



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER

at West Point



# ***Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines:***

*Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency*

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*Editor:*  
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## CHAPTER 4: The Rise and Risks of Nigeria's Civilian Joint Task Force: Implications for Post-Conflict Recovery in Northeastern Nigeria

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### Introduction

Since 2009, the violent activities of the jihadi group popularly known as Boko Haram have caused major upheaval and insecurity in Nigeria and the neighboring Lake Chad Basin (LCB) countries. The escalation of violence in 2013 culminated with a state of emergency being announced in the northeastern region of Nigeria, but the situation did not improve. Boko Haram continued to expand, declaring a so-called caliphate in 2014 and initiating in the next year a pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State.<sup>418</sup> By November 2014, the deputy governor of Borno State commented that if Boko Haram continued at its current pace, it would only be a short time before “the three northeastern states will no longer be in existence.”<sup>419</sup>

Such predictions did not come true. A multinational force including Chadian and Nigerien troops to support Nigerian troops in Borno broke Boko Haram's momentum in the run-up to Nigeria's presidential elections in February 2015, and since then, Boko Haram has lost the majority of its territory, though not its operational capacity.<sup>420</sup> While many studies focus on the state response to the conflict, the aim of this article is to consider the response of non-state actors, and in particular community-based armed groups (CBAGs), to Boko Haram. The most famous CBAG in northeastern Nigeria has come to be the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), or *yan gora* (“youth with sticks”), which has been credited with a level of success in helping to change the tide against Boko Haram.

Set up in June 2013, the CJTF comprises predominantly young male civilians who want to identify and apprehend Boko Haram insurgents amidst growing insecurity in northern Nigeria. Initially, the CJTF “were not given arms, but armed themselves with sticks and machetes,” though over time they came to acquire locally made guns to aid themselves in manning checkpoints.<sup>421</sup> At its essence, the CJTF is a distinct typology of CBAG known as “vigilantism,” and vigilantes may be defined as “citizens who organize themselves into groups to take the law into their own hands in order to reprimand criminals,” or as “associations in which citizens have joined together for self-protection under conditions of disorder.”<sup>422</sup>

Vigilantes, according to Schubert, can be distinguished from militias and gangs “in that their primary function is providing security, rather than pursuing their political or economic interests.”<sup>423</sup> The problem, however, is that vigilante groups have the propensity to reorient towards militias or gangs over time. An example of this can be found in South Africa with the People Against Gangsterism (PA-

418 Jacob Zenn and Zacharias Pieri, “How much Takfir is too much Takfir?: The Evolution of Boko Haram's Factionalization,” *Journal For Deradicalization* 11 (2017): p. 282.

419 Austin Ajai, “Borno Govt. Raises Alarms, Says Boko Haram May Capture Entire Three North-East States in Days,” *Premium Times*, November 3, 2014.

420 Zacharias Pieri and Jacob Zenn, “The Boko Haram Paradox: Ethnicity, Religion, and Historical Memory in Pursuit of a Caliphate,” *African Security* 9:1 (2016): p. 66.

421 “Stars on their shoulders. Blood on their hands: War crimes committed by the Nigerian Military,” Amnesty International, February 2, 2015.

422 R. M. Brown, *Strain of Violence: historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 130.

423 Moritz Schubert, “The Challenge of Community-Based Armed Groups: Towards a Conceptualization of Militias, Gangs and Vigilantes,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 36:2 (2015): p. 303.

GAD). PAGAD originated in a network of disparate anti-drug, anti-crime groups and neighborhood watches frustrated by the state's inability to tackle problems facing communities. PAGAD went from a popular anti-crime movement to a violent, "vigilante organization and, since 1998, an urban terror group threatening not just the state's monopoly on the use of coercive force but the very foundations of constitutional democracy."<sup>424</sup>

Because of their tendency to "turn bad and because of the threat to stability they pose when they have transformed, CBAGs are a serious problem for the countries in which they form and for international actors operating in those countries."<sup>425</sup> The Nigerian government will have to think carefully about how to manage the CJTF once Boko Haram violence is curtailed, and as such this article will consider possible avenues for the future trajectory of the CJTF.

The CJTF should be contextualized within the literature on CBAGs, most of which emerge in situations of state fragility when the state is unable to deal with increasing levels of violence toward civilian populations. Such groups form in order to protect their own communities, to address real grievances, and to right manifest injustices.<sup>426</sup> The significance of these groups, as Dowd and Dury note, is that they can attest to the ways in which communities in "conflict affected areas navigate security" and includes negotiating not only a "hostile insurgency force" but also the "sometimes predatory, often ineffective response of state security forces."<sup>427</sup> Aside from the CJTF, there are many examples of such groups, including PAGAD in South Africa,<sup>428</sup> the Arrow Boys in South Sudan,<sup>429</sup> and Local Defense Units in Uganda.<sup>430</sup> Vigilante groups in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger have also played a major role in combating Boko Haram. As the International Crisis Group reports, "they make military operations less blunt and more effective and have reconnected these states somewhat with many of their local communities, but they have also committed abuses and become involved in the war economy."<sup>431</sup>

