

Overcoming Boko Haram Insurgency in the North East, Nigeria: The challenges of Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) in Yobe State

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Abstract

This study investigated the challenges of overcoming Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East through the activities of Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC), with particular reference to the Gujba Local Government Area (LGA) of Yobe State. Insurgency is scholarly termed irregular warfare, usually protracted and devastating. The North-East has been in crisis since 2009 due to the Boko Haram insurgency, which has continued till date despite efforts of the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) and Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF). The insurgents have killed thousands of people; the UNDP estimated about 350,000 deaths. Despite the application of force against the group, the conflict is not over. Considering failure of the kinetic approach in addressing the Boko Haram insurgency; scholars believed that the FGN should adopt a combination of strategies for peacebuilding and peacemaking. For this reason, the FGN initiated Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) as part of a non-kinetic approach to end the insurgency. It was established in 2016 in order to de-radicalize, rehabilitate and reintegrate the repentant Boko Haram insurgents into the society. A qualitative method guided the collection and analysis of the data through Focus Group Discussion and Key Informant Interview. The study discovered that the application of non-kinetic approach through OPSC has to some extent facilitated the addressing Boko Haram crisis in the North-East sub-region. This is due to the fact that a number of Boko Haram insurgents have repented and accepted this peace initiative of the FGN. On the other hand, some community members affected by the Boko haram insurgency have expressed fears and unhappy about the amnesty and the reintegration process due to the atrocity committed by the group. Therefore, the study recommends the need to adopt holistic approach in addressing the crisis through good governance, justice, transparency, accountability, intelligence gathering as well as consulting/convincing the community members about the de-radicalization and reintegration process.

Keywords: Boko Haram, insurgency, rehabilitation, peace-building, operation safe corridor

Introduction

Insurgency is one of the prevalent variants of warfare in the contemporary world. Various kinds of insurgents have pervaded the world today, undermining the efforts of governments to restore order, provide security, and rebuild affected regions. Indeed, governments are finding it extremely difficult to unravel the crisis and bring communities and society back to normalcy. Metz and Millen (2004) believe that insurgency has existed throughout history but has ebbed and flowed in strategic significance. Today, the world has entered another period where insurgency is common and strategically significant, as it tasks and drains the affected countries' resources. Insurgency warfare is not peculiar to Nigeria; rather, it is almost worldwide. It has been established that most modern

warfare now occurs in the form of insurgencies, including in high-profile countries such as Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and many African countries. However, despite their prevalence, much is yet to be known about how insurgencies function and the best ways to address them.

The attacks on New York City and Washington DC, on September 11, 2001, caused extensive death and destruction and triggered an enormous U.S. effort toward combating terrorism in particular and a proactive move by the United Nations in general. Some 2,750 people were killed in New York, 184 at the Pentagon, and 40 in Pennsylvania (where one of the hijacked planes crashed after the passengers attempted to retake the plane) (Lehmon, 2003; Croce, 2014). These attacks infuriated the U.S. government, leading to a decision to use force against terrorist and insurgent groups. The U.S. decided on a forceful approach, hoping to crush the groups in the blink of an eye.

However, almost twenty years later, the U.S. government eventually had to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan, the two nations intended to be crushed for the attacks on U.S. territory and their sponsorship of terrorism and insurgency.

Though insurgency is condemnable and should not be condoned, the Boko Haram insurgents have been terrorizing the North-East region of Nigeria for almost fifteen years, resulting in devastating socio-economic consequences. Due to incessant setbacks, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN), after employing a kinetic approach, decided to adopt a non-kinetic approach codenamed Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) in September 2015 as a new strategy for overcoming the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East. Through this initiative, some militants surrender peacefully, receive the government's pardon, and turn over a new leaf.

The Federal Government of Nigeria, through the Defense Headquarters, inaugurated the OPSC strategy in April 2016. The initiative aims to reform, deradicalize, and rehabilitate any willing repentant Boko Haram militants, and reintegrate them back into their ancestral homes as productive and law-abiding citizens. Consequently, this weakens the fighting power of the insurgent group. Before the initiation of the OPSC, the President had repeatedly announced the defeat of the Boko Haram insurgency, even as several billions of naira was being sunk into the fight without an end. The OPSC is intended to provide a soft landing for some members of Boko Haram who were forced to fight through conscription and others who are tired of the endless struggle.

However, this research intends to investigate the acceptability and potential challenges that the program may likely face from the affected communities, as it seems not to consider their concerns and fears regarding the rehabilitation and resettlement of repentant Boko Haram whether the mechanisms of the OPSC can resolve the crisis in the North-East. Additionally, it aims to assess the potency of the OPSC in preventing the future occurrence of insurgency in the North-East region.

