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Rethinking Counterterrorism Strategies in Nigeria:
How Can the Boko Haram Insurgency be Brought to its End?

Introduction

When looking at examples of successful counterterrorism around the world – both historical and present-day, Boko Haram in northern Nigeria will not appear on that list. Employing tactics of provocation and intimidation, Boko Haram militants have been allowed to run rampant on their campaign of terror for over a decade with chaotic and largely unproductive efforts to combat them. Suicide bombings, mass abductions, and other coordinated acts of violence have been met with clumsy military and police response – which have temporarily intercepted the insurgents in some cases and fanned the flames in others. Boko Haram demonstrates a classic example of rationalist logic in which a weak nonstate actor uses violence against more powerful political institutions. By this logic, the group's leaders and its fighters "feel there is at least some probability that they can use whatever power they have to impose enough costs on the stronger opponent as to make it reconsider its position, *or* they do not think the full power of the stronger opponent will be brought to bear on them for whatever reason."[1] The reason, in this case – is that Boko Haram is not up against a considerably 'powerful' adversary – so the risks and potential costs to them are relatively low.

Not only has the government failed to protect its citizens from the terrorist group's attacks, it is also responsible for inflicting large-scale damage against its own people during crackdown

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[1] Braithwaite, Alex. Unit 2 Lecture – "Why do Groups Resort to Terrorism?" University of Arizona, POL 520A. January 2022.

attempts. Efforts to create political framework and guidelines for counterterrorism in Nigeria have also been haphazard since many of these strategies sound reasonable in theory, but not in practice – and they are full of logistical and technical gaps. Because Boko Haram "has used terrorism to demonstrate the government's inability to prevent violence and to provoke indiscriminate retaliation largely hurting civilians,"[2] it is evident that the current bodies of government and law enforcement are in need of a major overhaul in order for successful counterterrorism to take place. From there, a clearly defined and well-organized strategy that employs both coercive and conciliatory tactics needs to be implemented with the support of foreign governments and multilateral institutions. Additionally, Nigeria must recognize the drivers of terrorism and seek to address them at the root by engaging "local communities, the private sector, the media, and other groups in society" to "encourage the exchange of intelligence, information, and expertise between national agencies and across borders."[3] With the position Nigeria is in, a counterterrorism strategy is likely to be more effective when there is a broader and more unified response.

Background

The Boko Haram insurgency has been an ongoing crisis for fourteen years and a persistent threat on a smaller scale for even longer. Since 2009 – and at the hands of both terrorists and the government's military – nearly 350,000 people have been killed in northeast Nigeria and another 3 million people have been displaced in the Lake Chad Basin, encompassing Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon.[4] Though the government has declared repeatedly that Boko Haram has

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[2] Thomas, Jakana. "Rewarding Bad Behavior: How Governments Respond to Terrorism in Civil War." *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2014, pp. 804–818., https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12113.
[3] Smith, Mike. "Securing Our Future: A Decade of Counter-Terrorism Strategies." *UN Chronicle*, United Nations, Apr. 2012, https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/securing-our-future-decade-counter-terrorism-strategies.
[4] "Global Conflict Tracker." *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/boko-haram-nigeria.

been 'technically defeated,' the truth is that this is completely inaccurate. The past three

administrations have suffered immensely in the fight against the country's greatest security threat

for at least half a dozen reasons. First, the root causes have not been sufficiently addressed,

namely drivers of insecurity in the region such as poverty, corrupt governance, and inadequate

infrastructure.[5] The over-reliance of a purely militaristic strategy is a clear example of the state's

inability to deal with such crises proactively and efficiently. Second, Boko Haram is

exceptionally resilient and adaptable, which includes their ability to recruit new fighters. Other

than the systematic campaign of forced recruitment, "people are readily available for recruitment

just to survive"[6] since well-funded groups such as Boko Haram can provide its fighters with

basic needs like income, housing, education, and food[78] - commodities that might otherwise be

hard to come by. Third, Nigeria's military and national police force are ill-equipped in terms of

weaponry and personnel – and both entities have long been regarded as corrupt and inefficient.

Research by Beacon Consulting has found that the terrorist group has a higher caliber of

weapons than the military and that of the "6.5 million small arms and light weapons in

circulation in Nigeria… just 586,000 are in the hands of security forces."[9] Fourth – and this has

been alluded to twice but deserves its own point of recognition – is that corruption is rampant

throughout all levels of government and across law enforcement agencies in Nigeria. It has been

reported that the fight against the insurgency is not being fought sincerely and that "a lot of

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[5] Brechenmacher, Saskia. "Stabilizing Northeast Nigeria after Boko Haram." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 3 May 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/05/03/stabilizing-northeast-nigeria-after-boko-haram-pub-79042

[6] Khalid, Ishaq. "Nigeria's Boko Haram Militants: Six Reasons They Have Not Been Defeated." BBC News, BBC, 17 May 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57117296.

