

Nigeria's Troubling Counterinsurgency Strategy Against Boko Haram

How the Military and Militias Are Fueling Insecurity

By Vanda Felbab-Brown

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A soldier walks past a checkpoint in Bama, Borno State, Nigeria, August 2016.

Afolabi Sotunde / REUTERS

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defeated. Unfortunately, the attack should have come as no surprise. Since 2015, the jihadist group has lost significant territorial control and no longer holds major cities. But as I saw during my fieldwork in Nigeria in January, the jihadist threat is far from gone, and counterinsurgency policies continue to be troubled and troubling.

Since 2009, Boko Haram has waged a brutal insurgency in northeastern Nigeria and neighboring countries. Both its violent jihad and the Nigerian government's and militias' counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts have led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people, the prolonged detention and disappearance of tens of thousands more, and the displacement of over two million. There has also been massive economic devastation in an already exceedingly poor and underdeveloped region. Even in comparison with other Islamist jihadist groups, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan or al Shabab in Somalia, Boko Haram stands out in its predatory behavior and failure to deliver the most rudimentary public services to the communities it controls.

Boko Haram caused 3,329 deaths in 2017, far fewer than the more than 11,500 attributed to the group during the peak of its activities in 2015, but only slightly less than the 3,484 deaths connected to the group in 2016. Moreover, the number of "violent incidents" instigated by the group in 2017 rose to 500 from 417 in 2016. Although Boko Haram no longer appears able to mass militants and dislodge entire battalions of the Nigerian military, the latter has been struggling to establish effective control in the cleared areas, some of which the group has overrun anew. The insurgency remains highly active in the Bama and Gwoza local government areas, where some 80 percent of former residents remain in internally displaced person (IDP) camps. In major cities and towns, including Maiduguri, there is widespread belief that Boko Haram informants are everywhere. This belief is exacerbated by previous incidents of Boko Haram donning police or military uniforms and then killing those who volunteered information on the group. Travel among cities and towns, even on major roads, is possible mostly only under escort by the Nigerian military, both because Boko Haram ambushes have continued and because the Nigerian military does not often permit independent movement.

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are largely absent. Earlier in northern Adamawa State, Nigerian authorities, including the National Emergency Management Agency, persuaded some IDPs to return to their villages. But they provided no protection. The following day, Boko Haram killed the returnees.

THE NIGERIAN MILITARY'S BRUTALITY

Another complicating factor in the struggle against Boko Haram is that the Nigerian military and police have themselves been sources of insecurity, dislocation, widespread human rights abuses, and radicalization. Much of the counterinsurgency strategy before 2015 involved communal punishment of entire villages suspected of harboring Boko Haram militants or having fallen under Boko Haram rule. In such so-called clearing operations, villagers who did not manage to flee to the bush were randomly killed on suspicion of being Boko Haram members, while others, including women and children, were dragged off to detention en masse. Even those who were not detained in the clearing operation were often forcibly evicted by the military, without prior notice or an opportunity to take their belongings. The burning of houses, shops, cars, and other private property in villages and towns by the military was also commonplace before 2015.

The result has been the wiping out of entire communities. According to [Amnesty International](#), between 2009 and 2015, Nigerian military forces arbitrarily arrested at least 20,000, including children as young as nine. Cases of extrajudicial killings and torture by Nigerian military and police forces are also widespread, with more than 1,000 taking place from 2013 to 2014, sometimes hundreds a day. On March 14, 2014, in retaliation for a Boko Haram attack on the Giwa barracks in Maiduguri (one of the largest detention centers holding members of the group), the Nigerian military slaughtered some 640 boys and men, most of them recaptured detainees.

Since 2015, the brutality of the Nigerian military seems to have lessened for several reasons.

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opportunities to commit violations. Yet the Nigerian forces still engage in mass detentions in new areas they liberate, albeit less visibly since they clear increasingly more distant rural spaces.

The state response to Boko Haram remains flawed in other key ways. Consider its approach to intelligence. The Nigerian military and police have been partnering with local militias, such as the Civilian Joint Task Force, and relying on them and paid informants to find out who is a Boko Haram member. CJTF claims are often the dominant, if not sole, basis for raids and arrests, yet such intelligence is often completely unreliable, unverified, and random, motivated merely by desire for further financial payments or as a means of revenge for previous perceived grievances against local rivals.

Nigeria's policies to "starve the enemy" allow local military units to integrate themselves and dominate local economic markets and activities.

Apart from their disastrous humanitarian consequences, Nigeria's policies to "starve the enemy" allow local military units to integrate themselves and dominate local economic markets and activities. The military now prohibits growing tall crops (among which Boko Haram could hide) and controls fishing activities, travel on certain roads, and access to the markets, often collecting illegal tolls and rents. It demands that merchants buy fish only from fishermen and traders it certifies, justifying such control of access to the economy by the need to deprive Boko Haram of resources. Although cattle rustling is mostly attributed to Boko Haram, there is widespread belief in communities such as Maiduguri that both the Nigerian military and the CJTF have become increasingly involved in that racket as well, with stolen cattle finding their way into Maiduguri's market.

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An aerial view of buildings standing on scorched ground that have been destroyed in the conflict with Boko Haram in the Bama region of Borno state, Nigeria, November 2017.