Statement of the problem

The insurgency crisis has engulfed the North-East region of Nigeria for almost fifteen years (2009-2024), killing over 350,000 people (UNDP, 2021) and destroying billions of naira worth of

property. Choji (2022) reported that: “The insurgents have destroyed about 5,000 classrooms in Borno State and about 800 municipal buildings, including local government secretariats, prisons, and traditional rulers’ buildings, among others. Furthermore, they destroyed about 713 energy distribution lines and 1,600 water sources.” This has rendered hundreds of thousands of people homeless and without means of survival. Several strategies have been adopted to end the violent insurgency crisis, but they have yet to yield outstanding success. These strategies included the formation of the Joint Military Task Force (JTF), comprising the Army, Airforce, Navy, and other paramilitary agencies, and the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which was a combined force of five neighboring countries: Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria.

The adoption of the peace building method was later espoused; this research believes that the scheme will assist in ending the insurgency. Since there is a tendency to reduce the number of Boko Haram terrorists (BHT) members, this will definitely condense their destructiveness and bring an end to the insurgency in the shortest possible time. Therefore, the OPSC option is a positive approach and a good strategy.

However, the provision and outcomes of the OPSC program, aimed to rehabilitate and reintegrate repentant BHT into their ancestral communities, raise questions about its potential success. This research suggests that there is a possibility of rejection of the repentant BHT, especially due to the non-inclusion of survivors of the insurgency in the program. Some survivors, still displaced, believe this could be detrimental to the communities, reintroducing potentially destructive elements along with financial and skill empowerment. Therefore, the implementation of the OPSC requires careful consideration for both the repentant BHT and the survivors of their activities.

The central focus of this research is to investigate the OPSC programme for the repentant Boko Haram and find out the extent to which the initiative can assist in restoring peace in the North-East region of Nigeria. Therefore, there is the need to restore order and overcome Boko Haram crisis through non-kinetic approach. This study has observed through critical analysis of the literature that application of force or military approach alone in addressing insurgency cannot be a sustainable strategy; therefore, that informed the need to investigate the OPSC initiative in overcoming Boko Haram insurgency.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach, to enable the researcher investigate deeply into the beliefs, perceptions, viewpoints, values, and feelings of individuals regarding the BHT crisis, as well as the anticipated role of OPSC in resolving the crisis and its expected outcomes. Furthermore, the qualitative method is suitable for assessing the readiness of BHT members for rehabilitation and addressing questions related to the acceptability of repentant individuals within the affected communities of Yobe State. Additionally, it facilitates the analysis of outcomes following their reintegration into their ancestral communities. Through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interview (KII); the study generated relevant data in addressing the research problem.

Boko Haram terrorist group was formed by an Islamic sect to fight against western education and the activities related to its operations in the northern region. The sect is originally known as Jama’atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda’Awati Wal Jihad, is a terrorist Islamic sect in Nigeria. The group

has created security crisis in the country. It is responsible for destroying government property, attacking security formations, mosques, churches and markets among others. The activities of the group have led to the loss of lives and property (Abbas, Ali & Wakili, 2024).

Since 2009, the North-Eastern region of Nigeria have suffered from the incessant destructive attacks of Boko Haram insurgents, specifically, the group's attacks led to the destruction of public and private property.

Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC)

The Operation Safe Corridor programme which was established in order to de-radicalize, rehabilitate and reintegrate the repentant Boko Haram insurgents into the society. This is due the persistent and devastating effects of the military approach to ending BHT activities in the Northeast, the military reasoned that adding a non-kinetic approach to its efforts, especially when pure firepower is not yielding the desired results, was necessary. The Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) was designed to address these challenges. The need for Deradicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DRR) initiative was designed as the state's non-kinetic approach towards counterterrorism and peacebuilding efforts in the region in attempt to end the insurgents' activities and to move the region forward. The Operation Safe Corridor DRR program was launched in 2015 to encourage willing and repentant members of Boko Haram insurgents to surrender and embrace peace. By December 2021, the Chief of Defense Training and Operations disclosed that the program had graduated over 1,000 clients, including 16 foreign nationals, who had been successfully reintegrated by their national and state governments. He also mentioned that a total of 559 new clients were currently undergoing the DRR Program at the DRR Camp at Malam Sidi in Gombe State (Vanguard, 2021). Centre for Democratic Development detailed the intention of the OPSC as follows: The Federal Government of Nigeria, through the Defense Headquarters inaugurated OPSC in 2015.

