

ROLE OF VIGILANTE GROUPS IN WAR AGAINST TERRORISM IN NORTH EASTERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *In efforts to provide safe and conducive environment for citizens as well as foreign nationals conducting businesses on her shores, the Nigerian state have over the years constituted several regular law enforcement and security agencies mandated to maintain law and order as well as prevent and fight insurgencies including the terrorism they characterize. The Yan Tatsine uprising during the second republic and Boko Haram extremism cum attacks of the fourth republic have however raised doubts in certain quarters on the intelligence gathering ability of these state security outfits. While some scholars and policy makers have in this light called for a total overhaul of some if not all of these governmental agencies, this paper opts to take a critical look into the role of local vigilante organizations in assisting the state in her war against terror and other violent crimes such as rape and kidnapping. Focusing on the activities of some vigilante cells in Borno State which aligned in 2013 as 'Civilian JTF' to rout-out Boko Haram from their communities, and adopting the group theory approach to political inquiry, this study which assesses and confirms the positive activities of the vigilantes, also calls on the government at various levels to work out a synergy of these vigilantes' activities and those of the conventional state security forces/services for the enhancement of the entire Nigerian security system.*

KEYWORDS: Terrorism, Boko Haram, Vigilante Groups, Civilian JTF, Role

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian war against terrorism with theatre mainly in the north east is no doubt one of the greatest challenges facing the country since her independence in 1960. So many people including the country's commander chief of the armed forces president Goodluck Jonathan believe the Boko Haram insurgency is more threatening than the Biafra secessionist bid and the attendant war that was fought to keep the nation one. Of peculiar challenge is the fact that the Nigerian military is confronted with an asymmetric warfare in which soldiers find it very difficult to distinguish law abiding citizens from the renegades. The rebels have so infiltrated the entire system that the president had cried loud that they do not only live in and among the people, but have crept into his government and penetrated the military and police organisations. While the then shameful melodramatic escape of the now convicted and imprisoned Boko haram suspect named Kabiru Sokoto from the custody of the Nigerian police under the commission of Zakari Biu partly confirms this presidential revelation, later successes recorded by the terrorists particularly the capturing of towns such as Bama, Gwoza, Michika and Mubi and consequent hoisting of 'Islamic caliphate' flags further accentuates

the intelligence gathering and operational abilities of this notorious sect which could not have been possible without having planted agents within the Nigerian officialdom.

It is against this backdrop that this paper revisits the role of local vigilantes which reorganised as Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) to support the military in the ongoing war on terrorism. This study becomes significant following the discordant tunes within the public as regards the activities of this group. While some praise the group for its courage and measure of assistance to the military forces, others have condemned them for alleged extra judicial punishment it has meted to those the group tagged as members of the Boko Haram sect. The outcome of this study is equally important since whatever inference drawn can be used to position or reposition other similar groups that are spread all over the country for the purpose of crime fighting and intelligence gathering. Apart from this section, others in their order of appearance are: the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework, Literature Review, Methodology, Data and Discussions, Conclusion, and the final Policy Recommendation.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Terrorism which is the systematic use of violence or terror as a means of coercion for political purposes has no single generally accepted definition in the academic field as well as the practice of international relations. This is because what one group perceives as terrorism another conceives as a freedom fighting tactic or strategy. Common definitions of terrorism refer only to those violent acts which are intended to create fear; are perpetrated for a religious, political, or ideological goal; and deliberately target or disregard the safety of unarmed innocent civilians. Some definitions now include acts of unlawful violence and war.

The word "terrorism" is politically loaded and emotionally charged, and this greatly compounds the difficulty of providing a precise definition. Studies have found over 100 definitions of terrorism (Record, 2003). These divergences have made it impossible for the United Nations to conclude a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism that incorporates a single, all-encompassing, legally binding, criminal law definition of terrorism (Diaz-Paniagua, 2008:47).