[7] Igwe, Uche. "We Must Understand Terrorist Financing to Defeat Boko Haram and Nigeria's Insurgents." *Africa at LSE*, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 3 Aug. 2021, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2021/08/03/terrorist-financing-economy-defeat-boko-haram-nigeria-insurgents/.

[8] Agbiboa, Daniel. "The Social Dynamics of the 'Nigerian Taliban': Fresh Insights from the Social Identity Theory."

[9] Khalid, Ishaq. "Nigeria's Boko Haram Militants: Six Reasons They Have Not Been Defeated."

money meant to bolster the campaign against Boko Haram has ended up in officials' pockets."[10]

The 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Nigeria five places worse than the year before –

now 154 out of 180 countries. This means there are only 26 countries more corrupt than

Nigeria.[11] Fifth, Nigeria's heavy-handed and coercive military strategy is not working, and Boko

Haram is very unlikely to be defeated on the battlefield alone. This will be discussed in more

detail later in this paper. Finally, Boko Haram's influence has continued to spread rather than be

contained. There is evidence of armed criminal gangs forming relationships with insurgents, and

Boko Haram itself has split into multiple factions over the course of its campaign. Furthermore,

the group released a video in 2020 in which they claimed they had infiltrated the Nigerian state

of Niger – which is a considerable distance away from the northeastern part of the country.

Lieutenant General Tukur Yusuf Buratai – the country's then Chief of Army Staff – said later

that year that "there is likelihood of terrorism persisting in Nigeria for another 20 years," citing a

lack of appropriate response from civil and military authorities as well as other stakeholders.[12]

Unless Nigeria, its partners, and the international community rethink counterterrorism in Nigeria

at the most fundamental level, this may unfortunately be true.

How Should the Nigerian Government and International Community Engage with Boko Haram with the Goal of Ending their Campaign?

As previously mentioned, Boko Haram employs a strategy that can primarily be classified as

provocation – which is described as "an attempt to induce the enemy to respond to terrorism with

indiscriminate violence, which radicalizes the population and moves them to support the

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[10] Khalid, Ishaq. "Nigeria's Boko Haram Militants: Six Reasons They Have Not Been Defeated."
[11] Erezi, Dennis. "Nigeria Ranks Five Places Worse on 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index." *The Guardian - Nigeria National News*, The Guardian, 25 Jan. 2022, https://guardian.ng/news/nigeria-ranks-five-places-worse-on-2021-corruption-perceptions-index/.
[12] Larnyoh, Magdalene Teiko. "Terrorism Likely to Last in Nigeria for the Next 20 Years." *Business Insider Africa*, Business Insider, 3 Dec. 2020, https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/markets/terrorism-likely-to-last-in-nigeria-for-the-next-20-years/5c4r0k8.

terrorists"[13] – or at least support the goal they are trying to achieve (which in this case is the creation of an Islamic State in Nigeria governed by Sharia law.) There is also a second but equally important strategy of intimidation at play, which is seen through the group's arbitrary use of violence and fear tactics. With both unique strategies come a unique set of approaches to counterterrorism. For example, the best response to provocation "is a discriminating strategy that inflicts as little collateral damage as possible," which involves isolating the target from civilians and requires "superior intelligence capabilities."[14] This has, of course, been a failure on catastrophic levels – capturing the attention of human rights groups, foreign governments, and the United Nations – all of which have expressed concern about Nigeria's inability to "incorporate the protection of civilians into its counterterrorism policy." Following the 2015 massacre in Baga, the United States consulate issued a statement stating that the country's "indiscriminate, force-based approach to counter terrorism is increasing extremism and decreasing confidence in the Federal Government."[15] That being said, the governments' weakened position puts officials in a place where they are expected to offer concessions, and perhaps Boko Haram is willing to bargain. This was the case with The Irgun (IZL) in Mandate Palestine – a violent paramilitary organization that disbanded in 1948 following a strategic success and a transition to electoral politics after the State of Israel was established. IZL forced the British into offering negotiations and making a major concession (withdrawing from Palestine) and responded to the Israeli cabinet's ultimatum to join the Israeli Defense Fores or otherwise be subject to the use of force. Boko Haram will not necessarily end in the same way,

