VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NORTHERN NIGERIA:

ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES AND APPROACHES

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Introduction

Nigeria is at a turning point in its conflict trajectory, with deaths and attacks from terrorism declining to the lowest level since 2011.[1] A wave of mass defections from Boko Haram began in 2021 in Borno State, the epicentre of the jihadist insurgency. Those defections occurred after the death of Abubakar Shekau, long-standing leader of the Jamáat Ahl al-sunna li-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad (JAS) faction, and the introduction of a Mass Exit Model by the state authorities. This is a promising sign that Nigeria's efforts to encourage defections are having positive results.[2] Government authority in areas that were previously controlled by Boko Haram insurgents has been restored, peace and security have gradually returned to the state, many of the displaced communities have been resettled, and people are gradually returning to their livelihoods.

However, Nigeria is the eighth most-affected country in the world with respect to terrorism, and Borno State accounts for 60 per cent of all terror-related deaths.[3] The Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), which emerged from Boko Haram in 2016, is the deadliest terror group in Nigeria.[4] ISWAP, with links to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIL), represents a growing transnational dimension to the terrorist phenomenon. In addition, the Ansaru group, which emerged in 2012, has also staged a

revival. Ansaru, often seen as an outlier on the terrorism landscape, confirmed its allegiance to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2022. This may be Al-Qaeda's first chance to unite its Sahelian and Nigerian fighters.[5]

Therefore, the Nigerian government must ensure that the current wave of defections is sustained, and recidivism is prevented. Moreover, to prevent extremism in the future, it must also address the conditions in which extremism thrives. In this regard, the Mass Exit Model represents a shift towards new and localised approaches to addressing extremism. The purpose of this situation report is to examine how this approach represents a departure from traditional securitised approaches, while examining the gaps and opportunities associated with this model.

This report forms part of a larger project titled 'Shifting Narratives on Violent Extremism in Africa', funded by the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA). Its general objective is to produce alternative narratives about and approaches to countering violent extremism in Africa, thereby contributing towards sustainable peacebuilding that includes gender-sensitive and survivor-centred transitional justice and reconciliation processes. Specifically, the project aims to:

1. Enhance evidence-based knowledge of conflict management narratives about and responses to violent extremism in Kenya, Mozambique and Nigeria; and

2. Enhance experience-sharing, thought leadership and knowledge dissemination about violent extremism in the three regions among relevant stakeholders.

For this report, field research was conducted by a team of experts from the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) in Abuja, and the University of Maiduguri in Borno State. Interviews were conducted with a wide range of stakeholders between 25 March and 4 April 2023. They comprised 17 representatives of government institutions and think tanks, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs), international organisations, women and youth leaders, academics and internally displaced people (IDPs). Question guides were designed for the interviews, which were used in a semi-structured way.[6]

This report begins by examining Nigeria's recent conflict trends and interrogating the drivers of conflict, both globally and in Nigeria. It then goes on to look at the different narratives and approaches in relation to counter-terrorism (CT) and preventing violent extremism (PVE) at the international level, and within Nigerian government institutions. It reflects on initial efforts that have been primarily militarised and state-centred, and characterised by toxic masculinity. It can be argued that these approaches have often been counterproductive in the course of efforts made to mitigate the fundamentalism of Boko Haram as it ravages North East Nigeria and the Sahel in general. It then examines the successes and challenges of the Borno Mass Exit Model, which represents a departure from the traditional approach to CT and PVE, and concludes with a forward-looking perspective for more sustainable victim-centred and gender-sensitive approaches to PVE.

Nigerian conflict trends and dynamics

Since becoming independent in 1960, Nigeria has grappled with endemic conflicts stemming from the mobilisation of ethnic, socio-economic and religious identities for political ends. It has a population of more than 200 million, one of the largest youth populations in the world,[7] and more than 250 ethno-linguistic groups.[8] It is a product of both exogenous and endogenous imperial domination (mainly 18th-century Islamic expansion, European colonial expansion and neo-colonial domination). This has forced different identities to cohere within a state without the necessary consolidation of nation-building.

Nigeria has primarily suffered from ethno-religious and resource-induced conflicts, while political and election-related violence has remained a constant threat to development. In the south, the discovery of oil, an influx of foreign oil companies, and unequal access to oil revenue leading to a lack of development led to a four-decades-long militancy in the Niger Delta that continues to beset the country. On 2 and 3 June 2023, the oil facilities of the Nigerian Petroleum Development Company in the Niger Delta were attacked, with a militia group known as the Niger Delta Liberators Force claiming

responsibility, and stating that the aim was to draw attention to the 'disregard of our great ethnic nationalities by the federal government in the award of pipeline surveillance contracts both at the in-fields and the general surveillance'.[9]

In the South East, the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB) and its secessionist drive has re-emerged. The IPOB has been linked to some attacks in the region, leading to its labelling as a terrorist organisation by the Nigerian government. However, by and large, the operations of the group have been relatively peaceful.[10] Meanwhile, the South West has witnessed incessant gang wars with destructive consequences such as murder, kidnapping, ransoms and theft.[11] Farmer–herder conflicts traditionally occurred in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, but have spread to other previously peaceful parts of the country as a result of conflict triggers like drought and desertification.[12] Many of these conflicts are also linked to land ownership disputes. Nigeria has a dual land tenure system, encompassing both customary and statutory law, but a lack of clarity between these two systems has led to perceptions of deprivation over land and land rights, for example, between the Fulani and the Tivs of

Benue State; the Fulani and the tribes of Jos in the Plateau State; and the Tiv and the Jukun of Taraba State.[13]

In the North East political zone, Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states have been the epicentre and the primary targets of Boko Haram. It has also recently spread to other parts of the country,[14] such as Abuja, Edo, Kano, Kogi, Niger, Ondo and Taraba.[15] Armed bandits operating in the North West have also taken advantage of the insecurity in the north, sometimes collaborating opportunistically with insurgents to advance their own agenda, with its attendant violent onslaught on local communities. However, some have argued that the fractious and powerful nature of the bandits, as well as differences in ideology, have prevented them from being fully co-opted into the insurgent movement.[16]

Nigerian conflicts seem to intersect at vital points. A case in point is the activities of Mohammed Marwa (nicknamed Maitatsine), a Muslim preacher, who in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, using an extremist sectarian Islamic ideology, threatened the security of northern Nigeria. His revolt became the foundation of subsequent ethno-religious and political conflicts in the country. There seems to be a connection between the extremist ideology of Maitatsine and the insurgency of Boko Haram, and ultimately the rural banditry that is devastating the North West. In a similar vein, even the farmer–herder conflict in the Middle Belt is often associated with the religious fundamentalism of Maitatsine, because the conflict occurs mainly between herders who are mostly Muslims and Central Nigerian/Middle Belt farmers who are mostly Christians and animists.[17] Furthermore, the conflict has continued to transform into banditry and later into kidnapping for ransom.

