There's no budget line to track spending," noted AF1, highlighting the transparency issues that fuel community suspicions. This lack of openness breeds conspiracy theories, with many locals convinced that ex-combatants receive special treatment at their expense. "Local security forces are demoralized…. They see repentants prioritized," explained one FGD participant, capturing the resentment felt by those who believe they have borne the brunt of the violence only to watch perpetrators receive government support.

The Borno Model offers a glimmer of hope, demonstrating how localized, transparent approaches can begin to rebuild trust. Unlike the national OPSC program, this state-led initiative involves community leaders in the reintegration process. "Governor Zulum (governor of Borno state) speaks directly to communities in their language…. This built trust, leading to more surrenders," noted an FGD participant. However, even this model faces significant challenges, as evidenced by the opposition from some political elites, including a Borno senator who, as one FGD participant explained, "persistently rejected repentant reintegration."

Ultimately, the trust crisis reflects a fundamental paradox in Nigeria's deradicalization efforts. While the government measures success by the number of surrendered combatants, communities judge it by their own sense of security and justice. "Why are they given starter packs when we lost everything?" asked one community member (FGD) capturing the resentment that undermines reintegration. Until programs address this imbalance, the cycle of distrust will persist. As one FGD participant poignantly noted, "Peace isn't paperwork, it's when my children stop fearing their neighbors." This simple but powerful statement encapsulates the human dimension of a crisis that no amount of bureaucratic programming can solve without genuine community reconciliation.

Theme 2: Accountability and Justice Gaps

The absence of meaningful accountability mechanisms for ex-Boko Haram

members has created a pervasive sense of impunity, highlighting a critical failure in transitional justice. Transitional justice refers to the set of judicial and non-judicial processes, including prosecutions, truth commissions, reparations, and institutional reform, that societies employ to address legacies of large-scale past abuse and facilitate a shift from conflict to peace. Nigeria's OPSC framework, however, conspicuously sidelines these mechanisms. Across the interviews, a clear pattern emerges: former combatants are reintegrated without facing formal truth-telling or victim restitution, while those harmed struggle to obtain redress. "They feel above the law," an FGD participant stated, capturing the frustration of communities that see ex-insurgents reintegrated while their own grievances go unaddressed within any recognized justice framework.

Military personnel involved in the program openly acknowledge this justice gap. AF2, an armed forces member, argued that "DDR should follow prosecution" and criticized the current approach, in which ex-combatants receive amnesty without trials. "I prefer you tried them, jailed them…. It's that sentence they are entitled to," he insisted, reflecting a belief that true reintegration cannot occur without accountability. His critique aligns with broader concerns that Nigeria's approach prioritizes short-term stability over long-term justice, creating a system in which, AF1 explained, "people who destroyed communities are prioritized above those they victimized."

While there are isolated examples of redress, these remain exceptions rather than the rule. AF1 described a case in which a community member's house, damaged by "repentant" insurgents, was eventually rebuilt after complaints reached authorities. However, such outcomes depend heavily on individual persistence and media intervention, rather than systematic justice mechanisms. "The government responded… the house was reconstructed, and he was asked to forgive them," AF2 noted, highlighting both the potential for resolution and its ad hoc nature. Most victims lack the resources or connections to achieve similar outcomes, leaving many feeling abandoned.

The interviews reveal a stark contrast between Nigeria's approach and more structured models of transitional justice. AF1 pointed to Egypt as an example where "insurgents were prosecuted first, then deradicalized in prison," which created a clearer link between accountability and rehabilitation. In Nigeria, however, the lack of transparent vetting processes further weakens confidence in the system. "How do you know who is a victim and who is a combatant?" AF1 asked, emphasizing the arbitrary nature of current classifications. Without clear criteria, communities suspect that dangerous individuals are being released under the guise of repentance.

This justice vacuum has real consequences for reconciliation. FGD participants reported that ex-combatants often "feel like they are above the law," emboldened by perceived government protection. Meanwhile, victims see little recourse, as local authorities frequently dismiss their complaints. "The govern-

ment doesn't take serious action…. They only take it slightly," lamented one community member, describing a pattern of official indifference that perpetuates cycles of grievance (FGD).