It is known however that since 1994, the United Nations General Assembly has repeatedly condemned terrorism describing it as Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes. While this definitional problem rages, workable definition can be found in Hoffman (2006:41) characterization of the term. The author proposes that by distinguishing terrorism from other forms of crime, we come to appreciate that terrorism is more often than not characterise as:

- ineluctably political in aims and motives
- violent – or, equally important, threatens violence
- designed to have far-reaching psychological repercussions beyond the immediate victim or target

- conducted by an organization with an identifiable chain of command or conspiratorial cell structure (whose members wear no uniform or identifying insignia) and
- Perpetrated by a sub national group or non-state entity.

While the characterization above is accepted as being in tandem with this paper's perception of the term, it is imperative to quickly add that the purpose of terrorism is to exploit the media in order to achieve maximum attainable publicity as an amplifying force multiplier to influence the targeted audience(s) in order to reach short- and midterm political goals including desired long-term end.

Following its recent activities which include bombings, kidnappings and man slaughtering of innocent civilians particularly since 2009 the Jama'atu Alis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal- Jihad (People Committed to the Prophet's Teaching for Propagation and Jihad) otherwise known as *Boko Haram* (western education is forbidden) has been described in several quarters and in most occasions as a terrorist outfit. This group which initially possessed no violent outlook when it emerged in 1995 was reported to have changed when the Police attacked and killed several of its members during a funeral procession without provocation or apology. Its members decided to retaliate because they see the police as agents of the same Western educated elite that forced them to the margins of society now seeking to criminalize them (The Politico, 2012:24). This explains why their initial targets were political office holders and security agents. The situation got worse when their leader Mohammed Yusuf was extra judicially executed while in police custody. This notwithstanding, the attacks on innocent and unarmed citizens gives any sane human person the justification to regard boko haram activities as terrorism.

Following the brutal activities of these insurgents which climaxed in the recent attacks and bombings of public facilities such as motor parks, markets, shopping malls and kidnappings of several people including the internationally condemned abduction of over 200 chibok community female students, the Nigerian government have sought various means ranging from military operations to partnering with civil and military organisations in and out of Nigeria to bring their destructive activities to a stop. Vigilante groups are observably a major partner to the Nigerian military in this direction.

Humorously tagged the *Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF)* by their admirers, Borno state youths who were fed up with the mayhems perpetrated by the terrorists some of whom they are very much familiar with, constituted themselves into vigilante groups with the aim of collaborating with the soldiers to rid their land of these dreaded insurgent elements. While this group which was named after the regular military Joint Task Force (JTF) that was initially tasked to flush out the terrorists before the location of a Division in Maiduguri have been applauded on several grounds particularly in exposing and arresting Boko Haram sect members, they have equally been criticized for taking law into their hands. This criticism actually raises question on the actual essence of *vigilantism* which is deducible from the dictionary connotation of who a vigilante is.

According to Encarta (2009) a Vigilante is somebody who punishes law breakers personally rather than relying on the legal authorities. Vigilantism therefore means undertaking law enforcement with or without legal authority. The idea of vigilante justice is rationalized by the notion that adequate legal mechanisms for criminal punishment are either non existence

or insufficient. Hence, vigilantes typically see the government as ineffective in enforcing the law. They justify their actions as a fulfilment of the wishes of their communities. This is why it is often persons alleged to be escaping the law or above the law that fall victims of vigilantism.

Activities of vigilantes involve various degrees of violence such as verbal and physical assaults, vandalism, and sometimes killing of individuals. From these, it is imperative to stress here that vigilantes' activities as benevolent as they might be can constitute nuisance and threat to the society if allowed without some measure of checks and monitoring. This is where the idea of role comes in. It is important that the expected function of vigilante organisations in any particular security situation be spelt out. For instance, except for sake of spontaneous self defence or protection, vigilantes who apprehend and disarm criminals should not indulge in extra judicial acts particularly because such actions might not be in the best interest of the society either in the short or long run.