Of all these violent conflicts, the one that stands out, and has received the most interest from the international community, is the violent extremism of Boko Haram insurgents, due to their deadly activities. From 2009 onwards, Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Yobe and Taraba states were the worst affected, with Borno becoming the epicentre. Insurgency can be based on political, economic or even religious factors, and often falls into the category of 'irregular warfare', since it normally lacks the organisation of a revolution, even though it has the same aims. The ongoing insurgency in the North East, which has substantially challenged the legitimacy of the Nigerian state, is actively led by JAS, known locally as Boko Haram.

'Boko' means 'school', in this case referring to Western-style education, while 'Haram' means 'forbidden', 'ungodly' or 'sinful'. Thus Boko Haram denotes, whether literally or figuratively, that Western forms of education are forbidden or sinful.[18] Though there are different factions within Boko Haram, this name is used throughout this report. Insurgents have kidnapped many women and girls, displaced communities, killed and injured many people, and destroyed much valuable property. More than 2 million people have been displaced since 2009. Of these, 1.8 million are located within Maiduguri and other parts of Borno State.[19] The next section explores the drivers of extremism globally as well as in Nigeria.

Theories and drivers of conflict

A number of theories exist as to why armed conflict arises. Some have argued that this is related to the failure of the state to provide protection and welfare services (the State Failure theory),[20] or that frustration arises out of certain conditions, such as unemployment, poverty, inequality and marginalisation (the Frustration-Aggression theory).[21] There are also political economy discourses that examine how governments, economic systems and politics influence each other. These theories have a dual dimension: from a liberal perspective, societies characterised by religious, ethnic, tribal or racial pluralism are assumed to be prone to conflicts. From a Marxist perspective, conflict arises mainly out of the unequal distribution of wealth, in a way that favours dominant elements which control the means of production to the detriment of the working and other underprivileged classes.[22]

Many of these theories can also be applied to violent extremism, which is generally seen as complex and non-linear, comprising different factors and stages. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) argues that extremism incorporates both 'push' and 'pull' factors. The 'push' factors include high levels of social marginalisation and fragmentation, poor governance, government repression and human rights violations, as well as endemic corruption and elite impunity and cultural threat perceptions. According to USAID, the 'pull' factors relate to personal rewards such as access to material resources, social status and respect from peers, a sense of belonging and adventure, and achieving glory and fame. These obviously require more of an individual rather than a collective examination.[23]

A lack of civil liberties and blocked political participation can create grievances that lead to violent extremism

Moreover, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) has found that a lack of civil liberties and blocked political participation can create grievances that lead to violent extremism, and that there is evidence to support the notion that civil or political society will turn to violence if faced with repression. Importantly, when individuals feel that chances of achieving social change have been

closed out, their search for identity can present a risk of radicalisation. There is also evidence to suggest that religious and ethnic identities, if competing against loyalties to the state, can be exploited. In addition, shared discrimination makes people more susceptible to a 'single narrative'. Beyond this, government failure to provide basic services is strongly linked to extremism.[24]

Many of these 'push' factors are evident in Nigeria. For instance, in 2022, nearly 133 million Nigerians were multidimensionally poor,[25] with 65 per cent of these people living in the North, and seven in ten people in Borno State being multidimensionally poor.[26] The Mo Ibrahim Index[27] ranks Nigeria 46.3/100 for 'Participation, Rights and Inclusion', while the Corruption Perception Index ranks Nigeria 24/100 for corruption.[28]

In an attempt to gain a more granular understanding of the drivers of extremism, the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) 2017 report, *Journey to extremism in Africa,* analysed findings from interviews across the continent.[29] It found that people living in regions that have traditionally been marginalised are more vulnerable, and also lack exposure to people of other religions and ethnicities, education and civic engagement.

Importantly, the report showed that there was a difference between perceptions of religion in joining a violent extremist group and actual religious literacy – while 51 per cent of respondents cited religion as a reason for joining a violent extremist group, 57 per cent admitted that they had little or no understanding of religious texts.[30] Grievances about government, or a lack of confidence in the system, were linked to the highest incidence of violent extremism. There were also key linkages to grievances about

security actors, marked by particular tipping points, namely government actions such as killing or arresting a family member or friend. A major 'pull' factor was the opportunity for radical change offered by violent extremism.[31]

In 2023, the UNDP conducted another study of eight countries in sub-Saharan Africa, namely Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan, involving 2 196 interviews. It reaffirmed many of the findings in the first report, but also showed how religion is used as a conduit for channelling context-based grievances and identity, with religious literacy being a key source of resilience against extremism. It further found that the hope of employment was a key driver of recruitment. Unlike the previous study, a lack of trust in government was found to be a factor in extremism, with perceptions of distrust of security actors fuelling grievances. Dissatisfaction with state service provision was widespread, leading to extremism. Moreover, extremist groups were using this to present themselves as alternative options to the state. Significantly, local actors were more trusted than state authorities.[32]

The gendered pathways that persuade men and women to join extremist groups also need to be examined. UN Women explains that women are not merely passive victims of extremist groups, subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence, but also active agents who join these groups voluntarily, and act as combatants, suicide bombers, raising young jihadi fighters, gathering sources of finance, and providing emotional and psychological support.[33] Between 2014 and 2017, in the North East zone of Nigeria alone, girls and women accounted for more than 100 suicide bombings.[34] Tosin argues that Boko Haram has followed a 'feminisation of terror'

strategy, premised on the fact that women are less likely to be seen as terrorists, and therefore more likely to be successful in carrying out bombings.[35]