This article is primarily concerned with the way in which frustrated and seemingly marginalized civilians in northeastern Nigeria have mobilized themselves in the form of CBAGs against increased insecurity and violence in their localities from both Boko Haram and the Nigerian military. The article begins with a historical account of the origins, formation, and evolution of the CJTF and considers the role that it has played in the fight against Boko Haram. The chapter argues that by virtue of its knowledge of the local terrain, cultures, and languages of northeastern Nigeria, the CJTF has been effective in capturing myriad Boko Haram fighters, defending local communities, and helping to turn the tide against the group. The article also argues that an unintended but important consequence of CJTF activities has been to push Boko Haram to ramp up violence against civilians, especially those who are suspected of collaborating with the CJTF. The article also considers the changing dynamics in the relationship between the CJTF and the Nigerian military, as well as examining some of the allegations of human rights violations leveled against the CJTF. The CJTF operate within an ineffective state and as such have had to take on state-like roles, including security enforcement and intelligence gathering. In essence, the CJTF operates at the "frontier of the Nigerian state, blurring the boundaries

424 Bill Dixon and Lisa-Marie Johns, "Gangs, PAGAD and the State: Vigilantism and Revenge Violence in the Western Cape," *Violence and Transition Series 2* (Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 2001).

425 Moritz Schuberth, "The Challenge of Community-Based Armed Groups: Towards a Conceptualization of Militias, Gangs and Vigilantes," *Contemporary Security Policy* 36:2 (2015): p. 312.

426 Ales de Waal and Rachel Ibrek, "Hybrid Social Movements in Africa," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 31:2 (2013): p. 310.

427 Cairiona Dowd and Adam Drury, "Marginalisation, Insurgency and Civilian Insecurity: Boko Haram and the Lord's Resistance Army," *Peacebuilding* 5:2 (2017): p. 148.

428 Dixon and Johns.

429 Magnus Taylor, "On the Trail of Uganda's Arrow Boys," International Crisis Group, March 16, 2017.

430 Justine Nannyonjo, "Conflicts, poverty and human development in Northern Uganda," *Round Table* 94 (2005): pp. 473-488.

431 "Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram," *Africa Report* 244 (2017): p. i.



between the state and what normally falls outside of it.”<sup>432</sup> The article concludes by arguing that given the propensity for many CBAGs to turn violent over time, the Nigerian government will have to think carefully about how to reintegrate the group back into mainstream society. In that regard, this article also considers a number of potential trajectories for the CJTF.

### Origins of the CJTF

Nigeria’s response to the reign of terror by Boko Haram in the northeast of the country was to deploy its Joint Task Force (JTF), consisting of the various branches of the armed forces, State Security Services, and police, under a unified command structure. The JTF operations in the northeast “have generally been repressive relying heavily on operations to kill and capture ‘scores’ of Boko Haram insurgents since the movement was first brutally crushed in 2009.”<sup>433</sup> Despite a huge amount of spending on countering Boko Haram’s violence by the Nigerian government, little of that money was making its way to the frontlines, and insecurity in the region was on the rise in 2013. Trapped between the violence of Boko Haram on the one hand and the incompetence of the military response on the other, were civilians whose livelihoods were being destroyed.

In this context, the event that led to the formation of the CJTF was when in May 2013, Baba Lawan Jafar, a trader from Maiduguri who would later become the overall Chairman of the CJTF in Borno State, chased down and captured a Boko Haram gunman with only a stick handed to him by the soldiers of the JTF.<sup>434</sup> This act led one Modu Milo and thousands of other youths to follow Jafar’s example and to join the war against Boko Haram with whatever basic tools they had. By June 2013, roughly 500 vigilantes had come together in Maiduguri, and armed with rudimentary weapons such as sticks, clubs, machetes, daggers, and bows and arrows, “began organizing against Boko Haram by daily street patrols and house-to-house searches, complementing the ineffective counter-terrorism operations of the Nigerian army.”<sup>435</sup>

They became known as the CJTF, indicating that they operated as a counterpart to the JTF, or at the very least, that they considered themselves an elite unit of comrades who could thwart the activities of Boko Haram. In the words of one CJTF member who did not wish to be named, “We’ve passed many stages in Maiduguri, many of them terrible by nature and caused by Boko Haram. They pushed us to the wall and we had to bite back, so to speak,” and added that they swore to the Holy Qur’an to expose them.<sup>436</sup> The motivation behind setting up what became the CJTF was the frustration of youths and other civilians in Borno State over the lack of state capacity to prevent the incessant violence carried out by Boko Haram.