Theme 3: Security Concerns and Recidivism

The specter of recidivism and ongoing insecurity can be theorized as a symptom of a fundamental credible commitment problem in Nigeria's peacebuilding process. In post-conflict settings, this problem arises when former warring parties cannot trust the state or each other to uphold peace agreements and security guarantees, creating incentives to re-arm (Mmakwe 2022). The data reveal that communities and ex-combatants alike perceive the Nigerian state as unable to credibly commit to two essential promises: for communities, the guarantee that reintegrated individuals are permanently disarmed and non-threatening; for ex-combatants, the assurance of long-term safety and economic opportunity. AF2, a member of the military, reported that "some of them still end up going back," while community members, as reported in the FGD, suspect ex-combatants of being informants for new kidnappings. These fears are not merely operational failures but indicators of a broken security contract. The state's opaque vetting and weak post-release monitoring fail to provide the verifiable, enforceable assurances needed to overcome this mutual distrust, thereby perpetuating a cycle in which insecurity justifies resistance to reintegration, which in turn fuels further alienation and potential recidivism.

Communities live in constant fear of these relapses. FGD participants described how reintegrated ex-Boko Haram members are often suspected of serving as informants or active participants in ongoing attacks. "Kidnappings in our community…people suspect repentants are informants," shared one respondent, voicing a widespread belief that deradicalization camps have become recruiting grounds rather than rehabilitation centers (FGD). These concerns are not unfounded, as AF1 acknowledged cases in which graduates of OPSC later participated in the 2022 Kuje prison break, violently freeing detained insurgents. "If somebody is deradicalized, would that person want to break prison violently?" he questioned rhetorically, highlighting the program's failure to instill genuine ideological change.

The current vetting system, while theoretically separating high-risk from low-risk candidates, shows alarming flaws. AF1 explained that screening relies heavily on self-reporting: "Is it by my narrative? Is it by what I say?" This subjective approach allows dangerous individuals to slip through, especially since many ex-combatants were forcibly conscripted and may conceal their actual involvement in atrocities. "It's difficult to define whether they are victims or actually combatants," AF1 admitted, underscoring the challenges in accurate risk assessment.

Post-reintegration monitoring is equally weak. While the program includes an aftercare component where security agencies occasionally check on ex-

combatants, these efforts are sporadic and under-resourced. BH1, a former insurgent, warned that without consistent oversight, "Because some who left the bush, though they left, they still have dangerous ideologies. Our lives are in danger. Because some of us, people tried to kill them. They returned to the bush, and they were killed," implying that some individuals surrendered only because they were cornered, then later returned to the bush, where they were killed. His concern proved prescient; multiple interviewees noted cases where ex-combatants disappeared after reintegration, with some reportedly resurfacing in Zamfara's bandit groups, demonstrating how deradicalization failures spill over into other security crises (AF2).

The consequences are dire: communities grow increasingly hostile to reintegration, while security forces question the program's value. "OPSC has not really been very effective," concluded AF1, summarizing a military perspective that views many participants as unrepentant threats. Until Nigeria strengthens vetting, monitoring, and post-release support, recidivism will continue to poison relations between communities and ex-combatants, a cycle where every relapse validates fears and justifies further distrust. As one FGD participant starkly put it, "How can we believe in repentance when the 'reformed' keep killing us?"

Theme 4: Government and Institutional Failures

The deradicalization program in Northeast Nigeria is fundamentally undermined by systemic government failures that breed corruption, opacity, and exclusion of victims. As AF1, a security official directly involved in the process, revealed: "There's no budget line for OPSC…the program is so closed that CSOs have little information about what is going on." This lack of transparency creates fertile ground for mismanagement and erodes public trust in the entire initiative. Without clear financial tracking or accountability mechanisms, there is no way to verify whether funds are being properly utilized or siphoned off through corrupt practices.

This institutional failure is not isolated to OPSC but reflects broader patterns of governmental inefficiency in Northern Nigeria. These include the well-documented diversion of funds meant for IDP camps, the chronic under-equipment of the civilian police force, and the inability to restore basic services like health and education in liberated areas years after military operations. OPSC's lack of a transparent budget line exists within this wider ecosystem of resource mismanagement and accountability failure. Consequently, the program is perceived not as a singular anomaly, but as another manifestation of a state apparatus that is often inefficient, opaque, and unresponsive to its citizens' most acute needs, thereby compounding the legitimacy crisis at the heart of the reintegration challenge.

The consequences of these institutional failures are devastating for conflict victims. While ex-combatants receive government support, AF1 noted the painful

contrast that "internally displaced persons live in squalor"—a stark illustration of how the program prioritizes perpetrators over victims. This inequitable approach has generated deep resentment in communities, with FGD participants angrily questioning why "people who destroyed communities are prioritized above those they victimized." The absence of victim reparations or meaningful inclusion in the process reinforces perceptions that the government cares more about political expediency than justice.