Even so, the UNDP report shows that women are less likely to join extremist organisations for ideological reasons rather than socialised factors and a reliance on their husband,[36] but UN Women finds these socialised factors to relate to marginalisation, discrimination and gender-based violence (GBV). Men who are radicalised have been found to be more violent towards women, and women who have experienced GBV are more likely to be exposed to radicalisation.[37]

Boko Haram has followed a 'feminisation of terror' strategy, premised on the fact that women are less likely to be seen as terrorists

Okech argues that a gender analysis needs to be incorporated into radicalisation theories and programmes to ensure a holistic response.[38] She argues for a nuanced understanding of why women choose to join or leave armed groups; that (if not abducted) they often join for similar reasons as men, namely economic benefits and their associated freedoms; and that women are not homogeneous in these groups, and therefore have differential access to power and resources. These factors imply the need for a reconceptualisation of existing reintegration programmes based on a unidimensional perspective of women as victims. Okech draws on qualitative research conducted in Maiduguri to consider aspects of social norms, socio-economic status, gender,

ethnicity and religion. She draws on Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, which argues that there is a need to think about sovereignty not only in terms of a political state, but also in terms of the power to exercise control over life and death. Thus Okech argues that those who associate with Boko Haram are seeking to leverage sovereignty in a context that is often characterised by powerlessness. She contends that the cultural, religious and legal inequalities of women, such as limited access to education, the labour market and land, along with high birth rates and an overreliance on masculine patronage, combined with poverty, play key roles in driving women to join Boko Haram.[39] She further asserts that gender is a tactical tool used by Boko Haram to govern gender, and that women, through engaging with Boko Haram, gain access to power associated with necropolitics.[40]

Abatan cites a number of reasons why women join extremist groups in West Africa. These include protection against violence, efforts to preserve their income-generating activities, avenging the deaths of family members, finding or following their husbands (although women are also sometimes used as bait to attract men), accessing religious education, undergoing military training, and access to food or medicine.[41]

All these factors need to be taken into account in order to develop a multifaceted and comprehensive approach towards countering and preventing violent extremism (C/PVE). Specifically in terms of gender, PVE programming, particularly community responses to social issues, must include the participation and perspectives of women.[42] For example, Okech observes that the reintegration for women is often seen as easier, but that this

does not adequately reflect the loss of power felt by women when they return from the bush. Therefore, it is important to understand the 'pull' factors that either drive women back into the bush, or towards being reintegrated with communities. In addition, the provision of economic opportunities does not reflect the idea of the loss of a political status that leads to 'social death'. [43]

The next section examines how international responses to CT and PVE have changed over time, and how Nigeria has adapted its approach to addressing these challenges.

Narratives of and approaches to preventing violent extremism

International narratives and approaches

Traditionally, international responses to terrorism have often failed to take into account the different contexts in which extremism in Africa prevails, and Nigeria is no exception.[44] In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terror attacks in the United States, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) began to take a stronger and more institutionalised stance against terrorism, adopting resolutions to condemn incidents, and imposing targeted sanctions on those supporting these acts, including restrictions on providing assets to designated persons, or dealing with the assets of designated persons.[45] Most of those resolutions have been directed at ISIL and Al Qaida.

The UN ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee associated Boko Haram with Al Qaida in resolutions 1267/1989/2253, thus declaring it an international terrorist organisation, but failing to adequately consider local actors and drivers. In addition, the challenges of dealing with Boko Haram were largely left to the national governments in the region as well as the Multinational Joint Task Force

(MNJTF), which have played a militarised and security-focused role. Resolution 2349 (2017) places an overwhelming emphasis on urging governments in the Lake Chad region to prosecute those responsible for terrorist acts and to develop rehabilitation programmes as well as reintegration programmes for those who have completed their sentences.[46] This stance is closely aligned to a criminal justice perspective, as well as the argument that those who have committed crimes against humanity are not eligible for amnesty and must be prosecuted under customary international law.[47]

The UN's traditional narrative has therefore been one of militarisation and counter-terrorism as well as retributive justice, but efforts have also been made to broaden this perspective over time. In 2015, the UN released a Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism in which it acknowledged that two of the four pillars of its Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS), which was adopted in 2006 – specifically the conditions conducive to terrorism, and ensuring two of the four pillars – the conditions conducive to terrorism, and ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law – of its Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (GCTS), which was adopted in

2006, had often been overlooked. Therefore, the Plan of Action guides member states to develop more comprehensive and human-security-focused strategies, which emphasise dialogue and conflict prevention as well as restorative justice, together with broad-based community engagement.[48]

The African Union (AU) has also adopted a largely militarised approach to extremism. None of its primary frameworks, namely the Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism (1999), the Algiers Plan of Action on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism (2002) and the African Model Anti-Terrorism Law (2011), addresses the issue of PVE, and despite recent statements on counter-terrorism that embody a more comprehensive approach,[49] it has largely supported countries in the Lake Chad Basin by authorising the MNJTF.

More recently, the 2018 Regional Strategy for Stabilisation, Recovery and Resilience (RS-SRR) has been developed for the Lake Chad Basin, which emphasises a 'New Way of Working', moving away from securitised approaches alone to winning the hearts and minds of communities. This strategy has four pillars: political cooperation; security and human rights; the disarmament, demobilisation, rehabilitation, reinsertion and reintegration of persons (DDRRR) associated with Boko Haram; and humanitarian assistance.[50]

The DDRRR pillar involves a transitional justice component, although this only explicitly speaks to strengthening and harmonising 'national transitional and criminal justice systems to effectively undertake the investigation and prosecution of persons associated with Boko Haram and other forms of accountability'.[51] This neglects the many complementary aspects of transitional justice as outlined in

the AU's Transitional Justice Policy (AUTJP), which was adopted in 2019, including truth-telling, redistributive (socio-economic) justice, reparations, memorialisation, African traditional justice mechanisms, and political and institutional reforms.[52] The AUTJP also situates the need for victim-centred and gender-sensitive transitional justice programmes. However, both the UN and the AU have often been silent on the link between governance and violent extremism.[53] In the past, Nigeria's approach to counter-terrorism and PVE has followed suit.