While Jafar’s actions were spontaneous, the need for a body like the CJTF by 2013 was already well recognized. As the campaign against Boko Haram intensified with a state of emergency offensive launched in the three states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa in May 2013, hundreds of youth were caught in between the crossfire of the military and Boko Haram. They had to choose a side. From the perspective of many locals in the northeast, “their community had to fight Boko Haram so as to deflect the security forces’ suspicion and retaliation.”<sup>437</sup> Many civilians felt caught between the military on

432 Oluwaseun Bamidele, “Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) – A Community Security Option: A Comprehensive and Proactive Approach to Counter-Terrorism,” *Journal for Deradicalization* 7 (2016): p. 135.

433 Afeikhena Jerome, “Lessons from Colombia For Curtailing The Boko Haram Insurgency In Nigeria,” *PRISM* 5:2 (2015): p. 100.

434 The JTF responds to issues of piracy, pipeline vandalism, illegal oil bunkering, crude oil theft, illegal refining, kidnapping, and, with regard to Boko Haram, counterterrorism.

435 Daniel E. Agbiboa, “National heroes or coming anarchy? Vigilant youth and the war on terror in Nigeria,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (2017), p. 9.

436 Hamza Idris, Yahaya Ibrahim, and Ibrahim Sawab, “Who are Borno’s Civilian JTF?” *Daily Trust*, March 29, 2014.

437 “Watchmen of Lake Chad,” p. 5.

the one side engaged in arbitrary detention of youths, some of whom would disappear or be executed, while on the other side Boko Haram rampantly killed locals.<sup>438</sup> Those who sided with the military—the majority—sought the option of joining the CJTF.<sup>439</sup>

The security agencies welcomed the CJTF in recognition of the role grassroots CBAGs play in counterinsurgency operations.<sup>440</sup> One early member of the CJTF gave the following narrative as an explanation of why the CJTF came to be valued and promoted by the JTF:

“In late May last year [2013], some gunmen came to a shop in Babban Layi business district with the intention to rob, but were resisted. When we realized they had no ammo in their guns, we floored them and collected their guns, tied them up and handed them over to nearby soldiers. Later in the day, the soldiers came to thank us and urged us to continue doing we’re doing.” That was how the idea of “community policing” by the ‘Civilian JTF’ spread to other areas across Maiduguri, leading to hundreds of Boko Haram members being apprehended.<sup>441</sup>

More than this, however, the CJTF was also able to bring other skills to the table, such as knowledge of languages and the terrain in the northeastern Nigeria. Troops in the Nigerian military are recruited from throughout Nigeria, and so when deployed to the northeast to fight Boko Haram, these troops often lack knowledge of the local terrain and local languages. Because of this, it can be difficult for those troops to gather intelligence in a timely manner, and so allows insurgents to remain multiple steps ahead of the soldiers and police who are pursuing them.<sup>442</sup> This local intelligence gap was the challenge that the Nigerian military and Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the Lake Chad Basin region constantly faced. At the onset of the insurgency, most of the deployed security personnel had no knowledge of the local terrain in northeastern Nigeria and could not speak Kanuri and other local languages, resulting in major challenges in distinguishing civilians and enemy combatants.<sup>443</sup> The CJTF, which is comprised of indigenes from among the over 30 ethnic groups in Borno, thus filled a gap for the military.

### Evolution of the CJTF

The CJTF has evolved into a complex and hierarchical organization with each local government area in each state in the northeast having its own commander. Further to this, the CJTF in Maiduguri is organized into 10 sectors within two major segments of concentration: the Maiduguri Municipal Council (MMC) and Jere Local Government Area (LGA).<sup>444</sup> The branch operating in the MMC is mobile and not limited to Maiduguri, with deployments outside of its mobilization area as far as Lagos State in southwestern Nigeria when perusing fleeing Boko Haram members. Fifty members of the CJTF work in both sectors and are supported by volunteers in different LGAs who have chosen to

438 Rafael Serrano and Zacharias Pieri, “By the Numbers: The Nigerian State’s Efforts to Counter Boko Haram,” in Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos ed., *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria* (Leiden: French Institute for Research in Africa and African Studies Centre, 2014).

439 Afeno Super Odomovo, “Insurgency, Counter-Insurgency and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria,” *Age of Human Rights Journal* 3 (2014).

440 There are some who argue that the military actually orchestrated the establishment of the CJTF and coordinated the set-up structure. “Civilian vigilante groups increase dangers in northwestern Nigeria,” IRIN News, December 12, 2013.

441 Idris, Ibrahim, and Sawab.

442 More often than not, this precise intelligence comes from residents of the communities in which insurgencies operate. The United States military recognized this in its counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and subsequently created local intelligence and security units known as the Sons of Iraq (SOI) and Afghan Local Police (ALP). These indigenous units helped secure local infrastructure from insurgent attacks and filled the conventional military’s intelligence gap at the local level, providing soldiers with timely and accurate information that led to the capture of insurgent leaders and disruption of insurgent cells.

443 Vesselin Popovski and Benjamin Maiangwa, “Boko Haram’s attacks and the people’s response: A ‘fourth pillar’ of the responsibility to protect?” *African Security Review* 25:2 (2016): p. 167.