Compounding these issues is the program's troubling lack of coordination and oversight. While AF1 mentioned that "about fourteen federal government agencies" participate in OPSC, he also admitted that "coordination with other agencies has been problematic." This bureaucratic fragmentation leads to inconsistent implementation and gaps in monitoring. Perhaps most damning is the way these institutional failures directly enable recidivism. Without proper budgeting for long-term monitoring or community reconciliation programs, the government essentially releases ex-combatants into environments where resentment runs high and support systems are absent. As AF1 warned, "The last end, which is also the most important end, that's the reintegration end…if it's not taken very properly, then recidivism cannot be avoided." This prediction has proven accurate, with multiple reports of program graduates returning to violence.

The solution lies in radical transparency and institutional reform. As one FGD participant demanded, "People need to know how much has been spent in reintegrating one ex-combatant." Establishing clear budget lines, independent oversight mechanisms, and meaningful victim inclusion would help restore legitimacy to a program currently viewed by many Nigerians as an exercise in rewarding violence rather than building sustainable peace.

Theme 5: Conditional Reintegration Success

The success of reintegration efforts for former Boko Haram members remains precarious and heavily dependent on the provision of sustained economic support. While some positive outcomes have been observed, particularly in the Borno Model approach, the overall implementation has been inconsistent, creating a fragile situation in which progress could easily unravel. As BH1, a former combatant, candidly admitted, "We are receiving help…sometimes we receive money and land. But not very much. We get just a little." This partial fulfillment of promises leaves ex-combatants in a vulnerable position, potentially driving some back to violence when support proves inadequate.

The Borno Model emerges as a relative success story in the interviews, demonstrating how localized, comprehensive approaches can yield better results. As one FGD participant noted, "The Borno Model improved trust through governor-led outreach." This state-level initiative, which emphasizes community engagement and visible leadership, appears to have made more headway in

building acceptance than the national OPSC program. However, even this model faces challenges, as BH1's complaint that "we get advice but no capital" reveals critical gaps in the economic empowerment component, which is essential for long-term stability.

The consequences of inconsistent support are severe for both ex-combatants and receiving communities. When promised vocational training or business start-up packages fail to materialize, as was frequently reported in the interviews, it breeds frustration among former fighters and confirms community suspicions about government insincerity. AF1 highlighted this dangerous dynamic: "At the point of receiving surrendered insurgents, a lot of promises are made…if at the end of the program, somebody has promised some incentives to start up life and then that person finishes and you're not able to provide that, all of that creates doubts." This broken-promise syndrome undermines the entire rehabilitation process.

Economic support alone, however, cannot guarantee successful reintegration. The interviews reveal that even when material assistance is provided, the social dimension remains problematic. BH1 acknowledged: "We still haven't fully entered into society…because of our religion, with differences in opinions." This lingering social distance suggests that economic programs must be paired with robust community reconciliation efforts to achieve lasting results. The FGD participants emphasized this point, noting that while the Borno Model has made progress, "trust still more remains to be done in terms of bridging the gap."

The way forward requires a dual approach: consistent, long-term economic support for ex-combatants coupled with parallel investments in affected communities. As the interviews demonstrate, current programs fall short on both counts. BH1's plea for "constant monitoring" and the FGD's observation about the Borno Model's relative success point to potential solutions, but these require proper funding and implementation. Without this comprehensive support system, as AF2 warned, Nigeria risks creating a generation of marginally rehabilitated former fighters who remain suspended between two worlds—neither fully reintegrated into society nor part of the insurgency, a dangerous limbo that could fuel future instability.

Discussion: Impunity or Progress? The Interrelated Architecture of Failure

The five themes identified are not isolated challenges but interconnected components of a systemic failure. At its core lies the credible commitment problem (Theme 3), which acts as a primary barrier. The state's inability to guarantee security and justice destroys the foundation for trust. This security deficit directly fuels the profound trust deficit within communities (Theme 1), as civilians, left unprotected and perceiving impunity, naturally resist reintegration. That

impunity, that is, the absence of transitional justice (Theme 2), is itself a product of governmental and institutional failures (Theme 4), such as opaque budgeting and a lack of coordination, which prevent the design and implementation of robust justice mechanisms. Finally, without trust, justice, or functional institutions, any reintegration success remains fragile and conditional (Theme 5), perpetually at risk of reversal. Thus, while all themes are critical, the credible commitment problem surrounding security and trust is foundational; it both exacerbates and is exacerbated by the others, creating a vicious cycle that OPSC's current design is powerless to break. This analysis aligns with peacebuilding scholarship, which posits that without solving this core commitment dilemma, other technical interventions are likely to falter.