The programme's aim is to rehabilitate repentant Boko Haram militants and reintegrate them back into their respective communities as productive law-abiding citizens. The defecting members will acquire vocation training, access de-radicalization and civics program to become useful members of their society upon release from the program. Since OSC's commencement in May 2016, many have expressed strong reservation and criticism against the programme (CDD, 2015: 1). The common believe was that a kinetic approach should be apply to resolve the insurgents' crisis once and for all. However, looking at the causality from the military and other collateral damages point of view, a rethink of approach will be desirable.

What is the extent of acceptability of the OPSC in the communities of the Northeast?

When the OPSC programme was finally launched in 2016, most people were unaware of its aims and intention. However, by the time the programme graduated first set of deradicalized BHT members out of the camped efforts were being made to reintegrate them into their various communities in Maiduguri and some communities in Gujba LGA in Yobe State, a lot of information was shared, and there were perceptions. Most people interacted with by the researcher, faulted the direction of the policy and the non-inclusion of the displaced persons in their schemes of activities. They also complained about the intention of the FGN to reintegrate the repented BHT

to their community of origin. In a focus group discussion held in August 2021, their response shows a mixture of acceptance and rejection of the OPSC.

Based on the community's perception regarding reintegration, it is evident that they are willing to forgive and embrace tolerance due to the teachings of their religion emphasizing forgiveness and mercy. However, they insist that repentant Boko Haram members should not be reintegrated into their original communities. Instead, the government should either facilitate interstate exchange of repentant individuals or establish new settlements for them to start a new life where they are not known, aiming to address issues of revenge, fear, or stigmatization. Additionally, some members of the community completely reject the idea of bringing them back to their ancestral communities (FGD, 2021).

Many measures favor the ex-Boko Haram members, as highlighted by Ike *et al* (2022), including governmental reintegration programs aimed at preventing ex-combatants from reoffending. These programs encompass diverse approaches such as financial subsidies, monitoring by security agencies, occupational training, and education (2022: 3).

The argument presented by community members is that if criminals are provided with gestures of training, provision, and protection while internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps suffer, then it appears that another set of rebellion is being created (FGD, 2021). Clubb and Tapley (2018) advocate for better reintegration by extending deradicalization programs to include communal attitudes and behavior. This perspective emphasizes the importance of recognizing community perspectives within the context of the Northeast crisis.

Therefore, the non-inclusion of various communities' perspectives, especially those directly affected by the crisis, might undermine the good intentions of Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) in ending the insurgency in the Northeast.

Many people affected by the insurgents' activities feel sidelined and believe their plight is not being considered. Consequently, they may not be willing to cooperate with the returning Boko Haram members, with some even vowing to seek revenge if the opportunity arises. Hence, a rethink and expansion of the OPSC mandate are necessary.

What are the Challenges Faced by the OPSC Programme in the North-East Communities in Nigeria?

This is connected to the preceding discussions, indicating that there are more vulnerable communities in the Northeast region. These communities can be easily coerced and manipulated, as demonstrated by how Boko Haram exploited their susceptibility to further their nefarious activities over the years. Brechenmacher (2018), while acknowledging the potential effectiveness of the OPSC in ending the insurgency, emphasizes the importance of ensuring that the military implements robust eligibility and vetting criteria, particularly in the context of ongoing conflict. It must also provide incentives for *Boko Haram associates* to reintegrate into communities—an effort that will have to include *building local support* for the effort and providing parallel assistance to vigilante groups that have emerged during the conflict. A piecemeal approach that neglects any part of this complex sequence risks perpetuating insecurity and creating new lines of conflict (Brechenmacher, 2018:2). Even though it's been seen that provision must be provided for the

repentant BHTs to be able to embrace the OPSC, however, as observed earlier, these might cause resentment from the communities' members, simply because they are in poverty and wants, while the ex-BHTs will enjoy affluence. Brechenmacher (2018), gives example of most conventional DDR contexts, she said, peace agreements must lay out the eligibility criteria for amnesty and rehabilitation. In Colombia, for example, the peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the guerrilla movement established a tiered system: Rank-and-file fighters are eligible for amnesty provided that they were not involved in war crimes or crimes against humanity, while those who exercised command responsibility or were otherwise implicated in serious crimes have to stand trial (Brechenmacher, 2018:4).