444 Agbiboa, p. 12.

become members. (There are 27 LGAs in Borno State.)

Baba Lawan Jafar has reportedly said that the CJTF numbers 15,541 members, and is split in the following ways: 10,000 in Adamawa, 1,200 in Bauchi, 1,800 in Borno, 715 in Gombe, 1,156 in Taraba, and 670 in Yobe.<sup>445</sup> The size of the volunteer force grew to approximately 30,000 individuals, whose biometric data is supposed to be collected but it is doubtful that this has been implemented. Nearly 2,000 of the CJTF have received ‘formal’ paramilitary training, while the military, according to the CJTF, also trained an estimated 750 CJTF ‘special forces,’ who work closely with the military in their everyday operations in towns such as Mubi and Maiwa in Adamawa State.<sup>446</sup> There is also an intelligence-gathering unit in the CJTF, comprising 100 officers who are spread across the states of the country. Because of this, the CJTF has taken on some state-like roles and has been operating at the “frontier of the Nigerian state, blurring the boundaries between the state and what normally falls outside of it.”<sup>447</sup>

While the CJTF is mostly comprised of men who have reached the required age of 18 to be eligible to join, the organization also allows women to join its ranks, and this is an opportunity that women are starting to pursue. Importantly, to address Boko Haram’s increasing use of female suicide bombers and attackers, the CJTF set up a women’s wing. Boko Haram has played on the common perception of women as non-violent to recruit and mainstream women into its organization, including using them to gather intelligence, recruit, and promote radical ideologies to indoctrinate abductees and other converts to Islam in Boko Haram enclaves as well as to utilize them as suicide bombers. Because of this, the women in the CJTF conduct pat-downs of women in churches, mosques, and other public places; patrol towns and villages; gather intelligence; and arrest suspected female insurgents.<sup>448</sup> Their role is crucial and takes the upper hand away from Boko Haram, though it is not always easy for women to operate as part of the CJTF. One prominent female member of the CJTF, Fatima Mohammed, commented that “it’s harder to do this work as a woman” and admitted that she feels more “vulnerable if something were to go wrong.” Her family in her home village of Gamboru Ngala, 90 miles outside Maiduguri, wants her to stop, “but I have no option,” she said. “Boko Haram is now in a weaker position than when the C.J.T.F. was formed.”<sup>449</sup>

Some of the women recruited by the CJTF come from families of hunters, though there are many who do not. Women in some instances have been empowered to command groups of fighters and take part in active fighting alongside men.<sup>450</sup> Northeastern Nigeria has experienced many attacks by Boko Haram and through the efforts of the female CJTF members, several attacks have been thwarted through successful intelligence gathering.<sup>451</sup>

Funding for the CJTF has mostly come from the Borno State government, which donated over 60 vehicles to the group. Its formation was also facilitated by buy-in from Borno State Governor Kashim Shettima. In addition to the Borno State government, the CJTF also received handout donations from citizens and some private politicians as well as also sponsorship from the North East Regional Initiative (NERI), which supported training on Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC).<sup>452</sup>

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445 Bamidele, p. 132.

446 Transcript of focus group discussion with State Executive Council of the CJTF, May 2016.

447 Bamidele, p. 135.

448 Idayat Hassan, “The role of women in Countering Violent Extremism: The Nigerian experience with Boko Haram,” *Peace Insight*, March 20, 2017.

449 Alexis Okeowo, “The Women Fighting Boko Haram,” *New Yorker*, December 22, 2015.

450 Chitra Nagarajan, “Gender Assessment for Northeastern Nigeria,” conducted for Managing Conflict in Northeastern Nigeria, 2017.

451 Hassan, “The role of women in Countering Violent Extremism.”

452 Interview by Idayat Hassan of CJTF members, Maiduguri, November 2017.

To curb discontent in the CJTF about its members sacrificing their current employment opportunities to join, the Borno State government also set up the Borno Youths Empowerment Scheme (BOYES). BOYES supports the work of the CJTF by providing each BOYES member with an allowance of 15,000 naira (approximately \$50 USD) per month.<sup>453</sup> In addition to this, the scheme allows for participants to receive limited military training, uniforms, patrol cars, and identification documents.<sup>454</sup> The CJTF has also received support from the Every Nigerian Do Something Foundation (ENDS), development partners, and residents of Borno State. It was initially hoped that the BOYES program would train up 6,000 members, but it was stopped in 2015 in order to convert the training site into a camp for an estimated one million IDPs in Borno.<sup>455</sup> “But stopped at around 1,850, apparently due to the army’s uncertainty about training so many potentially unreliable persons.”<sup>456</sup>

