



Taking Our Security into our Hands: The Role of Vigilante Groups in the Fight against Boko Haram Terrorist Group in the Lake Chad Basin

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Executive Summary

The rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria and its spread to other parts of Lake Chad Basin has triggered the proliferation of several community defense forces, otherwise known as vigilante groups. This policy brief reveals that faced with Boko Haram attacks, the local population reinvented effective indigenous self-defense groups for their survival. The brief further states that though proven effective in the fight against Boko Haram, the quest by vigilante groups to provide security to their communities can become a source of insecurity if not properly handled. The author, therefore, recommends the need for Security Sector Reform within the Great Lakes region that will minimize the risks posed by these groups, optimizing their gains in fighting Boko Haram and addressing other security threats within the region.

Key Points

- Boko Haram benefited from state absence in the Lake Chad Basin to implant and flourish
- Limited resources by states in the Lake Chad Basin and state absence in some areas require a new recruitment model for security personnel that will leverage on existing local security providers
- Recruitment into the security services should take into consideration knowledge of the geography of the area, knowledge of the local realities and values of patriotism demonstrated by potential security personnel
- The rise of “new security actors” otherwise known as vigilante groups pose serious security challenges, but these threats can be transformed while keeping the benefits brought by these groups in combating Boko Haram
- The effectiveness of vigilante groups in addressing security threats calls for a rethink of the security architecture of states in this region. These groups should be constituted as a vital part of the security architecture of the Lake Chad Basin.

Introduction

In 2002, what began as a protest group to address socio-economic marginalization in the Middle Eastern part of Nigeria, soon degenerated and transformed into a full-blown terrorist organization. The use of force and violence by the government of Nigeria against a group in its embryonic state forced the latter to metamorphose into a radicalized and subsequently deadly terrorist group. Initially making socio-economic demands, the group moved into a quest of revolutionizing the entire country to an Islamic Caliphate¹. From Maiduguri, Boko Haram succeeded in taking over towns and states in the Federal of the Republic of Nigeria. The quest for more territories and zones of influence pushed the group towards capturing the entire Lake Chad Basin to rebuild the lost glory of Unman Dan Fodio².

Exploiting mutual mistrust and reluctance of both governments to agree on the right of hot pursuit, Nigerian Boko Haram began using the backyard of Cameroon as its hideout³. Using Cameroon as its base, Boko Haram mounted 'hit and run' attacks against the Nigerian military and retreated before the Nigerian military could muster any counter-offensive.

The drive to establish a caliphate in the entire Lake Chad Basin pushed this terrorist group to spread its tentacles into Chad and Niger, using both countries as a means of gathering resources and gaining popularity to fight the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and to establish its hegemony within the Lake Chad Basin. When faced with strong resistance from the Cameroonian and Chadian military, the group found it difficult to seize and occupy territories in Cameroon. Instead, the group was pushed beyond the Cameroonian border into Nigeria. To reinvent itself, the group infiltrated in the local population in the Northern part of Cameroon and Chad where it resorted into looting and killing, but more dangerously, using

suicide bombers including women and girls as young as 13 years old.⁴ The deaths and destruction of property caused by Boko Haram especially by the use of suicide bombers led to the revitalization of local security structures. Specifically, the local population was compelled to revive the vigilante or self-defense groups to address the growing security threats caused by the Boko Haram insurgency.

This policy brief interrogates the geostrategic situation of the Lake Chad Basin and explains why the area constitutes a fertile ground for Boko Haram activities. It also briefly highlights the origins of the vigilante group, their composition, age factors, eligibility criteria in joining these groups, their activities, and their relationship with the government, the traditional rulers, the population and other security sectors. It goes a bit further to examine the modus operandi of these groups and how their attempts and quest to provide security can be a source of insecurity. The policy brief ends providing policy options.

Incentive to Join Self-Defense Groups

Several socio-economic factors compelled and motivated young men and women to join these self-defense groups. The first is the survival instincts. In an environment of state absence where state security architecture is hardly felt, inhabitants of these areas were compelled to reinvigorate the existing local security for their survival.⁵ In addition, the death of loved ones through suicide bombings and other forms of attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram pushed young people to joint vigilantes groups as they seek revenge or means of honouring the death of their friends and family members. The fear of seeing other loved ones killed through the similar atrocities committed by this sect urged some young people into these self-defense groups. The Governor of the Northern region of

Cameroon succinctly captures the survival instincts of some members of the vigilante groups. In his words;

Those members that died protecting Cameroon did not lay down their lives in vain. After a long period of time spent encouraging people to contribute to the fight against Boko Haram, the inhabitants of villages bordering Nigeria have been joining these self-defense groups in large numbers⁶

Joining vigilante groups by young men and women has partly been influenced by the plea and sometimes coercion of the governments of Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad. In Nigeria, besides sending pleas for young people to join these vigilante groups, the government has also used coercive measures to get young people into these groups as those who refuse to join are branded, terrorist. The fear of stigmatization has also been a contributing factor. Many young men especially vigilante groups for fear of being perceived as a Boko Haram. For example, in Maiduguri, the retaliation carried out by the government against Boko Haram attacks led to the arrest of several innocent young men who were accused of being part of this sect. The only way for some young people to exonerate themselves from this was to join vigilante groups. The Government of Chad has used both means to register thousands of young men in the ranks of vigilante groups.