Having considered the fundamental conceptual challenges of deradicalization, as well as the specific shortcomings of OPSC, one key question remains: can the effort being made be considered progress in addressing violent extremism, or does the injustice that has been observed in its application negate its application. This presents a paradox that is best understood through the lens of social identity theory, which explores how group identities shape intergroup dynamics. At its core, the program seems to aggravate rather than ease the divisions that drive violent extremism. SIT, as articulated by Tajfel and Turner (2004), argues that individuals attach significant value to their group affiliations, and when these affiliations are devalued or threatened, resentment and conflict are likely to follow. In the case of OPSC, communities frequently perceive that the state's support for ex-combatants via stipends, vocational schemes, and reintegration efforts eclipses the needs of victims, many of whom remain displaced and underserved. The sense of injustice is palpable, with participants in FGD discussions expressing outrage at the perceived reward system: "They killed our people, and now the government gives them money." Such reactions are not merely emotional; they reflect deep-seated social cleavages and a zero-sum understanding of state legitimacy and care.

Compounding this, the absence of formal accountability mechanisms (no prosecutions, no truth-telling processes, no reparations) reinforces the idea that former Boko Haram members are being absorbed into the state's in-group, while victims are further pushed to the margins. This aligns with SIT's contention that dominant groups maintain control by shaping narratives around justice and power. The label "repentant" for ex-combatants further entrenches this divide. It marks them, in the public eye, as distinct and suspect, as shown in testimonies like "Discrimination and stigma are still shown." Even where models such as the Borno approach attempt to rebuild trust through community engagement, their uneven implementation, particularly their inconsistent economic support, undermines efforts at identity redefinition. Without broad-based reclassification that unites victims and perpetrators under a shared post-conflict identity, reintegration efforts remain superficial.

Worse still, institutional opacity and reports of corruption, illustrated by statements like "No budget line for OPSC," (AF2) signal to already traumatized communities that the government is complicit in their continued marginalization. In effect, rather than facilitating reconciliation, OPSC reinforces historical grievances about elite favoritism and exclusion. Unless Nigeria's deradicalization framework incorporates mechanisms for truth, justice, and equitable resource allocation, it risks becoming yet another arm of state power that manages, rather than resolves, identity-based conflict. The resurgence of violence and organized banditry in the Northwest, often linked to recidivist ex-combatants, suggests that the warning signs SIT identifies are already manifesting.

The dynamics observed in Nigeria's deradicalization program align with broader critiques of post-conflict reintegration frameworks, particularly those failing to address identity-based grievances (Scheepers and Ellemers 2019). Owonikoko (2023), applying a SIT approach, elucidates why OPSC's exclusionary approach exacerbates intergroup tensions: by privileging ex-combatants over victims, the state reinforces a hierarchy of victimhood, which fuels collective resentment (Basra 2022). This mirrors findings in Colombia, where impunity for demobilized paramilitaries deepened societal divisions (Kaplan and Nussio 2018). Similarly, the program's opaque design reflects what Autesserre (2021) terms "ritualized peacebuilding," defined as performative compliance with DDR norms while ignoring local justice imperatives. Nigeria's failure to provide reparations, a key pillar of transitional justice (Mmakwe 2022) further entrenches the zero-sum resource competition that originally fueled Boko Haram's recruitment. These gaps suggest OPSC risks replicating what Galtung (1969) termed "structural violence," where institutionalized inequities perpetuate cyclical conflict.

Conclusion

The effort for deradicalization in Nigeria is currently at a precarious juncture. Despite being created to prevent violent extremism, Operation Safe Corridor has inadvertently strengthened the very divisions it intends to mend. The data depicts a system plagued by selective impunity, in which ex-combatants are prioritized over victims, opaque processes promote distrust, and half-hearted reintegration attempts fuel recidivism. As social identity theory reveals, Operation Safe Corridor promotes the conditions for cyclical violence by failing to destroy the perpetrator-victim hierarchy or foster shared social identities, thereby perpetuating the conditions that lead to cyclical violence.

Under the cover of counterterrorism, this is not development; rather, it is an institutional abuse of power. True deradicalization necessitates radical honesty and the recognition that a lasting peace cannot be constructed on the erasure of victims' suffering. Without meaningful measures to achieve this, Nigeria runs the

risk of producing a new generation of militants who are merely "reformed" on the surface, but who continue to be at odds with society and the communities that are ready to exact revenge. To be successful, deradicalization must transform into a social contract; otherwise, it will fail as a state monologue. The data demonstrate that anything less is not only ineffective but also potentially harmful. The choice is stark: continue the current facade of impunity or embrace the uncomfortable work of transformative justice. The stability of Northeast Nigeria hangs in the balance.

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