What makes the CJTF different from other militia groups operating in Nigeria is that most other militia groups are ethnic in orientation and oppose either the government or rival ethnic groups.<sup>457</sup> By contrast, the CJTF is based on an objective: to oust Boko Haram and end the insurgency in Borno State and its environs. Moreover, as part of the bi-religious nature of the CJTF, new recruits are required to swear an oath using the Bible or Qur’an—depending on the faith to which they belong—before joining. The CJTF also claims that members work under the strict rules that a member of the CJTF must not take laws into his/her hands and any insurgents identified must be reported to the police. In this regard, Abba Khalil, the state coordinator of CJTF, stated that “if you see an insurgent you know is a member of Boko Haram, and even if it is a member of your family that this person killed, you let us hand him over the authorities.”<sup>458</sup> In the same vein, Khalil argues that CJTF are professional enough to even turn over to the authorities members of their own families who are found to have associations with Boko Haram. Khalil did this himself, turning over his 18-year-old nephew, whom he later watched executed by the military, and later said that he had “no regrets.”<sup>459</sup>

In another digression from other local militia groups in Nigeria, the CJTF initially operated as a pro-government force, working closely with the Nigeria security forces to gather intelligence and perform some combat roles alongside the Nigerian military in routing out the insurgents. It has been reported that the military frequently took CJTF members on military operations, and according to military documents, the military relied heavily on CJTF for its operations in the northeast.<sup>460</sup> For example, “in its August 2013 report, the army’s Joint Investigation Team (JIT) mentioned the contribution of CJTF to the success of military operations.”<sup>461</sup> However, there had been some level of confusion over “who is who,” and a power tussle ensued between the army and CJTF. As the CJTF evolved, the army started to see the latter as attempting to usurp its authority while the CJTF saw itself as the military’s eyes and ears and the first responders manning the roadblocks in towns and villages. The CJTF were also on the frontlines of Boko Haram violence often with none of the weapons available to the armed forces, and as such have often paid the price of its commitment to fight Boko Haram with their members’ lives. Armed with little more than traditional weapons, 680 CJTF members were

453 The BOYES was introduced as an all-inclusive blueprint aimed at transforming “youths into becoming more productive,” according to Governor Shettima. See “War Against Boko: Borno Holds Orientation for 800 ‘Boyes’ Civilian JTF,” NewsRescue, September 28, 2013. The CJTF secretary in an interview claimed to have been the chair of the committee, and it was one attempt to stop the discontent within the group as no remuneration was going to be given to the volunteers or post-conflict plans. Idayat Hassan, in-depth interview, May 3, 2016.

454 “Watchmen of Lake Chad,” p. 5.

455 Agbiboa, p. 16.

456 “Watchmen of Lake Chad,” p. 5.

457 For example, the Ombatse militia in Nassarawa State functions as a vigilante group and also as an Eggon self-determination group.

458 Author interview, state coordinator of the CJTF, Abuja, Nigeria, May 2016.

459 Alexis Okeowo, “Inside the Vigilante Fight Against Boko Haram,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 9, 2014.

460 “Stars on their shoulders,” p. 26.

461 Ibid.

killed in the conflict from May 2013 to July 2017.<sup>462</sup>

The military also distrusts the CJTF and believes that CJTF ranks have been infiltrated by Boko Haram Fifth Columnists (which is probably true in some cases), along with criminals and other miscreants.<sup>463</sup> The CJTF, however, see themselves as community defenders who receive little or no remuneration for their work and no insurance coverage.<sup>464</sup> The relationship between the military and the CJTF began going awry around 2015, but it hit a nadir in February 2017 with the arrest of the founder of the CJTF, Baba Lawan Jafar, over his alleged links to Boko Haram, which caused some CJTF leaders to refuse to cooperate with the army.<sup>465</sup> The CJTF has also raised concerns about the military, alleging that some soldiers sell weapons to Boko Haram as a means of earning extra cash and that they are too lenient with suspects handed over to them by the CJTF.<sup>466</sup>

On top of the tussles with the military, the CJTF has also been reportedly weakened by factionalism and indiscipline; there are complaints that members abuse drugs and alcohol and refuse to heed instructions. Regular complaints of irregular pay from the Borno State government and the lack of health insurance and even fuel for their vehicles has also affected morale. Moreover, since the Nigerian government launched in April 2016, a program in Gombe State called “Operation Safe Corridor (OSC)”<sup>467</sup> to engage in Deradicalisation, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DRR) of repentant Boko Haram members and cater for ex-insurgents, there has been discontent among CJTF members. They claim that several CJTF members are in detention for petty crimes that the government would not pardon, yet the government is intent on not only forgiving Boko Haram insurgents but even providing job opportunities and education for them.<sup>468</sup>

