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RESEARCH DEPARTMENT

THEMATIC AREA: GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL STABILITY

TITLE:

THE DYNAMICS OF NEGOTIATING WITH TERRORIST GROUPS IN NIGERIA: EVALUATING OUTCOMES, THREATS, AND POLICY OPTIONS.

EDITION: NALTF/GPS021

VOLUME:16

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24<sup>th</sup> November, 2025.

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Negotiating with terrorist and armed groups, such as Boko Haram, ISWAP, and the loosely organized “bandits” in northwest Nigeria, has become an ongoing policy challenge for Nigerian federal and state authorities, local communities, and international partners. These negotiations, which range from informal local truces and ransom payments to formal amnesty and deradicalization offers, can provide short-term humanitarian benefits, such as freeing hostages and restoring local calm. However, they also present significant political, security, and ethical risks: they could legitimize criminal actors, encourage more kidnappings and attacks, weaken the state’s monopoly on violence, and undermine long-term rule of law. This report reviews existing literature, recent case studies, and policy frameworks to analyse their effects and risks, and offers practical policy options with guidance for implementation. It draws on academic analyses, policy papers, and recent reports on amnesty initiatives and community-led negotiations.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

Negotiating with terrorist groups in Nigeria, including Boko Haram, ISWAP, and various bandit factions, poses significant challenges for security and governance. These negotiations can range from informal truces and ransom payments to formal amnesty offers, providing immediate humanitarian benefits such as hostage releases and temporary violence reductions. However, they also raise serious ethical, political, and security concerns, including the potential to legitimize criminal actors and undermine state authority.

As Nigeria faces escalating security threats, the need for effective negotiation strategies becomes critical. Policymakers must balance short-term gains with potential long-term risks, such as incentivizing further violence and weakening the rule of law. Given the mixed outcomes of previous amnesty and negotiation efforts, there is an urgent need for clear, evidence-based guidance.

This report aims to analyze the complexities of negotiating with armed groups in Nigeria, evaluate the effects of past initiatives, and provide actionable policy recommendations. By equipping federal and state officials, civil society, and international partners with a comprehensive understanding of negotiation dynamics, this study seeks to enhance the prospects for conflict resolution while minimizing harm.

### **1.1 Statement of the problem**

Nigeria is confronting multiple security challenges: the Islamist insurgency in the northeast involving Boko Haram and ISWAP, along with widespread banditry, kidnapping-for-ransom, and communal violence across the northwest and north-central areas. In some instances, actors such as state governors, community leaders, and intermediaries have directly engaged with armed groups-offering amnesties, paying ransoms, or mediating local truces. These actions pose complex policy questions: do such negotiations help reduce harm and pave the way for lasting peace, or do they enable criminal groups and extend violence? The dilemma is intensified by uneven state capacity, communities' urgent demand for security, and the varied motives and structures of armed actors.

## **1.2 Justification**

Policymakers need to balance short-term lifesaving achievements, such as hostage releases and temporary stoppages of attacks, with potential long-term effects like encouraging future violence and weakening authority. Therefore, clear guidance based on solid evidence and tailored analysis is crucial for Nigerian federal and state officials, civil society, and international partners. Recent studies and case reports highlight varied results from previous amnesty and negotiation efforts, emphasizing the importance of a proactive, evidence-based policy toolkit for the future.

## **1.3 Aim**

The goal is to evaluate the impacts and dangers of engaging in negotiations with terrorists and armed groups in Nigeria, and to develop practical policy options that reduce harm while still offering chances for conflict resolution when suitable.

## **1.4 Objectives**

1. To identify the different forms of negotiation used in Nigeria include formal amnesty, local truces, ransom payments, and mediated surrenders.
2. To assess the documented effects and risks based on previous efforts.
3. To identify the contextual factors that influence the likelihood of negotiation success or failure.
4. To provide practical policy options, safeguards, and monitoring mechanisms for federal, state, and local actors.

## **2.0 Literature review**

This section consolidates peer-reviewed research, policy briefs, and investigative reports on negotiations with violent non-state actors pertinent to Nigeria.

### **Types of engagement recorded.**

Top-down amnesties and DDR-style programs involve the government providing incentives for individuals to surrender and reintegrate, often including vocational training. Evaluations indicate mixed outcomes: some short-term demobilization is observed, but frequent recidivism occurs when reintegration efforts and livelihood opportunities are limited.

Localized truces and community negotiations involve local chiefs, religious leaders, or vigilante groups arranging temporary ceasefires or non-aggression pacts to safeguard farming periods or secure the release of captives. While these measures can offer immediate relief, they often lack enforceable guarantees.