The basic argument underlying the *group theory* as an approach to the understanding of any policy matter is that the role of individual members is not important. Instead acts and actions including failures and achievements are attributed to the entire group. Citing Marcur Oslon Jr., Olaniyi (2001:61) observes that individuals will rather pursue self interest except under the condition that the group is small; individuals are coerced or are offered incentives. It is on this premise that the activities of the CJTF as a vigilante group is evaluated with a view to understanding the best role to be assumed by vigilantes in the fight against terrorism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is important to start this review by stating here that the Boko Haram insurgency is indeed a very good scenario for the Nigerian state to put to test the contents of the Nigerian National Defence Policy (2006) which is a policy document that was signed into being by the Obasanjo's presidency to guide the country on what to do and what not to do when faced with certain security challenges. The contents of the policy particularly reflects the letters and spirit of section 217, sub-section 2 of the 1999 constitution which spells out the constitutional role of the Armed Forces (Okereke, 2011:445). This role can be broken down into various functions as follows:

- defending Nigeria from external aggression;
- maintaining its territorial integrity and securing its borders from violation on land, sea and air;
- suppressing insurrection and acting in aid of civil authorities to restore order when called upon to do so by the president, but subject to such conditions, as may be prescribed by an act of the national Assembly; and
- Performing such other functions as may be prescribed by an Act of the National Assembly.

The overall objective of the National Defence Policy therefore is to protect the country's interests within the ambits of the constitution. The specific objective as entrenched in the NDP (ibid: 22) are as follows:

- Protection of Nigeria's sovereignty, citizens, values, culture, interests, resources and territory against external threats.
- Provision of defence as well as strategic advice and information to the government.
- Promotion of security consciousness among Nigerians
- Response to request for aid to civil authority
- Participation in disaster management and humanitarian relief operations both at home and abroad.
- Assistance to government agencies and levels of government in achieving goals
- Protection of Nigerians wherever they reside
- Ensuring security and stability in the West African sub-region through collective security
- Participation in bilateral and multilateral operations, and
- Contributing to international peace and security.

It is in line with these provisions, that the federal government of Nigeria and various state governments in the wake of the Boko Haram deadly attacks in 2009 exhibited a rare political will to restore order and safeguard lives and properties. President Umar Yar' Adua specifically ordered the Chief of Defence Staff and the Inspector General of Police to take every measure necessary to restore order in the affected places. Consequently, soldiers and policemen were deployed in what came to be known as *Operation Flush Out II*. The security agents stormed the sects' strongholds across the country (Okereke, *ibid*: 456). But despite this initial stupendous counter-terrorism efforts, and about three years old State of Emergency declaration by the President Jonathan, Nigeria is yet to fully be on top of the war situation as the state has always claimed whenever the terrorists take swipe at their targets often constituting large chunk of defenceless civilian population. This was the scenario that informed the emergence of certain Borno State youths under the auspices of their local vigilante organizations called Yan Gora whom their admirers nick named Civilian Joint Task Force (Civilian JTF) – a titled name they earned following their initial excellent performance which saw the terrorist sect fleeing from the urban centres to some rural areas and forests. This in fact could be termed War-time civil-military partnership which is mentioned in the National Defence Policy (*ibid*: 68) where in the section 14 of Chapter 7 states that:

The Nigerian populace shall be mobilized to provide necessary support and co-operation to the Armed Forces to enable them collectively defend the nation in times of war. Procedures shall be put in place to enable the military receive prompt assistance in the use of civilian communication, transport and other facilities that it may require for the prosecution of war. There shall be legislative procedure for the mobilization of youths for military service...

The text above no doubt provides some sorts of official backing for the formation of such vigilante organisations as the CJTF except for two loopholes. First, it fails to elaborate on the actual kind of military service whether combats or intelligence or both to be provided by the youths or any segment of the civilian population and secondly the policy makers equally failed to state the mode of recruitment and remuneration of the youths when mobilised particularly in view of the fears raised earlier on concerning the possibilities of individuals pursuing self interest when group is largely populated and members not adequately motivated (Olaniyi, *ibid.*). These are issues that call for analysis of the actual role function of vigilante outfits such as the CJTF that is formed to assist the military in times of war as currently being witnessed in North Eastern Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

Information for this paper was garnered from different sources which are largely primary. Interviews were conducted through face to face contact and via telephones and emails. Community elders were asked questions whose answers availed us with information on the various activities of the vigilante groups. Though the north-eastern states worst hit by the terrorists' activities are Borno, Yobe and Adamawa, the research that produced this paper only concentrated on Borno state. After studying all data that were collected and collated, the qualitative analytical method was used to draw inferences which formed the basis for the final policy recommendations.