Nigerian narratives and responses

The term 'kinetic' is often used to describe Nigeria's past efforts to address its insurgency. This implies the use of lethal military force, as opposed to a full-spectrum approach of non-military and military approaches.[54] It reflects the previous government's perspective that Boko Haram did not have legitimate grievances, and that dialogue with it was not an option. In particular, Boko Haram's use of violence has meant that it has been easy for the Nigerian state to dismiss the causes fuelling the group's continued presence and expansion.

Boko Haram is said to have emerged in the early 2000s, in an arena characterised by intra-Salafi competition. The growth of democracy and freedom of speech at this time also drew animosity, with Boko Haram openly criticising the Nigerian state. Moreover, the group attempted to construct an alternative state that included a cabinet, religious police and a farm, with welfare handouts as well as food and shelter.[55] Youths were offered jobs in working the land, given micro loans to start businesses, and given motorcycles, enabling them to work as drivers.[56]

It is believed the former governor of Borno State, Mala Kachalla, was reluctant to implement full Sharia law, as was being done in some other northern states, thereby leading to his defeat in the 2003 elections. This prompted an alliance between Mohammed Yusuf and the subsequent governor, Ali Modu Sheriff, on the one hand, and Buji Foi, an avid follower and father-in-law of Mohammed Yusuf, appointed as the commissioner of religious affairs, Borno state, on the other.[57] While this shows an early attempt to consider Yusuf's political demands, such efforts were short-lived.

In 2009, the police and Boko Haram began to clash, following a tightening of law enforcement that required motorcyclists to wear crash helmets. At that time, the Nigerian elite were competing against the group for control of the motorcycle industry.[58] Members of the group were travelling to a funeral when they were stopped by police. The dispute became heated, and several people in the funeral procession were killed.[59] These events justified Boko Haram's narrative of a corrupt and heavy-handed government, that had bought into an unjust Western system. Yusuf and Foi are said to have been summarily executed while in police custody, which may well have served as a 'tipping point'.[60]

The new Boko Haram leader, Abubakar Shekau, declared war, and the group re-emerged in 2010, more organised and more active than before. In 2011, the group targeted schools in retaliation for the supposed arrests of Islamic teachers from traditional 'Tsangaya' Quranic schools in Maiduguri.[61] At that time, the government was believed to be only hiring people with Christian education, and the arrests were therefore seen as an attack on the Tsangaya system as a whole.[62] This suggests the movement was established in response to a perceived unequal and unjust system of governance.

The Boko Haram movement was established in response to a perceived unequal and unjust system of governance

The president at the time, Goodluck Jonathan, quickly labelled the organisation as having ties to international terrorist networks, resulting in the UNSC designating Boko Haram as a foreign terrorist organisation. Ette and Joe stress the role played by the Nigerian media in labelling the group as 'terrorists' or 'insurgents', thus affecting how it was popularly understood.[63] The group was also given the name 'the Nigerian Taliban'.[64] Moreover, the issue of Boko Haram was politicised, mainly by the two main political parties, the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC). Nwangu, Ononogbu and Okoye cite the 'widely held view that state governments whose parties are not in power at the centre tend to sabotage the counter-terror campaign in order to blame the federal government for any loopholes in the counter-insurgence operations', with the latter lacking the courage to put people in prison.[65] While the federal government under Jonathan claimed that Boko Haram was established by aggrieved northern politicians,[66] some of the latter, such as the former governor of Adamawa State, retired Vice-Admiral Murtala Nyako, argued that the federal government's inability to contain Boko Haram could be seen as a disregard for the North, or even an intention to destroy it.[67]

Walker argues that shortening the movement's name to Boko Haram made it more difficult

to understand their motives, noting that its full name was 'really a succinct critique and implied rejection of Yusuf's teachings'.[68] He cites Raufu Mustapha's observation that Boko Haram is not a single group, but one that has morphed as it has evolved, thereby making it hard to define.[69] He also argues that the group is a grassroots movement that has emerged from anger, while also being a 'kind of personality cult, an Islamic millenarianist sect, inspired by a heretical but charismatic preacher'.[70]

Moreover, Walker suggests that Jonathan arguably played up connections to wider terrorist networks as a means of securing funding from international partners. However, Boko Haram was less intent on attacking Western interests than in growing a state-like organisation that could act in parallel with the state until it could eventually take over the whole of northern Nigeria.[71] Brechenmacher argues that this

labelling ruled out any political dialogue[72] and enforced a narrow counter-terrorism response which was further supported in international circles in the form of resolutions 1267/1989/2253, tying Boko Haram to an international network.[73]

In 2011, the government launched Operation Restore Order, incorporating members of the Nigeria Police Force, Nigeria Armed Forces, Department of State Security, Nigeria Customs Service, Nigeria Immigration Service and Defence Intelligence Agency. In 2013, the government imposed a State of Emergency in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa States. Then, in April 2014, the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok drew international condemnation, inspiring 6.1 million tweets with the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls.[74] The incident also brought to the fore that Boko Haram was a national rather than a northern issue, and helped to turn local public opinion against it.

During this time, the Nigerian military continued to step up its operations. Its approach was often heavy-handed, and more than 200 civilians of Borno State are alleged to have been killed in the same year.[75] The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), created to fight violent crimes, is the most notorious example of the human rights violations committed by the Nigerian security apparatus, but it was only disbanded in 2020 after thousands of protestors took to the streets citing extortion, torture and killings. This followed a 2018 report by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) which recommended disciplinary action against guilty officers.[76] These actions may have fuelled violent extremism in the country.