### Ups and Downs of the CJTF

As CJTF members operate largely near their places of residence, working with the CJTF has helped the Nigerian military overcome the problem of identifying Boko Haram members. From 2011 to 2013, elite elder statesmen in Borno under the auspices of Borno Elders and Leaders of Thought (BELT) criticized the Nigerian military for being heavy-handed and using indiscriminate force against the local population and called for the withdrawal of the JTF from the state.<sup>469</sup> BELT alleged that the Nigerian military came into the communities and maimed and destroyed property due to lack of knowledge of how to distinguish insurgents from the general populations. In a press statement dated July 12, 2011, BELT also accused Nigerian soldiers of arson, murder, looting, and rape of young girls.<sup>470</sup> However, the formation of the CJTF was able to stem the problem of identification for some time. According to the Borno State coordinator of the CJTF, Abba Khalil, “immediately after the CJTF became active, there was less bombing, less kidnapping, less killing. How did we achieve the success? We the good Samaritans [the CJTF] started showing members of Boko Haram to the security outfit, as we know who Boko Haram members are. They live in our communities, but previously we feared the military.”<sup>471</sup>

462 “Civilian JTF loses 680 Members to Boko Haram Insurgency,” *Vanguard*, July 9, 2017.

463 There have been many allegations of rape made against the CJTF. See Samuel Malik, “Civilian JTF: The Making of a Human Time Bomb,” *Premium Times*, May 19, 2015.

464 Idayat Hassan, “Boko Haram – the fear, the conspiracy theories, and the deepening crisis,” *IRIN Analysis*, August 30, 2017.

465 Idayat Hassan, “Boko Haram: Down but Far from Out,” *IRIN News*, May 24, 2017.

466 “Watchmen of Lake Chad,” p. 14.

467 See Max Siollun, “Can Boko Haram Be Defeated?” *New York Times*, May 18, 2016.

468 Focus group discussion with CJTF sector head, August 20, 2017.

469 Hamza Idris and Yahaya Ibrahim, “Nigeria: Borno Elders, JTF Trade Blames,” *Daily Trust*, July 15, 2011.

470 “Borno Elders Join Call on FG to Withdraw JTF,” *Sahara Reporters*, July 14, 2011.

471 Idayat Hassan, focus group discussion with communities in Maiduguri, Damaturu in Borno and Yobe states respectively, Borno, Adamawa, May 2017.



However, whatever the initial gain, this was to be short-lived, as the CJTF has been accused of fingering opponents as Boko Haram members, which has led to several allegations of human rights violations. In fact, in the quest for accountability, many of the victims of the insurgency claim they want accountability from the men of the CJTF who they allege violated their rights.<sup>472</sup>

The involvement of the CJTF in the fight against insurgency also had a significant impact on the casualties recorded during the insurgency—although paradoxically in a negative way at first. In areas where the CJTF has been active, violence against civilians from Boko Haram increased. The formation of the CJTF and its active perusal of Boko Haram has incited the movement to directly target civilians in order to deter them from joining or collaborating with the CJTF. In a statement sent to journalists by Boko Haram on June 18, 2013, the spokesperson of Boko Haram was quoted as saying, “We have established that the youth in Borno and Yobe States are now against our cause. They have connived with security operatives and are actively supporting the government of Nigeria in its war against us. We have also resolved to fight back. We hereby declare an all-out war on you because you have formed an alliance with the Nigerian military and police to fight our brethren.”<sup>473</sup>

To buttress the seriousness of the threat, a few hours after issuing this threat, Boko Haram killed around 22 people, including students and fishermen, in Borno and Yobe states.<sup>474</sup> Rather than the war abating in Borno State, it escalated, with Boko Haram resorting to more violence against civilians. Bama, for instance, witnessed a total of 11 heavy casualty attacks between May 7, 2013, and September 1, 2015. In the same vein, Baga and its surrounding villages were the site of the worst massacres committed by Boko Haram between January 3 and January 7, 2015, where Boko Haram is alleged to have killed between 150 and 2,000 people.<sup>475</sup>

This kind of escalated violence against civilians as a result of the formation and activation of CBAGs can be seen in areas outside of Nigeria, too. There is evidence of extreme Boko Haram violence in response to vigilantism in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. In Niger, for example, “the communities of Lamana and Ngoumao, among the few to have set up armed units, were brutally attacked in June 2015, and 38 villagers were killed.”<sup>476</sup> In Uganda, areas of the country that had active CBAGs fighting against the Lord’s Resistance Army had “an average of 73 recorded attacks against civilians over the duration of the conflict; compared to an average of 25 attacks per region in areas with no recorded non-state actors.”<sup>477</sup>

According to Boko Haram, it was attacking the civilians and their villages to serve as a deterrent to other civilians considering joining the fight against it. This, however, led to a major shift in attitudes of the local populace toward Boko Haram. Many who may have initially been sympathetic toward the group’s claim of acting in favor of the people against the state started to see the brutal attacks on citizens as unacceptable. Thus, rather than intimidating civilians, Boko Haram’s attacks spurred more civilians to join the CJTF and support the government’s counterinsurgency efforts. This also resulted in improved confidence and collaboration between the CJTF and government forces.

The acceptance of the CJTF by the local population contributed to the decimation of the insurgents, particularly in populated urban areas and towns as well as an increase in local populations who had previously openly or tacitly supported the insurgents to collaborate against them. This was especially

472 “Prospects for Transitional Justice Initiative in the North East Nigeria,” Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD).