Origin, Aim and Modus Operandi of the CJTF

Following their inability to continue watching their own dissipation by members of the boko haram terrorists' organization and given the nod of their community leaders, Youths in Borno State formed vigilante cells to hunt suspected Islamic militants, majority of whom were forced to -flee their enclaves in the wake of the military onslaught that followed the declaration of state of emergency in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe States. Hausari ward of Maiduguri, a notorious den of the Islamic militants is known to be the first area where the activities of the vigilantes (that is the CJTF) begun. There, the group started by revealing the identities of the terrorist Boko Haram members. Youths in Gwange ward, Bolori and other areas later joined in the hunt. Members of the group who are mostly between the ages of 17 and 35 years, told interviewers that they decided to hunt down the terrorists because they had brought untold hardship on residents and jeopardized their future. A member of the group, who identified himself as Isa Musa said:

We are tired of this and we want to put an end to it. Since the soldiers don't really know who the Boko Haram members are, then we who live with them and know them have no option than to help fish them out ... We are into this to salvage our people from the Boko Haram who had killed our people, security operatives and destroyed our economy; we are not afraid of them because we are doing a just cause and God is by our side.

In terms of modus operandi, the youths go from street to street and house to house arresting identified Boko Haram members and handing them over to the operatives of the Joint Task

Force (JTF). Some of the “Civilian JTF” members seen on the streets of Maiduguri were carrying cutlasses, iron bars and wooden batons. Abubakar Malum, one of the group’s leaders, explained that they did not need guns or sophisticated rifles to catch the deadly Boko Haram insurgents, adding that their will and the support of everyone in the town were enough. All they want he said is prayers from the people and their cooperation; we are working together with the JTF soldiers. We want government to assist us with more weapons like cutlasses, iron batons and axes.

Impressed by the initial activities of these group which saw the terrorists fleeing to remote areas particularly those at the borders, the Borno State Government asked communities living in border towns with Cameroon to form similar organizations to help security agencies fish out Boko Haram members. Alhaji Zanna Mustapha – the deputy Governor gave this directive when he visited the areas following reports that thousands of them were fleeing to the neighbouring Cameroun Republic, as a result of alleged harassment by members of the Joint Task Force, (JTF) who were now being assisted by vigilante youths. The Deputy Governor who addressed traditional/religious leaders and other stakeholders, said they should select between about 150 and 200 volunteer youths in each of their communities who would be paid monthly allowances by the state government for assisting the security agencies in their onerous task of ridding the state of Boko Haram members, as such job should not be left to the JTF alone (Vanguard, 2013).

The state government in a press conference was however quick to caution members of the local vigilante group against taking laws into their hands. Represented again by Alhaji Zannah following reports of alleged negative actions of some members of the group as demonstrated on June 1 and July 24, 2013 in Maiduguri and Dikwa respectively (see Table 1), it addressed clearly among other issues that the main duty of the civilian JTF is to assist law enforcement agencies in their job of providing security to the society, that is why they sometimes join the military at the check points.