The challenges of corruption, inefficiency and weak accountability within the Nigerian military are said to have hampered international cooperation, leading to a shift in focus by international actors and national governments towards a more regional approach to countering violent extremism.[77] In an effort to improve internal cohesion within the different branches of the security forces, the Terrorism Prevention Act (2011), amended in 2013, designated the Office of the National Security Advisor (ONSA) as the coordinating body for law enforcement agencies. Subsequently, Nigeria's Counter-Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST), developed under Jonathan in 2014, made some effort towards a more comprehensive approach that included, for example, a programme to facilitate engagements between government and civil society, academics and religious and traditional leaders, and programmes of poverty alleviation and economic development.[78]

As the Nigerian government struggled to contain the insurgency, civilians also stepped in to protect communities. These groups are also examples of citizen agency. They are key actors in the conflict landscape, and belie the dominant portrayal of citizens as hapless victims. Instead, they also seek to fill the void left by formal state security structures.[79] It is therefore worth noting the rise of certain community security mechanisms from 2009 onwards, known as Voluntary Security Outfits (VSOs). Borno State harbours a few VSOs that have different dynamics and roles depending on the various security and context dynamics that led to their establishment. On the whole, these groups have been lauded by civilians for their ability to protect communities, including pushing back armed groups from the capital of Borno State in the early days of Boko Haram, screening entry to towns and protecting IDP camps.[80]

Some of these VSOs have existed for a long time, combating banditry, theft, and armed groups. The Kungiyar Maharba (hunters) have been in Borno State the longest, dating back a few generations.[81] The Yan Banga (vigilantes) and the Kesh Kesh (Shuwa vigilantes) are additional community groups, sometimes under the same leadership as the Kungiyar Maharba, but with slightly different roles and responsibilities. The Yan Banga were formed in rural areas in the early 1980s where police presence was limited, and in a context of poverty, inequality and insecurity. These community security organisations initially protected people against thieves, but post 2009 increasingly began to address the broader insecurity challenges posed by the insurgency. A Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) also arose in 2013 in Maiduguri as a direct response to Boko Haram.[82]

The CJTF consists of young people, men and women, who have played active roles in protecting communities and supporting government counter-terrorism programmes in

Borno State. At the beginning of the conflict, the Nigerian security forces found it hard to distinguish between civilians and members of Boko Haram. This led to mass arrests and arbitrary detentions, which made some civilians even more susceptible to recruitment by the extremist group. Due to their success, they were officially adopted by the Borno State government in 2013 as part of the Borno Youth Empowerment Scheme (BOYES), receiving uniforms, a monthly stipend and training.[83] They can therefore be seen as a paramilitary youth group with a degree of state protection.

> Mass arrests and arbitrary detentions by the Nigerian security forces made some civilians even more susceptible to recruitment by the extremist group

They have been an important quasi-civilian actor in the counter-terrorism landscape (and have even been referred to as 'game changers').[84] They have been able to draw on their knowledge of local inhabitants, geography, cultures and languages to strengthen intelligence efforts, and have played a key role in taking in ex-Boko Haram members who have surrendered to them. They have also strengthened cooperation between civilians and the military, leading to greater trust. However, the lack of an accountability framework poses a challenge to human rights by opening up the potential for human rights abuses.[85]

Women have also played significant roles in these groups, particularly in southern Borno, and while their roles vary, they have been known to play security roles such as hunting, defending the community, searching suspected female Boko Haram members for bombs and guns, as well as non-militarised roles such as making indigenous medicines and protective charms, and resolving disputes.[86] There are women in the CJTF, but Ogundiran argues that women continue to be subjected to patriarchal and hierarchical norms and perspectives, namely that the 'hard work' or security operation is a masculine role. She states that 'the religious and cultural doctrines that portray men as leaders and guardians created in the men the feeling to exercise superiority and make decisions for the CJTF women regarding what they can or cannot do'.[87] As a result, women do not play a decision-making or leadership role. There is also benevolent sexism, in that women are not seen as capable of protecting themselves. Moreover, women are sometimes mislabelled as prostitutes for being active in a male-dominated security organisation. The research found that women's integration was largely based on operational needs, namely the fact that the cultural context in Borno State did not allow CJTF men to search women.

From the women's perspectives, many of the people interviewed for this study explained that they had joined intentionally as a means of achieving personal goals, or attempting to change the behaviour of male members of the CJTF, as well as the organisation as a whole. Thus, despite the constraints under which they work, women are not passive or powerless. Rather, their agency in the CJTF is fluid, and changes constantly. The study therefore suggests that codes of conduct should be developed for the CJTF, and that mental health care should be provided for members, particularly women.[88]

By 2015, the MNJTF, with the support of these civilian paramilitaries, had reoccupied a significant amount of territory in Nigeria, but Boko Haram had also become more prominent in neighbouring countries. The group splintered into ISWAP, led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi, while Shekau commands the JAS. Meanwhile, Muhammadu Buhari was elected as president in 2015. By then, the conflict had resulted in the destruction of lives, properties and livelihoods. This was compounded by social problems, such as a rise in drug addiction, extreme poverty, and the proliferation of small arms and other light weapons. Climate change further compounded the challenges of fishing and agriculture. Certain villages became no-go areas, with schools attacked and people unable to go to work. As Boko Haram moved to capture towns and villages, these were cut off from local government services, including access to water, electricity and hospitals, and residents were forced to pay taxes to the group instead.