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[13] Kydd, Andrew H., and Barbara F. Walter. "The Strategies of Terrorism." *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2006, pp. 49–80., https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2006.31.1.49.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Thomas, Jakana. "Rewarding Bad Behavior: How Governments Respond to Terrorism in Civil War."

but the point is that IZL's primary goal was based on the creation of a religious state and that their attacks were strategies "to provoke the state into widespread civilian repression in order to erode their governments' bases of support,"[16][17] much like the radical Islamist insurgency in Nigeria. There is certainly an opportunity for bargaining should Boko Haram be willing to enter into negotiations, which of course is entirely dependent on the strength and power of the Nigerian government. Building such capabilities to adequately facilitate these talks would involve a complete restructure of government and law enforcement as to eliminate corruption, the willingness to pursue a conciliatory counterterrorism approach in tandem with coercive strategies, and seeking and allowing the support of foreign allies.

Regarding Boko Haram's second strategy, intimidation works by demonstrating "that the terrorists are strong enough to punish disobedience and that the government is too weak to stop them."[18] The best response to intimidation in which the terrorist goal is social control is to strengthen law enforcement capabilities – another failure on the part of the Nigerian government. This has been nearly impossible to achieve due to a shortage of personnel and the inability to recruit new officers, a lack of proper intelligence-gathering networks and modern technology, and rampant corruption. Nigeria needs to look at a solution that encompasses community policing, enlists the support of international partners for best practices related to transparency and stabilization, and in turn, the global community must demonstrate a willingness to supply the country with the resources it needs to protect its citizens and alleviate the strain on law enforcement – which came far too late into the crisis. With stronger military and police

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[16] Thomas, Jakana. "Rewarding Bad Behavior: How Governments Respond to Terrorism in Civil War."
[17] Bueno de Mesquita, Ethan, and Eric S. Dickson. "The Propaganda of the Deed: Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and Mobilization." *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2007, pp. 364–381., https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2007.00256.x.
[18] Kydd, Andrew H., and Barbara F. Walter. "The Strategies of Terrorism."

capabilities (other than just the use of force), perhaps Boko Haram militants would be reluctant to continue conducting widespread and large-scale attacks.

Other than the government's inability or unwillingness to prevent terrorism, there are at least two conditions that have allowed Boko Haram to take hold of northeastern Nigeria and beyond. The first condition – which can be seen as a *cause* of terrorism, is the "concrete grievances among an identifiable subgroup of a larger population, such as an ethnic minority discriminated against by the majority."[19] In this case, Boko Haram leaders and fighters feel that 'true' Muslims have been persecuted in Nigeria and that 'false' Muslims have seized control of the political landscape and other areas of life.[20] The second condition which *motivates* terrorists "is the lack of opportunity for political participation."[21] Though it seems counterintuitive to allow terrorists the chance at any sort of electoral power or political representation, many democracies have resorted to this in conjunction with other conciliatory and coercive efforts – and in some cases this has been successful. Three notable examples of such are IZL of Mandate Palestine and later Israel, the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). These are considered successes for the terrorist groups, but "recognizing that terrorism sometimes succeeds does not legitimize the tactic and may even be a necessary step toward reducing and eliminating it."[22] With this concept in mind, the Nigerian government and international partners should engage with Boko Haram in the following ways:

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[19] Crenshaw, Martha. "The Causes of Terrorism." *Comparative Politics*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1981, pp. 379–399., https://doi.org/10.2307/421717.
[20] Thurston, Alex. 'The Disease Is Unbelief': Boko Haram's Religious and Political Worldview." *Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, Washington, D.C., 2016, pp. 1–30.
[21] Crenshaw, Martha. "The Causes of Terrorism."
[22] Cronin, Audrey Kurth. "Success: Achieving the Objective." *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2011, pp. 73–92.

- ***Declare a state of emergency*** in northeastern Nigeria on the basis of insecurity, the breakdown of public order and safety, and acts of mass violence or war. This may decrease the number of attacks but is a short-term solution while other counterterrorism measures simultaneously take place.

- ***Seek to understand the drivers of insecurity and radicalization*** as well as the grievances of Boko Haram militants. "Insurgents feed on grievances and are best met with classic counterinsurgency techniques to answer those grievances, for example by providing other avenues for improved security, poverty abatement, better opportunities, more equal treatment – in short, better ways to live in the present, within a defined territory."[23]

- ***Organize inter-religious dialogues and mediation processes*** in addition to security cooperation and military measures with neighboring states and other partners.[24] On an international front this may include the United Nations establishing a tribunal for prosecuting and detaining current and former fighters accountable for their crimes and human rights abuses. From a religious standpoint, there needs to be inter-religious dialogue that lays aside the idea of "exclusive ideological superiority," – that one's belief system is the 'true' or only way.[25]

- ***Attempt to facilitate a negotiation process*** and be prepared to make concessions. It is highly unlikely that Boko Haram will be defeated militarily, so more conciliatory strategies such as this are worth another attempt. However, there is a fundamental

[23] Cronin, Audrey Kurth. "Reorientation: Transitioning to Another Modus Operandi." *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2011, pp. 146–166.