Ransom and hostage payments involve families, communities, or intermediaries paying ransoms; occasionally, state actors are accused of making unofficial payments. While these ransoms can save lives, they also fund violent groups and create negative incentives.

### **Empirical evidence and theoretical insights**

Conditional success: Comparative studies indicate that negotiated settlements are more likely to succeed when (a) armed groups are unified and pursue political objectives, (b) exit incentives such as jobs and security guarantees are credible, and (c) third-party monitors confirm compliance. Conversely, loosely organized criminal gangs are more challenging to bring into peace negotiations.

Risks of legitimization and moral hazard: Amnesty or repeated concessions may normalize violence as a bargaining method, leading to more kidnappings and banditry. Several analyses of Nigerian amnesty efforts indicate this risk is genuine, especially when reintegration programs lack sufficient funding.

Fragmentation and governance: When state actors (such as governors and chiefs) negotiate independently, it can weaken national policy coherence and the rule of law, leading to contested authority.

### **3.0 Methodology**

This report is a qualitative desk-based policy analysis combining:

A systematic review of academic publications, policy papers, and reports from international organizations (2019-2025).

Analysis of media and investigative reports to gather recent case evidence, such as localized amnesties and community negotiations in Zamfara and nearby states.

A comparative synthesis of international lessons from UNIDIR studies and peace research literature on negotiating with violent non-state actors to identify applicable safeguards.

**Limitations:** This desk study did not include primary field interviews; instead, it depends on published reports and secondary sources that may differ in detail and local context. When relevant, the report highlights contested claims and advises consulting local sources during policy rollout.

### **4.0 Results / Findings / Analysis / Discussion**

#### **4.1 Observed effects of negotiations (short- to medium-term)**

Humanitarian relief efforts have led to hostage releases and short-term decreases in violence in specific areas, facilitating brief returns for displaced persons and granting humanitarian teams access.

**Temporary stabilization:** In certain communities, truces have led to brief agricultural recoveries or a return of market activity, both crucial to people's livelihoods.

## **4.2 Observed risks and negative consequences**

Recidivism and rearmament: Former combatants or attackers who accept amnesty but lack sufficient reintegration support often return to violent groups or criminal activities. In several Nigerian settings, initial amnesty efforts were followed by renewed attacks.

Incentive effects: Repeated payouts (ransom) or perceived rewards from negotiations boost the profitability of kidnapping and banditry, encouraging copycat behaviour across regions.

Erosion of legitimacy and rule of law occurs when governors, local leaders, or unofficial intermediaries make separate deals, undermining federal policy coherence. Armed groups may interpret these actions as de facto recognition.

Factional advantage: Negotiation windows enable groups to regroup, recruit, or rearm, transforming a tactical pause into a strategic opportunity to strengthen, a pattern seen in global cases and in parts of Nigeria.

## **4.3 Conditions that influence negotiation prospects (factors that make negotiations more or less likely to succeed)**

Group cohesion and clear leadership are essential; a centralized command increases the likelihood of credible agreements. Fragmented bandit networks tend to be less reliable in honouring their terms.

Credible exit incentives, such as sustainable livelihoods, relocation, and psychosocial support, enhance the likelihood of long-term disengagement. Conversely, weak reintegration programs are linked to higher recidivism rates.

Monitoring & verification: Using third-party groups such as NGOs, religious councils, and regional bodies enhances compliance and fosters trust.

Political control and coherence: Establishing clear national guidelines alongside state-level coordination helps minimize the chances of contradictory agreements and prevents armed actors from engaging in 'forum-shopping.'

#### **4.4 Trade-offs: Humanitarian Versus Strategic Considerations**

Negotiation decisions often involve balancing the immediate goal of saving lives with the medium-term costs to security. A strict ban on negotiations can hinder hostage releases and extend suffering, while an unconditional approach might increase violence. The key policy challenge is to develop conditional, transparent, and monitored strategies that engage and reduce moral hazard, thereby enhancing protective outcomes.

### **5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations**

#### **5.1 Conclusion**

Negotiating with terrorists and armed groups in Nigeria is neither a complete solution nor completely off-limits. Evidence indicates that negotiations can provide quick humanitarian aid and encourage defections. Still, they also pose notable risks, such as legitimizing these groups, increasing the risk of reoffending, creating incentives for bad behaviour, and causing governance issues. Therefore, the policy should move away from sudden, unclear deals and instead establish a controlled, transparent framework that allows engagement only with strict conditions. This framework should include strong safeguards, effective reintegration programs, independent oversight, and clear legal and oversight mechanisms.

#### **5.2 Policy Options and Actionable Recommendations**

Below are graded options (from least permissive to more engaged), with implementation steps and safeguards.