The international and Nigerian discourse has subsequently shifted from militarisation/ neutralisation towards 'stabilisation', although this term has been used differently by stakeholders, from broadly encompassing the transition from humanitarian aid to long-term development to a narrower focus on restoring local governance and state authority.[89]

In 2016, Buhari (who was initially opposed to the soft approaches in NACTEST, favouring military approaches instead)[90] launched the 'Buhari Plan' for rebuilding the North East, centred on emergency humanitarian assistance, social stabilisation and protection, and early recovery, and prepared by the Presidential Committee on the North East Initiative.[91]

In September 2018, Germany, Nigeria, Norway and the UN hosted the High-Level Conference on the Lake Chad Region, bringing together 27 governments as well as 24 regional

and international organisations, as well as representatives from national and international civil society. The outcome document defined stabilisation as seeking 'to enable first steps towards reconciliation between parties to the conflict and to establish social and political consensus as a foundation for legitimate political structures and long-term development'.[92]

In 2017, Nigeria developed a Policy Framework and National Action Plan for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE). Its objectives are to:

- Institutionalise, mainstream and coordinate PCVE programmes at the national, state and local levels;

- Strengthen accessible justice systems and respect for human rights and rule of law;

- Enhance the capacity of individuals and communities to prevent and counter violent extremism, and recover from violent occurrences; and

- Institutionalise, mainstream and integrate strategic communication in PCVE programmes at all levels.[93]

The plan shifts Nigeria's approach to terrorism and extremism towards a 'whole-of-government and whole-of-society' approach, and more comprehensive multi-stakeholder and community-oriented solutions. However, it has been criticised for failing to adequately translate from the federal to the state level and for failing to adequately consult stakeholders, leading to a trust gap between communities and the government.[94] There is also a lack of awareness of the plan, and some have raised criticisms that inadequate budgets have been set aside for programmes, particularly at the state level.

Gaps in responses

As a result of the shift towards stabilisation, programming in Borno State has subsequently focused on three main areas: 1) strengthening local conflict prevention and community security mechanisms; 2) restoring local government and basic services; and 3) supporting reintegration and social cohesion.[95] In terms of local conflict prevention and community security mechanisms, the rise of the CJTF is notable. Its members now receive salaries from the Borno State government, but their future is uncertain as Borno State seeks to demobilise all armed groups in the state.[96]

The National Action Plan shifts Nigeria's approach to terrorism and extremism towards a 'whole-of-government and whole-of-society' approach

At the same time, the role of traditional and religious leaders, who have historically played a significant role in dispute resolution, has been weakened.[97] Some programming has therefore focused on strengthening dialogue. For example, one initiative has been the Hadin Kan Mu Karfin Mu (Our Unity, Our Strength) and the Ido da Ido (Face to Face) project organised in July 2019 by International Alert Nigeria (IAN), with the support of religious groups and the communities of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states. It is aimed at 'reinforcing the resilience and reintegration of women and children, promoting peacebuilding in communities affected by Boko Haram, and strengthening effective engagement between community vigilantes and security officers across affected areas'.[98]

The Borno State government and the Borno State Islamic Association also decided to establish peace clubs, and designed a curriculum for teaching peace studies in Western schools at the primary and secondary level. The curriculum also targets children attending religious schools, or Madrasas, with Islamic clerics working to deconstruct the narratives of Boko Haram.[99] Peacebuilding efforts were also accompanied by mass media campaigns developed by the Nigerian federal government, that looked to counter the narrative put forward by Boko Haram, and shape the behaviour of youths. This included the production of jingles in English and Hausa that were run on television and radio, newspapers, magazines and the internet.[100] There has also been an influx of international NGOs and a surge in locally based organisations, working on different issues.

The focus on restoring local government administration and basic services has also led to efforts to include communities in decision-making around local services, as well as providing services to increase resilience (as dealt with later, this is also part of the Borno Model). Starting with the 2016 Buhari plan, this has been a key focus in Borno State. However, this depends on access due to security reasons, and interventions remain too short term and relief-oriented.[101] In Borno, the Ministry of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement has been criticised for failing to engage with donors that are seeking to improve transparency in relief and recovery activities, which is a challenge for developing a more holistic and comprehensive multi-stakeholder approach.[102]

Meanwhile, in terms of DDRRR, the main model has been Operation Safe Corridor for high-risk defectors, established in 2016 under a presidential directive. As per the regional strategy for the Lake Chad Basin, this involves screening, prosecutions, rehabilitation through de-radicalisation programmes, psychosocial support (PSS), vocational training courses and reintegration. These perpetrators are then labelled as 'graduates'. However, the reintegration process has not always been favourably received by community members, who see the scheme as rewarding those who perpetrated violence, while those who rejected the violence get nothing for opting for peace and public order.

As one victim of the insurgency noted: 'For us to agree on any reconciliation or dialogue, our livelihoods have to be resuscitated; we lost all our properties to the insurgency, and we see de-radicalized Boko Haram members with assets provided for them to restart their lives, while we, the victims, who lost everything, have not received any help: we cannot accept that.'[103]

There have also been some fears that the programme could incentivise youths to join armed groups to get more favourable attention from government.[104]

Furthermore, some observers analysts have been sceptical about just how genuine the repentances by former Boko Haram members really are.[105] The feeling in the past has been that communities have not been adequately consulted.[106] Attitudes towards reconciliation also depend on the level of victimisation, with those suffering more from victimisation less likely to forgive. For instance, women who have been victims of sexual violence have been the strongest advocates for prosecution, while those former Boko Haram members who were forcibly conscripted, or repented over time, were more favourably considered.[107] Openly asking for forgiveness from the community, requesting or

seeking forgiveness from God, and swearing an oath never to repeat the condemnable acts were listed as the main requirements for reconciliation and reintegration by community members.[108]

An evaluation conducted of Operation Safe Corridor found that an 'overemphasis on pre-release activities and minimal attention to community reintegration and reconciliation is a historic weakness'

In addition, an evaluation conducted between July 2020 and March 2021 of Operation Safe Corridor by USAID found that an 'overemphasis on pre-release activities and minimal attention to community reintegration and reconciliation is a historic weakness repeating itself in NE Nigeria'.[109] The report found that PSS was one of the most effective elements of the programme, since community, family and friend relationships, a supportive religious network, access to counsellors, suitable housing, employment, financial stability, and a sense of belonging were all key to preventing people from joining violent extremist groups. The report also found that the programme was still overly militarised in terms of the opaqueness around vetting and categorisation. The lack of capacity in the criminal justice system to prosecute, risks of human rights abuses when the CJTF faces hardliners, and inadequate funding were all vital issues mitigating against positive outcomes.[110]