[24] Olojo, Akinola. "Nigeria's Troubled North: Interrogating the Drivers of Public Support for Boko Haram." *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism Studies*, 2013, pp. 1–20., https://doi.org/10.19165/2013.1.07.

[25] "Historical Examples of Inter-Faith Dialogue Achievements." Academy for Cultural Diplomacy, Academy for Cultural Diplomacy, https://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/academy/index.php?en_historical-examples.

contradiction that comes from Boko Haram being a radical Islamist group that declared

jihad from the beginning. A jihadist group almost by definition does not negotiate peace,

whereas Islamists *do* negotiate.[26] It is important for Nigeria, its African counterparts, and

the international community to understand the limitations of negotiating with this

particular group based on its complex ideologies. There are several ways in which this

type of process could be successful: (1) lower-level members and fighters showing a

genuine interest and coming forward to participate in negotiations, (2) building

confidence through small, single-issue negotiations which could open the door for larger

and more substantive ones later on, and (3) willingness to offer Boko Haram an "Islamic

state" somewhere in Nigeria.[27] The first two have potential, but the third is the most

unlikely to occur since that would involve the government relinquishing territory to the

group, which may in turn become a breeding ground for radicalization, and a safe haven

for extremists in and outside of Nigeria.

- ***Use force based on coordination with neighbors and intelligence-gathering*** rather than

   relying on indiscriminate attacks. Nigeria needs to remain one step ahead of Boko

   Haram, which cannot be accomplished without its counterparts in the Lake Chad Basin

   and beyond. Facilitating the flow of information in a proactive and timely manner is key

   for states being able to react in an organized way.

How Will the Boko Haram Insurgency Most Likely End?

There are conflicting ideas about how Boko Haram and its campaign of terror will meet its end.

From a Nigerian standpoint – particularly coming from the Borno State Governor – is the very

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[26] Zenn, Jacob, and Mary Jane Fox. "Negotiating with Boko Haram? Examining the Jihadist Exception." *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, Indiana University Press, 2020, pp. 158–83, https://doi.org/10.2979/africonfpeacrevi.10.2.08.
[27] Ibid.

ambitious suggestion that the insurgency will end by 2023. The Governor claims a massive laying down of arms by militants and that "over 30,000 former fighters have now surrendered and are in the custody of the authorities."[28] If this seems too good to be true, it might be because it is. The Nigerian government has fabricated numbers and information throughout the insurgency, and each administration has had its issues with transparency. However, for the sake of giving them the benefit of the doubt – *if* Boko Haram were to voluntarily surrender its weapons, and *if* there really are that many members in custody, then conclusions can be drawn about why this might be. It is possible that militants are fatigued from years of grueling battles and having to live in substandard conditions. It could be that Boko Haram's mission and goals have changed to the point that they are irrelevant to many fighters, or it could be that being in the group is no longer serving them or meeting their needs. These are merely suggestions, but still worth considering given the unpredictable nature of Boko Haram, and the widespread corruption that plagues Nigeria.

Otherwise, the Boko Haram insurgency will likely not end until the aforementioned needs are met – and most of the literature on Nigerian counterterrorism measures seems to be in relative agreement: waging war on corruption that exists within the government, military, and police force, a fundamental shift in how the government responds to the insurgency, addressing "the root causes that contributed to the emergence of the group, including the social, economic and political grievances of marginalized communities,"[29] more authority and support to handle the crisis that comes from abroad as well as internally, and a comprehensive, coordinated approach

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[28] Agbakwuru, Johnbosco. "Nigeria: Boko Haram Insurgency Will End by 2023 - Zulum." *AllAfrica*, Vanguard, 11 Feb. 2022, https://allafrica.com/stories/202202110027.html.

[29] "Root Causes of Boko Haram Threat in Lake Chad Basin Must Be Tackled – UN Political Chief ." *United Nations*, United Nations, July 2016, https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/zh/node/13829.

that employs both conciliatory and coercive strategies. It is not until these factors are prioritized

that a *stable* and unified Nigeria will rid itself of its greatest security threat.