The President of Chad has requested for traditional rulers to help fight Boko Haram. Meanwhile official threats against traditional rulers who were not ready to cooperate forced many traditional leaders to encourage their young men to join these vigilante groups. Rather than using coercive measures, government officials in Cameroon had instead attempted to win the hearts and minds of young people by calling on them to join vigilante groups and by providing some elements of reward system. Alain Edgar Mebe Ngo'o, the former Minister in

Charge of Defense at the Presidency captures the plea of the government in these words;

"Boko Haram is becoming a serious nuisance, menacing the population more than ever before with the use of suicide bombers, burning and looting. I am asking all Cameroonians, especially in border zones, to be members of vigilante committees and collaborate with the military to make sure that this new form of Boko Haram attacks is stopped,"⁷

However, on its part, the government of Niger, have been reluctant to using vigilante groups for fear that this groups may turn into rebel groups and thereby have a long term negative impact on the security of the country.⁸

Composition and Selection Process

Most members of the vigilante groups ranged between the ages of 25-40 with a bulk of them within the age group of 30-40 years⁹. Potential vigilante members are those who can leverage on their knowledge of the geography of the area in which they live, (lakes, streams and hills) to facilitate the war strategy in combating Boko Haram. They must have some basic skills and techniques in self - defense and defending their communities. Before joining vigilante groups, some members were petty businessmen and farmers who were rendered jobless by the attacks of Boko Haram.¹⁰

A rigorous process has been put in place by some governments which permits potential members to go through a process of registration, selection and vetting, to ensure that members of Boko Haram do not infiltrate these vigilante groups. In Nigeria, background checks are carried out, and members go through a process of vetting and training before they are permitted to operate on the field. In Cameroon, a background check is a prerequisite before joining the groups as it permits security officials

to decipher the morality and patriotism of potential vigilante members.

In most communities, to avoid infiltration, those who have been away for a period of above three months are not eligible to become part of the vigilante groups. This is because of the fear that they might have been exposed to and influenced by the violent ideology of Boko Haram sect.¹¹

Activities and the Gains of Vigilante Groups

The activities of vigilante groups differ from one country to another. Generally, the activities ranged from patrol with homemade rifles, house to house search, discrete surveillance networks, intelligence gathering, taking the offensive against militants alongside the military, involved in low-intensity fights, interrogations of suspects, and deterring activities of suicide bombers.¹²

In the Northern part of Cameroon, members of the vigilante groups are divided into teams and carry out patrols on the mountainous areas, villages, markets, mosques and farms. They also report the presence of strangers and any person suspected to be a Boko Haram member or spy to the army.¹³ Through these activities, they have been able to identify potential suicide attackers. The vigilante groups have been able to wade off Boko Haram attacks. In 2016 and 2017, the Amchidé vigilante group and similar ones in Limani, Kerawa and Tolkomari were involved in low intensity fights with small groups of about half a dozen Boko Haram fighters. In some cases, they could contain the activities of smaller Boko Haram cells or completely defeat them in battle. In some cases, they suffered great casualties.

Besides surveillance, offensives and defensives actions carried out by these self-defense groups against Boko Haram members, vigilante

members have been able to identify suicide bombers and stopped them from exploding these bombs. For example, in the village of Kerawa, two female suicide bombers stuffed with explosives attempted to enter this village on Sunday, July 9 at around 3 a.m. but were stopped by members of the vigilante committee who were on guard. Members of vigilante groups report to traditional rulers, who report to the administrative head of their area of operation or the military commander of the area. Through these multiple activities, these groups have used fewer resources to do what the military could not do in the fight against terrorism in some areas¹⁴.

The Insecurity of Vigilante Security: Threats Pose by Vigilante Groups

Though the vigilantes in the Lake Chad Basin have proved useful in helping authorities and the military fight against the Boko Haram insurgencies, their activities sometimes pose serious security threats to themselves and their communities and the state. Sometimes these groups are compelled to use crude arms to fight members of Boko Haram who have more sophisticated weapons such as Kalashnikovs, mines and other well-equipped arms.¹⁵ These have exposed members of these groups to combat risks that have led to several deaths. Although some governments have donated materials such as jackets, whistles, flashlights, badges and batteries to these groups, they remain hesitant in arming the self-defense forces due to the potential threat they pose once Boko Haram is defeated.¹⁶ As such, currently, the vigilante is no match to the sophisticated weaponry used by Boko Haram members.

Besides this, members of these vigilante groups have no training in modern warfare especially training in combating terrorism. Boko Haram's suicide bombing tactics require rigorous training to counter. The lack of training and skills by

members of these vigilante groups explains why some die in the process of deterring explosives from suicide bombers. The lack of basic training in International Humanitarian Law by members of these vigilante groups has contributed to human rights violations in Nigeria.