Thus, as noted, the DDRRR approach embodied in Operation Safe Corridor fails to adequately consider community needs, which

further highlights the importance of moving to an approach centred on survivors instead of perpetrators. The wider range of transitional justice tools included in the AUTJP could be an important start. Furthermore, it is increasingly recognised that conflicts are gendered, and that specific and separate efforts must be made to address the issues faced by women and girls. This includes measures to protect victims against social and cultural stigma when investigating and prosecuting sexual and gender-based violence, and efforts to address the psychosocial, medical and livelihood needs of survivors. It also means ensuring women's participation at all stages of transitional justice.[111] However, this does not seem to be a focus in Operation Safe Corridor, with only a few women sent to the Bulumkutu Rehabilitation Centre in Maiduguri, Borno State, predominantly for vocational training, while the rest were quickly reintegrated into society.[112]

Not all women are innocent victims – in fact, Boko Haram has relied on female suicide bombers more than any other terrorist group in the world. Between 2014 and 2017, in the North East alone, girls and women accounted for more than 100 suicide bombings.[113]

More broadly, one of the gaps in the Nigerian response relates to the lack of federal-level commitment and cooperation. It is not always clear who is supposed to make decisions or take the lead between the federal and state government, and coordination of different stakeholders has been challenging. Federal policy is not always aligned with state-level priorities, and communities have not been adequately consulted on the way forward.[114] This has not stopped Borno State from forging ahead in new directions.

Alternative narratives and approaches: The Borno Mass Exit Model

In 2018, Babagana Umara Zulum was elected governor of Borno State. His committed leadership and political will is argued to have been instrumental in developing a new and innovative approach to preventing violent extremism.[115] Zulum immediately set about establishing the Borno State Security Trust Fund (BSSTF), intended to provide security equipment and other human, material and financial resources to enhance the functioning of federal, state and local government agencies. In this regard, the fund aimed to modernise, reconstruct and expand security infrastructure, and to restore public and private infrastructure. The BSSTF also strengthened the management of small arms and light weapons, based on conversations with repentant insurgents.[116]

The trust fund thus provided a legal framework for collecting resources, and succeeded in re-opening the main roads linking Maiduguri with the rest of the country as well as international routes, and ensuring the safety of relocated communities. Commercial activities were restored, with efforts to provide alternative sources of livelihood and job opportunities to repentant combatants. The Borno State government also instituted a 'cash for guns' strategy to incentivise insurgents to surrender their weapons. By 2021, a wave of mass defections had begun, with battle-weariness and fatigue beginning to show among Boko Haram members. Zulum thus seized the opportunity to develop an approach that built on community participation and localisation.

Subsequently, the governor developed a Community-based Reconciliation and Reintegration Policy which is awaiting approval by the state assembly. This is envisaged to complement the national-level Operation Safe Corridor response. This policy emphasises the importance of giving Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) 'opportunities to understand alternative narratives to violent extremism and seek change through peaceful means',[117] while also stressing the need for reintegration, transitional justice and reconciliation. The document notes that the handling of NSAGs does not fall under classical DDR, since there is no peace agreement or ceasefire, and must therefore undergo screening, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration as per the UNSC counter-terrorism framework. Importantly, the policy notes that it does not address these issues, as this is guided by federal policies and authorities.[118] However, it is unclear how the federal government will handle the large numbers of people prior to their reintegration, and how this will be prioritised and coordinated. In this regard, the timing and sequencing of the different processes will be key. Since children are not subject to prosecution under international humanitarian law, this is one means of separating categories of people associated with Boko Haram. Rape, on the other hand, is a war crime and a crime against humanity, and must be treated as such.

The first component of Borno State's policy involves community engagement and dialogue. In a departure from past efforts in Nigeria and globally as well, the policy envisages communities playing a leading role in reconciliation and reintegration, from planning to implementation (this corresponds with current international best practice,[119] but is often not implemented in reality). Moreover, the policy envisages the establishment of community-based reconciliation and reintegration committees, providing a clear means of implementation.[120]

The second key aspect of the policy is reconciliation. In other parts of the world, rituals and religious ceremonies have been used to promote trust-building and reconciliation, and this policy allows the local committees to decide on the approach, which may vary according to the local context and situation. This is key for allowing communities to determine their own sense of justice, and the parameters for forgiveness – for example, are they meant to repent to God, victims or communities?[121]

In a departure from past efforts in Nigeria and globally as well, the policy envisages communities playing a leading role in reconciliation and reintegration, from planning to implementation

The third aspect of the policy relates to transitional justice. Noting the prosecutions of senior leadership, it also allows for *ummah* (the collective sense of solidarity and peace) through the establishment of official Islamic Sulhu courts for lower-level and repentant NSAGs. It also calls for restorative justice: *ihsan* (healing and reconciliation), *samah* (forgiveness) and *adl* (justice).[122] Here, it will be important for the courts to act fairly across all classes and ethnicities.

These three aspects of the Borno policy – community engagement and dialogue, reconciliation, and transitional justice – are organic approaches that have a high degree of legitimacy as they are based on custom, religion and history. As the UNDP's 2017 report showed, levels of trust were higher in religious and community leaders than in government institutions, and the use of these actors to develop the different aspects of this policy is therefore welcomed. However, these approaches must emphasise a victim-centred and gender-sensitive approach. In addition, truth-telling has been an important aspect in other parts of the world, such as South Africa, giving victims a voice and a platform on which to tell their stories, while also pushing perpetrators to provide much-needed closure to victims' families. The National Human Rights Commission in Nigeria has started to collect testimonies, which should be used to bolster these new efforts.[123]

Beyond these aspects, the policy calls for the restoration of social and productive infrastructure and livelihoods, and a public information campaign and awareness-raising. As noted earlier, peace cannot be fully restored until people are able to gain access to basic services and livelihoods, and is also vital for preventing further recruitment. A public information campaign is needed to ensure public legitimacy, public ownership and trust, and to promote public understanding of the process.

The final aspect of the policy refers to community reintegration. Marking a departure from past efforts at reintegration, it puts communities in the forefront, and emphasises:

1. Dual targeting, meaning that both community members and reintegrees[124] should benefit from targeted (individual) reintegration assistance.

2. Working with former NSAG associate initiatives on socio-economic activities that have potential for benefiting the community as a whole.