473 “Boko Haram Declares War on Borno, Yobe Youth for Assisting Vigilante Activities,” *Premium Times*, June 18, 2013.

474 Hamza Idris, “Nigeria: 22 Killed as Boko Haram Launches Reprisal on Youths in Maiduguri,” *All Africa*, June 19, 2013.

475 The Nigerian government put the official figure of dead at 150 while the Human Right Watch puts the figures between dozens and 2000 deaths. See Nnenna Ibeh, “Nigerian military denies 2,000 killed in Baga; says about 150 died,” *Premium Times*, January 12, 2015; Mausi Segun, “What Really Happened in Baga, Nigeria?” Human Rights Watch, January 14, 2015.

476 “Watchmen of Lake Chad,” p. 13.

477 Dowd and Drury.

the case in Maiduguri, where the insurgents operated on an almost daily basis between 2013 to 2015. With the formation of the CJTF, the insurgents have generally not been able to carry out high intensity operations. However, all of this changed as Boko Haram proved adaptable and resilient. Starting in 2015, Boko Haram began to regularly attack the Borno State capital of Maiduguri through the use of asymmetric attacks, IEDs, and child suicide bombers.<sup>478</sup> The insurgents have further perfected their travel logistics, now using camels, donkeys, and horses as means of movement. However, the success of the insurgents is also connected to the lack of discipline, war fatigue, low morale, and politicization of the CJTF.

### CJTF and Human Rights Abuses

While the CJTF model has had successes in curtailing the insurgency, it must also be noted that the group's operations have not entirely deviated from that of previous militias in different parts of Nigeria. The CJTF has come under increasing suspicion of working for politicians by providing fronts and attacking perceived political opponents. This is similar to the *modus operandi* of similar vigilante groups across Nigeria, such as the Bakassi Boys, the Oodua People's Congress, and the Yandaba boys, who also engage in similar political activities. Some observers suspect current Borno Governor Shettima's BOYES program is partially political clientelism, an attempt to turn the vigilantes into a political network using counterinsurgency funding.<sup>479</sup> The International Crisis Groups points to the 2015 election campaign in which numerous CJTF members were seen at rallies of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Shettima's current party, though "it is not clear how much control he has over the CJTF, but throughout the Lake Chad region politicians on all sides are keen on cultivating relations with these groups."<sup>480</sup>

The CJTF has also been accused of summary executions and participation in military-led extrajudicial killings. For instance, video footage published by Amnesty International of a gruesome attack alleged to have taken place on March, 14, 2014, shows what appear to be members of the Nigerian military and CJTF using a knife to slit the throats of a series of detainees before dumping them into an open mass grave.<sup>481</sup> As the cries for justice continue to be aired, victims' groups are also emerging to pursue accountability. One such group is the Knifar Movement (in Kanuri, this roughly translates to "we must get justice at all cost"), which is a loosely organized group of displaced women and victims of conflict in northeastern Nigeria.<sup>482</sup> The group is seeking truth-telling and compensation and to reunite with their relatives. In its petition, the movement attached a list of 466 persons they claim died in Bama Hospital between December 2015 and July 2016 and another 1,229 persons currently in detention.<sup>483</sup> It also expressed fear that children as young as five years old may be held in Giwa Barracks. It further alleged in a YouTube video that there was ill treatment, extrajudicial killings, and poor living conditions for the children in detention and accused the military and men of the CJTF of raping women and girls in Bama Hospital and the internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps near Maiduguri.<sup>484</sup> Presently, men of the CJTF have several cases before them in different courts, which were brought by relatives of victims against the CJTF for brutalizing, arson, maiming, or wrongfully accusing their family of being Boko Haram members.

The CJTF has also been accused of recruiting and using child soldiers in the war against the insur-

478 For example, see "16 killed in Maiduguri suicide bomb attacks," *Premium Times*, October 23, 2017.

479 "Watchmen of Lake Chad," p. 18.

480 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

481 "Nigeria: Gruesome footage implicates military in war crimes," Amnesty International, August 5, 2014.

482 A video from the Knifar Movement is available at "Knifar petition," Knifar Movement, YouTube, May 24, 2017.

483 See Tobi Soniyi, "Displaced North-east Women Protest Presidential Panel's Snub," *ThisDay*, October 9, 2017.

484 See "Knifar petition."

gency,<sup>485</sup> although it signed an Action Plan with UNICEF to end the practice in November 2017.<sup>486</sup> In some cases, boys younger than the age of 18 were keen to join, wanting to show that they, too, could be part of the solution against Boko Haram, but many children may have also been forcefully recruited. In a joint report by UNICEF and the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Program, it was claimed that children associated with the CJTF were “mainly used for intelligence related purposes, search operations, night patrols, crowd control and to man guard posts.” Additionally, it was also reported that some children also “conducted arrests of suspected Boko Haram elements while others allegedly participated in combat during the initial emergence of the CJTF and were reportedly exposed to high levels of violence, including taking part in killings, body mutilation and even parading body parts.”<sup>487</sup> This was further buttressed by the indictment of the CJTF for using child soldiers by the United States in its Trafficking in Persons report in 2016.<sup>488</sup>