Table 1: Summary of feats and Failures of CJTF Activities (2013-2014)

	Incidence	Location
June 1, 2013	CJTF sets ANPP chairperson’s home ablaze	Maiduguri
June 14, 2013	Boko Haram killed 13 Vigilante youths	Maiduguri
July 24, 2013	CJTF sets Boko Haram sect member ablaze	Dikwa
July 26, 2013	5 CJTF plus 25 innocent civilians killed as CJTF and Boko Haram clashed	Dawashi village
July 26, 2013	5 CJTF killed by terrorist sect	Mainok
August 5,	5 CJTF killed following clash of two CJTF groups	Biu

September 8, 2013	Boko Haram Killed 18 Vigilantes	Benisheik
September 9, 2013	CJTF killed 5 Boko Haram members and seized 4 AK 47	Benisheik
September 17, 2013	Vigilante group arrests 19 Boko Haram terrorists	Konduga
May 13, 2014	200 Boko Haram insurgents killed	Kala/Balge district
May 15, 2014	8 Boko Harams killed and several others arrested	Kwarangilam near Chibok
May 16, 2014	70 terrorists killed and 7 arrested in ambush laid by the vigilantes	Madagali town
May 24, 2014	CJTF arrested suspected Boko Haram informant	Baga Road, Near Maiduguri
June 13, 2014	Top Boko Haram member arrested	Maiduguri
June 16, 2014	CJTF killed 8 armed terrorists	Chibok Town
June 21, 2014	28 Boko Harams and 6 Vigilantes killed during a clash	Kwarangilam
July 24, 2014	Gunmen kill 2 including the Vice-chairman of CJTF	Gamboru near Cameroon
October 31, 2014	CJTF beheaded 41 suspected Boko Haram sect members	Biu

Compiled by Odi O from BBC Hausa News service and other local media (2014)

CONCLUSION

The civilian JTF as a vigilante organisation has contributed positively to the ongoing war against terrorism being fought by the Federal Republic of Nigeria. One cannot but applaud them for their various counter-insurgency activities which are responsible for the earlier feats recorded by the Nigerian side. They were responsible for the identification, apprehension and killings of the Boko Haram terrorists. This is largely part of the reasons major cities such as Maiduguri and Biu where the CJTF are highly present have not fallen to the Boko Harams. These feats notwithstanding, some negative attitudes of the group must be condemned.

The practice of burning alive, beheading or any other form of extra judicial killing or punishment of captured terrorists should be discouraged as this in itself not only negates the provisions of the Geneva Convention of 1949 which guarantees the security and safety of

prisoners of war. Such act it should be recalled in the case of Mohammed Yusuf who was murdered while in police custody heightened Boko Haram attacks against the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

The role of the vigilante organisations in crime prevention and detection/control is mainly in the area of assistance rendering to constituted authorities. Their specific functions are that of providing intelligent information on crime and threats to the military and police, apprehending criminals where law enforcement agencies are absent and handing them over to appropriate security agencies. But we must be quick to also draw government's attention to the need for a proximate security system. In other words, no community should be deprived of visible State protection, else vigilantes should not be blame for maltreating criminals who when left untamed may overpower them. It is in view of the foregoing that this paper makes the following policy recommendations which are aimed at properly positioning vigilantes and their groups to perform effectively for enhanced national security.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Since the role of the vigilantes in any security situation is that of assisting the regular forces in identifying criminals and those who constitute threats to the community, the government should make bold an effort to proximately locate competent police or military bases to every community that constitute a part of the country. For the absence of this exposes the vigilantes as well as other citizens to the risk of possible reprisal attacks. This has been the case in many remote towns in North Eastern Nigeria.
- Because vigilantes live and operate within their local communities, states and local governments should be mandated and empowered constitutionally to operate and remunerate vigilante organisations in all states of the federation. This will help immensely in addressing security problems before they get out of hand. The policy will also serve to provide employment to the local youths whom themselves constitute security threat when not employed.
- There should be an arrangement of constant periodic interactions between the regular security forces in every particular area with the local vigilantes. These meetings will avail them the opportunities to share intelligence and create a forum for training the locals on how to go about the task of enforcing laws and providing security in their localities.
- Finally, following the vital roles they play in local communities which are subsets of the Nigerian system, it is important for the state to find a place for this group in her current National Defence Policy as published in 2006. This will not only motivate the group, it will certainly increase their efficiency and indeed enhance Nigerian National Security.

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