3. Area-based interventions that target a defined geographic territory containing conflict-affected communities with large clusters of former NSAG associates, while considering all networks and economic flows that affect (or could affect) the defined territory.

Rather than providing packages of support, reintegration packages (available to both NSAGs and community members) will rather be focused on providing services based on a combination of economic, social and psychological needs, the ambitions of reintegrees, and market opportunities. Members of CJTFs are also encouraged to reintegrate into civilian life, with reintegration packages tailored to their specific needs.

Gender should be a cross-cutting issue across all of the other aspects of the Borno State policy, with women involved in key decision-making processes across community engagement and dialogue, reconciliation and transitional justice

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This Borno State policy is positive in that it provides incentives and makes an effort to ensure that communities do not feel that NSAGs receive preferential treatment by including both community members and reintegrees. However, the socio-economic activities undertaken by NSAGs must make communities feel that they are forms of reparation, intended to help them rebuild their lives – in countries such as East Timor, for example, this took the form of community service.

The policy also provides specifically for children, women, the elderly and the disabled. Children, as per the UN Paris Principles of Children Associated with Armed Forces, are not subject to prosecution,[125] and are eligible for reintegration. Meanwhile, the policy states that reintegration programmes should meet the specific requirements of and provide specific resources for special-needs groups. As noted, rape is a crime under international humanitarian law, and therefore special care needs to be taken to ensure that those accused of rape are prosecuted and that women are not re-traumatised. Rather than an afterthought, gender should be a cross-cutting issue across all of the other aspects of the Borno State policy, with women involved in key decision-making processes across community engagement and dialogue, reconciliation and transitional justice. These approaches should also seek to address structural violations such as discrimination against and the inequality of women.

Importantly, the Borno policy also establishes an Information, Counselling and Referral System, which the USAID evaluation[126] found to be one of the most effective aspects of OPSC, and often an overlooked aspect of transitions. This must be adequately funded and resourced.

The Borno State policy is a marked shift towards a localised approach that incentivises people to leave armed groups. The 2023 UNDP report titled *Journey to extremism* shows that voluntary disengagement ensures that those associated with armed groups are less likely to return, that government incentives and amnesty programmes influence decisions to leave armed

groups, and these factors have a cascading effect. It stresses the importance of service delivery and strengthening community-based reintegration and reconciliation efforts through community and locally based organisations. It emphasises the need to scale up amnesty and exit programmes, together with comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration services. These should include mental health and psychosocial support, raising awareness of and access to amnesty and disengagement strategies, developing gender-sensitive strategies, and leveraging the perspectives of peer networks and structures, including former violent extremist group members, as voices for alternative or counter-messaging.[127] This policy is an important new effort.

Nevertheless, the UNDP report also emphasises strengthening the oversight of state security actors and acknowledging legitimate grievances, as well as the need for political and institutional reforms, such as resource-sharing. Trust has developed between state security actors and communities, perhaps partly due to support for the CJTF, but community policing should still be emphasised, as should efforts to ensure that all security actors are non-politicised. Religious authorities should continue to play a role in counter-messaging and resilience, and this should be adequately supported.

Essentially, the OPSC and the Borno State model combined constitute a new hybrid model that reflects Nigeria's context and which, in theory, allows for complementary and mutually reinforcing processes between the federal and state governments.[128] It is a localised approach that allows communities themselves to decide on the most appropriate means of justice, through the Sulhu courts and through restorative justice efforts. However, close coordination and agreement will be needed, particularly in respect of the screening process at the federal level. The Borno government should address low-risk perpetrators while the federal government should handle those labelled as high risk, and the former should be adequately resourced to do so.

The Borno State policy is a marked shift towards a localised approach that incentivises people to leave armed groups

This would require clear definitions and classifications, as well as efficient methods of verification. Resourcing will also be vital, and the federal government should provide Borno State with more finances to ensure that the mass exit strategy can be sustained and managed. It will also be important to develop trust between ex-combatants and communities, to prevent acts of reprisal and vengeance by carefully managing dialogues and by understanding shifting local dynamics.

THE WAY FORWARD

This situation report argues that Borno's Mass Exit Model represents a departure from traditional and securitised approaches to CT and PVE. Indeed, it may be the first model of its kind to apply transitional justice to the context of violent extremism. In the past, opportunities for dialogue in the context of violent extremism were rejected outright, because of the extreme nature of attacks, and because the labelling of the group limited attempts to understand its underlying aims. There is still no peace agreement in place, which may pose a challenge for defectors who want some kind of guarantee.

However, the Borno State model adopts a pragmatic approach to the current context, namely one that recognises the limitations of prosecutions, takes a forward-looking approach that instils a sense of ownership in communities and allows them to determine their own pathway to justice, and provides socio-economic incentives for engagement across former Boko Haram associates and communities. Dialogue remains essential for ensuring that people feel they are heard and understood, and that the drivers of conflict are addressed in a way that is acceptable to all. Dialogues should therefore be held between the government and Boko Haram, as well as between communities and those being reintegrated.

While there may be some difficulties associated with the Borno State model, it does represent a home-grown effort that seeks to be flexible and adaptive. This will include reconstructing narratives about Boko Haram that are less influenced by post 9/11 counter-terrorism narratives and approaches, and more about grievances and alternative narratives of belonging and statehood for which it is important to develop more sustainable and innovative governance and security policies and practices. These efforts should be complemented by an examination of political and institutional reform, both in Borno State and in Nigeria as a whole, aimed at ensuring that the Nigeria of the future will be just, equitable and fair.

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The IJR was launched in 2000 in the wake of the public hearings of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Our stated aim at the time of our founding was to become a civil society voice, campaigning for the adoption of the TRC's recommendations through government policy and citizen action. In light of the central role that we played in one of the most observed transitional justice processes in recent memory, our expertise and guidance has been sought in similar transitional justice processes across the African continent. The IJR continues to work towards its broadened vision of building fair, inclusive, democratic and peaceful societies in Africa, and increasingly further abroad, by designing relevant and carefully crafted interventions that combine research, dialogue, capacity-building, advocacy, policy advice and implementation support. We pursue this vision at the global, continental, regional and national levels.

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