The unforeseen challenge posed by these vigilante groups ought to come after the complete eradication of Boko Haram. Most members, some who were either unemployed before the advent of this terrorist group or became unemployed because of the activities of this group have no future plans after the complete defeat of Boko Haram or when its activities will no longer pose any serious threat to these communities. With no effective exit strategy put in place by some governments on how to handle some of the groups to whom they have been arming to fight Boko Haram, members of these groups may become potential security threats to their communities. The arming of these vigilante groups by some governments may equally pose a great challenge as this may lead to the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons. Kiale points out that the proliferation of such weapons by members of vigilante groups has an implication on peace-building as it usually ignites and fuels violence amongst different communities.¹⁷ The proliferation of such weapons may lead to an increase in crime wave when the threat of Boko Haram has been addressed.

Conclusion and Forward-Thinking Options

This paper has traced the origin, evolution and usefulness of vigilante groups in Lake Chad Basin. It has also discussed eligibility criteria in joining these groups, their activities and methods of operation. Though proven effective in the fight against the Boko Haram terrorist group, these vigilante groups pose a significant

challenge. It is against this backdrop that the following policy options have been made.

Forward Thinking Policy Options

There is a need for Security Sector Reform within the Great Lakes region which will provide the legal framework for the formalization of vigilante groups.

Any meaningful SSR should include vigilante groups in the new security architecture either as auxiliaries or have some of them included into the Police, military. This will clarify their roles and dispel the suspicion that exists between them and security forces.

Vigilante groups should form part of the Early Warning System of the Economic Community of Central African State and the Economic Community of West African State ECCAS/ECOWAS as they can help in providing vital information to these sub-regional organizations. To best capitalize on their existence vigilante groups, their members should be trained for intelligence gathering and sharing.

Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger should put in place a joint mechanism through which all existing vigilante groups would be able to network, share information on the threats of Boko Haram and other security threats under the coordination of security sector providers.

To address the threats that might be posed by members of vigilante groups after Boko Haram is defeated, some members of the vigilante groups should be disarmed, demobilized and reintegrated into their local communities. Vigilante groups should be trained and transformed into private security companies. They should also be trained in non- security jobs like agricultural products and construction.

About the Author

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End notes

¹ In 1809, Usman Dan Fodio founded the Sokoto Caliphate which covered West Africa. This Caliphate was abolished when the British conquered it in 1903 and put it under the Northern Nigerian Protectorate. Members of Boko Haram claimed their activities are similar to that of Usman Dan Fodio and is aimed at rebuilding the lost glory of this caliphate.

² Virgie (2016) "Islamist Contamination in the Extreme North of Cameroon: Risks and Limits" NO. 02, 2016.

³ Dibussi Tande, "Staving off Boko Haram: Why Cameroon Must Unilaterally Exercise the Right of Hot Pursuit (Part II)" accessed 19 /11/2018 at <https://www.dibussi.com/2015/01/boko-haram-cameroon-hot-pursuit-ii.html>.

⁴ Amnesty International. (2018) Amnesty International Report 2017/18 – Cameroon. Retrieved from <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5a993930a.html>.

⁵ Chikwendu S, Nwankwo I, Uche O. N.P. (2016) The Role of Vigilante Service Groups in Crime Control for Sustainable Development in Anambra State, South East Nigeria 6 (3), pp. 065-074.

⁶ Baval, P. (2018) Fight Against Insecurity in Cameroon: The Case of Boko-Haram Insurgency in The Far North Region, 1960-2017. A Research Project Submitted to the department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Buea in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Award of a Bachelor of Arts Degree (B.A) in History, p. 49.

⁷ Ibid. p. 50.

⁸ International Crisis Group, p. 20.

⁹ Bava, 2017, p. 35.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Chukwendu, S, Nwankwo I, Oli, (2016), The Role of Vigilante Service Groups in Crime Control of Sustainable, in Greener Journal of Social Sciences 65-74.

¹³ Interviewee 2: Col. Ayang Frederick Senior Military Officer at the Ministry of Defense, Enoch Commander, Kouseri, Maroua, interviewed 18th March 2018, at Kouseri.

¹⁴ International Crisis Group (2017), .23.

¹⁵ Felix Onuoh, (2014, Febraury 17) Nigeria Islamists better armed, motivated than army: governor. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-violence/nigeria-islamists-better-armed-motivated-than-army-governor-idUSBREA1G1AO20140217>; Also see Akinola O, (2018) Boko Haram Expose the Crack in Nigeria's Military in ISS Today. Retrieved at <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/boko-haram-exposes-the-cracks-in-nigerias-military-strategy>.

¹⁶ Interviewee 1: Col. Adeck Moises Tingwe, Senior Military Officer at the Ministry of Defense with the Rank of a Colonel, Interviewed in Addis Ababa, 7th March 2018.

¹⁷ Kialee Nyiayaana, (2015) Arming Community Vigilantes in the Niger Delta: Implications for Peacebuilding in John Idriss Lahai and Tanya Lyons (eds) African Frontiers: Insurgency, Governance and Peacebuilding in Post-Colonial States, Ashgate Publishing.