Paul Carsten / REUTERS

THE FUTURE OF THE MILITIAS

The extensive presence of anti-Boko Haram militias in Nigeria's northeast is a further complicating factor. Some local residents I spoke with still see the militias as “heroes,” “saviors,” and “champions.” During the early insurgency years, CJTF members at times were the only actors standing up to Boko Haram and providing some protection to local populations. Yet they have also become a source of insecurity, and the multifaceted threats they pose are likely to increase.

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recruited from within the CJTF and trained, armed, and paid 20,000 naira (approximately \$56) per month by the Nigerian government are now referred to as Borno Youth Empowerment Schemes, or BOYES. A second level, the Borno State Youth Vanguard, has been armed by the government but has not been paid or trained. This group probably also numbers in the low thousands, although no clear data are available. Many members of this group are frustrated by their status and seek to be “promoted” to the BOYES category so they can get on the government’s payroll. The rest, the vast majority of the militias, have not received arms or training from the government, nor are they being formally paid. Many within this last level of the militia are similarly dissatisfied with their status, as they perceive their contribution to the counterinsurgency fight to be as important as those of the other two groups. Even commanders who are members of BOYES often seek greater benefits than they are receiving, and the commanders of the two lower-ranked units are growing even angrier that their contributions are not being adequately acknowledged and compensated by the state.

Because the Nigerian government simply does not have enough resources to train these militias and put them on the government payroll, there is a significant chance that the rivalries among the groups may give rise to violence and that at least some of the militias may resort to predation, extortion, and criminality. Nominally, a village elder is supposed to approve any new CJTF member; but when one such village elder was questioned about the process, he said he had never rejected any candidate or heard of rejections in other villages. The village elders themselves may be highly vulnerable to CJTF pressure. In some places, CJTF members have started to arrogate power and influence to themselves, openly questioning the authority of traditional and village leaders, pointing out that traditional authorities ran away or were not able to protect communities from Boko Haram. These patterns of the weakness of supervision and susceptibility to collusion occur frequently with militias elsewhere, such as in Afghanistan.

Increasingly, the CJTF has taken it upon itself to punish petty crimes, such as the passing of

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negotiating truces and agreements for social contract negotiations. Some units have started holding trials for the accused, though the quality of evidence, procedures, and judgments is questionable and transparency is lacking. This is generating some friction between communities and local CJTF units.

And ominously, local leaders appear interested in appropriating CJTF units for political purposes. Some politicians are handing out money and drugs to CJTF members; in one case, a CJTF commander even received a car. And as the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections approach, the political usefulness of CJTF securing votes and donations for candidates will only grow. “If the government does not give us a job after the insurgency has ended, we can become insurgents ourselves, we are armed,” one CJTF member told me in an interview. Controlling, disarming, and dismantling the militias will have a fundamental effect on whether the Boko Haram insurgency will be brought to an end or whether militancy in the northeast will merely mutate.

A MORE INSIDIOUS THREAT?

As a result of its brutality, particularly mass killings of fellow Muslims and attacks on mosques, and its total lack of provision of services to local populations, Boko Haram suffered two major instances of fragmentation: one in 2012 when a branch split off, forming the militant group Ansaru, and the other in 2016 when Abu Musab al-Barnawi declared himself to be the true leader of the Islamic State (or ISIS) in Nigeria. (Boko Haram had claimed allegiance to ISIS a year earlier.)

The local ISIS chapter, in particular, has clearly been trying to differentiate itself from Boko Haram, present a gentler face, and build a more legitimate state project. So far, it has been very discriminating in attacking only military and government targets and has tried to avoid civilian casualties. It has also started to provide a variety of services, such as transporting women to the hospital, in communities where no such assistance previously existed. In Yobe

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ISIS thus poses a more insidious and perhaps more long-lasting threat to the region. This is all the more ominous as official systems of governance in Nigeria remain extraordinarily weak and often revolve around extralegal rent seeking. The state has made little effort to address legitimate grievances, allowing violent movements to justify their rebellions. In large parts of northeastern Nigeria over the past seven years, and for decades in many parts of the greater country, state corruption and neglect have meant that local populations have seen little if any state-provided public goods and services, whether it's schools, infrastructure, health care, or electricity. Significant flows of international economic resources to northeastern Nigeria have not helped alleviate the situation, as most aid has of necessity been devoted to the more immediate humanitarian purpose of countering large-scale famine in 2016 and 2017 and severe levels of ongoing food insecurity.


THE WAY FORWARD

In order to effectively counter Boko Haram in the long term, the Nigerian military and the anti-Boko Haram militias need to stop being the sources of radicalization themselves. The Nigerian military's policies—rounding up liberated villages en masse, prolonged detention in awful conditions, extrajudicial killings and massacres, and reliance solely on informal militias to identify and arrest Boko Haram members—are illegal and fundamentally alienate the military's victims from the Nigerian state. So far, Nigerian society has failed to demand badly needed accountability from the military and militias and address the plight of victims.

Organizing a broad-based societal dialogue about these processes is an essential first step. Creating disarmament, demobilization, justice, accountability, and reconciliation processes for armed actors beyond Boko Haram, including for CJTF, is also crucial. Finally, Nigeria must develop the wherewithal to start genuinely addressing the underlying root causes of

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policies and making them consistent with human rights norms, the Nigerian government will not only more effectively counter Boko Haram but also have a chance to finally start overcoming its own legacy of citizen abuse and neglect. 

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