Option A: Maintain a strict 'no-official-negotiation' stance as the default deterrent.

Rationale: Sends a strong deterrent signal, effectively discouraging actors aiming for political recognition.

Risks: Could exacerbate immediate humanitarian issues (such as harm to hostages) and lead communities to engage in unofficial negotiations.

Safeguards, if adopted, include robust public communications, legal penalties for officials involved in unauthorized deals, and enhanced capabilities for hostage rescue and law enforcement.

Option B: Controlled, conditional negotiation framework (recommended pragmatic default)

Rationale: Balances humanitarian needs with long-term strategic interests. Negotiation is permitted only under specific conditions and with proper oversight.

Option C: Community-led negotiated ceasefires with state facilitation.

Rationale: When the state cannot access certain areas, it should encourage and establish community-led mediation to minimise harm and avoid exploitative agreements.

Implementation involves training and supporting local mediators, establishing minimum standards for agreements, integrating local pacts into the national monitoring system, and providing community development packages as incentives for compliance.

Option D: Integrated 'carrot-and-stick' approach

Rationale: Implement targeted enforcement actions to restrict access for hardened combatants, while offering conditional incentives to lower-level fighters.

Implementation involves intelligence-led actions targeting leaders who refuse to engage, while conducting DDR for rank-and-file members willing to surrender, with strict verification processes.

#### **Core Elements & Steps:**

1. National legal protocol: A federal law or regulation that defines who has the authority to authorize discussions, such as the federal security council, and bans unilateral state-level amnesty without proper coordination.

2. Eligibility criteria: Engage solely with groups that (a) can be credibly identified and centralized; (b) show willingness to demobilize publicly; (c) are not mainly transnational terrorist networks operating under external directives.
3. Conditional, time-limited offers: Any amnesty or incentive package depends on demobilisation, weapons surrender, community restitution, and involvement in DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration).
4. Third-party monitoring: Recruit unbiased monitors such as UN agencies, reputable NGOs, or religious councils to verify compliance and publicly disclose their findings.
5. Implement a no ransom policy by banning payments from state actors and establishing secure, anonymous reporting channels for families and NGOs to reduce private ransom markets. In cases where ransom payments happen, ensure thorough documentation and criminal investigations into possible state collusion.
6. Robust reintegration: Ensure continuous funding for livelihood initiatives, psychosocial support, education, and relocation when necessary; link release to clear reintegration milestones.
7. Accountability and transparency include parliamentary oversight, public registers of agreements, and sunset clauses to prevent permanent concessions.

### **5.3 Immediate operational recommendations (first 6-12 months)**

1. Issue a national protocol that defines the negotiation and amnesty authority, clearly outlining the roles of federal, state, and local actors.
2. Create a multi-stakeholder Monitoring & Reintegration Unit (MRU) comprising representatives from federal security agencies, civil society, religious leaders, and international partners to review proposals, oversee compliance, and manage reintegration funds.
3. Ban official ransom payments and criminalize unauthorized negotiations by public officials, while implementing whistleblower protections and swift investigative processes.
4. Implement pilot community mediation projects in two affected local government areas, accompanied by independent evaluations to assess local ceasefire models and reintegration strategies.

5. Increase funding and capacity for reintegration efforts, including job training, relocation support, and psychosocial care, while linking these initiatives to performance monitoring and independent audits.

#### **5.4 Monitoring and Evaluation**

Utilize independent third-party entities such as NGOs, academic partners, or the UN to generate quarterly compliance reports.

Track indicators such as recidivism rate, number of attacks, hostage incidents, livelihood outcomes for DDR beneficiaries, and community perceptions of security.

#### **References**

Note: The citations below represent the literature and reporting reviewed for this report. For direct source links and further reading, the in-text citations refer to the underlying documents.

- 1) UNIDIR & ISS- Prospects for Dialogue and Negotiation to Address Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin (policy analysis)- examines negotiation tools for groups, including Boko Haram.
- 2) Wiehler, C.- Time to Make 'Peace' with the Bandits (ETH Zurich policy paper, 2024)- discusses divergent state responses and consequences.
- 3) Barnett, J.- Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a "Banditization" of Jihad? (CTC West Point)- analyzes the connections between bandits and jihadist groups.
- 4) The New Humanitarian- Why bandit amnesties are failing in Nigeria's northwest (reporting and analysis, 2025)- documents failures and recidivism in amnesty efforts.

- 5) Academic and policy articles on amnesty and DDR in Nigeria (IJID / peer-reviewed 2024-2025)- evaluations of reintegration outcomes and program design.
- 6) Grounded reporting on community negotiations in Zamfara and other northwestern states (GGA, 2025)-case examples of local-level mediation.