The situation in Nigeria, where Boko Haram terrorists (BHT) who lay down their arms are automatically granted amnesty, trained, empowered, and reintegrated into communities, is problematic. This policy raises concerns among communities still suffering from abject poverty. In a focus group discussion (FGD) conducted with some community leaders from Gujba LGA in 2021, the majority opinion was that the government should address the problem of abject poverty, which forced some people to join Boko Haram. They also stated that it is too early for the government to release the so-called repentant BHT members from the rehabilitation center. Therefore, they should spend at least ten years in the rehabilitation center or remain there until the insurgency crisis is over (FGD, 2021). Additionally, some community members were uncomfortable with the absence of retribution for the ex-BHT combatants. They assumed the group is being given the freedom to kill people intermittently and then later surrender and receive pardon with empowerment. They queried if this is the case, many people might attempt to join the group and later repent.

Is the programme capable of reducing/ending the coordinated violence attacks on communities in the Northeast?

The opinion of this research is that the government should take a more forceful approach to ending the insurgency crisis in the Northeast. This means that winning over insurgents cannot be achieved solely through peaceful means; it requires the backing of armed force, pressure, and diplomacy. Additionally, the concerned communities must be actively involved. The population-centric approach to ending insurgency emphasizes the importance of engaging with and protecting the community. By doing so, valuable information may be revealed that could aid the success of theater operations forces.

Is the OPSC mechanism capable of preventing a reoccurrence of the insurgent crisis in the future?

This research doubts if the OPSC could prevent a reoccurrence of insurgency in the near future. The reason is not far-fetched because, according to a community member, granting amnesty to hardened terrorists cannot allow the crisis to end in record time. For instance, many hardened insurgents are roaming around, and they can explode at any time or coerce their ex-members to support their struggle. France24 (2021) noted that, "the deradicalization program has also targeted the wrong people, with participants saying that many civilians, rather than fighters, end up in the hands of the military." The relaunching of attacks, as is happening intermittently in Geidam, Tarmuwa, and Gujba LGAs of Yobe State, is an impact to note. Moreover, this study believes that ending the insurgency crisis cannot be achieved by granting amnesty alone. Studies (McCormick

et al., 2006; Connable & Libicki, 2010) have documented that as much as insurgents are given relief and breathing space, they will surely regroup and cause havoc to the communities. Government sometimes wins the insurgent's war in theory according to Connable and Libicki (2010) by destroying the insurgent cadre, political structure, or both. In practice, however, government can and have crushed the insurgent forces only to see them reappear some years or decades later. This typically happens when the government fails to address the root causes of the insurgency. Victory can also be achieved through legitimate channels, even though this method requires some concession to the demands of the insurgent.

The need for counter-ideology to end BHT insurgent's crisis

Ending an insurgency crisis requires a counter-ideology because any ideology-driven insurgency cannot be easily eradicated unless there is a counter-narrative to the idea that the insurgents profess. Ideological wars are usually hardened and difficult to crush; once members have been brainwashed, reverting them back to normal takes a long time to achieve. It is doubtful if the current perspective of the Malam Sidi training process could achieve the desired objectives of removing the insurgent idea from the minds of the current beholders.

It is believed that ideology plays an important role in the resilience of insurgency, meaning that we have to root out what has already been injected in the form of ideology. However, before the idea can be eradicated, it must take an equivalent or double the period of indoctrination. Forest (2012) claimed that the ideology of a terrorist or insurgent group has no motivating power unless it resonates within the social, political, and historical context of those who support the group. Thus, extirpating insurgency from the community takes a longer period, especially where it has taken root over a longer period like the BHT.

Hence, the main programs of OPSC, particularly "Deradicalization," need to gear towards attitudinal, behavioral, psychological, ideological, emotional, and worldview changes in the lives of the repentant BHT. However, our contention is that the period allotted for this endeavor is not matching the years of indoctrination. Therefore, no BHT should spend less than 10 years in the camp to eradicate all traces of violent behavior associated with their religious propagation.

Conclusion

Due to the devastating impact of Boko haram insurgency that manifested in attacking security formations, schools, markets, banks, Islamic scholars, Christians, traditional rulers, politicians, public servants and lately all non-members of the group; the FGN applied military approach or force in reversing the trend but yet over a decade that approach has not succeeded in addressing the root of the problem. For that reason, the FGN initiated the Operation Safe Corridor programme which was established in order to de-radicalize, rehabilitate and reintegrate the repentant Boko Haram insurgents into the society. The outcome of this study shows that the programmed has to some extent helped in addressing the boka haram cirisis.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made;

- i. The study recommends the need to adopt holistic approach in addressing the crisis through good governance, justice, transparency, accountability, intelligence gathering as well as consulting the community members about the de-radicalization and reintegration process.
- ii. Adopting military approach along non-kinetic approach.
- iii. Involving community members and other relevant stakeholders in the deradicalization and reintegration process.

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