The CJTF has also been accused of raping women, false arrests, imprisonment, and arson. For example, reports from IDP camps allege the CJTF forcefully coerced females to have sex with them in return for food and protection. There is also evidence believed to be credible that CJTF resorts to arson on perceived enemies’ property. One such incident that generated public outcry was the burning down of the home of Mala Othman, the erstwhile chairman of defunct All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) in Borno State, on allegations that he was a Boko Haram sponsor.<sup>489</sup>

Damning reports from human rights groups and citizens continue to suggest CJTF members have committed international war crimes and should be brought to book in order for peace, justice, and reconciliation to prevail in northeastern Nigeria. Meanwhile, the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) has established six possible cases of international crimes against Boko Haram and two others against the Nigerian military. Already, the conflict between the Boko Haram and the Nigerian government has been declared by the prosecutor of the ICC as a non-international armed conflict.<sup>490</sup> Preliminary investigations have alleged the Nigerian military committed gross human rights violations in the process of stemming the conflict, just as the CJTF has also been accused of committing war crimes against civilians and Boko Haram insurgents.

### Post-Conflict Scenarios

It is clear that while the CJTF have had a high level of success in combating Boko Haram and turning the tide against the movement, the future of the CJTF is unclear. Increasing allegations of human rights abuses and tensions with the military are pushing policymakers to think twice about the role of the CJTF, especially as Nigeria plans to move into post-conflict community rebuilding and development. Considering the history of other CBAGs (including the Bakassi Boys in southeastern Nigeria), there are further fears that if left unregulated, the CJTF may “use their power not to fight Boko Haram, but to intimidate personal enemies, and one day prove to be as dangerous as the insurgents.”<sup>491</sup> This is a point that Borno State Governor Shettima also commented on. “Unless deliberate efforts are made towards addressing issues of unemployment, illiteracy, hunger, and poverty, the Civilian JTF will be the Frankenstein monsters that might end up consuming us.”<sup>492</sup> The question that then arises is whether the CJTF, which is a group of “largely unemployed youth, desensitized to violence, and used

485 “Perceptions and Experiences of Children Associated with Armed Groups in NorthEast Nigeria,” NSRP and UNICEF, 2017.

486 “Civilian Joint Task Force in Northeast Nigeria Signs Action Plan to End Recruitment of Children,” UNICEF, September 15, 2017.

487 “Perceptions and Experiences of Children Associated With Armed Groups in Northeastern Nigeria,” NSRP/UNICEF, 2017.

488 “Trafficking in Persons Report 2016, Country Narratives, Nigeria,” U.S. Department of State, June 30, 2016.

489 “Youth Group burn Borno ANPP Chair House,” *Vanguard*, June 2, 2013.

490 “Report of the Preliminary Examination Activities 2013,” International Criminal Court, November 2013.

491 Agbiboa, p. 14.

492 Okeowo, “The Women Fighting Boko Haram.”

to having a feeling of power and purpose, pose a threat to the future of the region?”<sup>493</sup>

The Nigerian government has established the Presidential Committee on the North East (PCNI) to deal with rebuilding the region after the conflict, and as a result, several post-conflict reconstruction initiatives have commenced. The PCNI is mandated to serve as the national strategy, coordination, and advisory body for all humanitarian interventions and transformational and developmental efforts in northeastern Nigeria. Both state and non-state actors have made efforts toward ensuring peace building and rehabilitation, but there are gaps in terms of absence of effective linkages, coordination, monitoring, and evaluation of these activities.<sup>494</sup> Moreover, none of these initiatives has sought to tackle seriously the reintegration of the CJTF, and this remain a limitation of current policy.

There is palpable agitation among the members of the CJTF about returning to living their normal lives after the insurgency. A portion of them are now employed full-time as members of the CJTF and receive a monthly stipend from the government, even if the payment is irregular. It is also important to point out that there is actually no status that is more uplifting today in Borno State than being a CJTF member. This is elevated not only through the issuing of official identity cards to members of the CJTF that state the individual is a member of the Borno Youth Association for Peace and Justice (BYAPJ), but also because the CJTF has captured the imagination of local populations.<sup>495</sup> The CJTF believe they have won the war *for Nigeria* and can completely decimate Boko haram if properly supported.<sup>496</sup>

The CJTF are, however, beginning to wonder what the government will do for them after the insurgency, particularly as they are witness to the ongoing OSC program in Gombe. According to Abba Khalil, “The [Civilian JTF] have protected the integrity of this country so they should not be dumped by the government. Government should come in and help the members of CJTF.”<sup>497</sup> Though about 250 CJTF members have been absorbed into the military, current members are requesting empowerment to enable them to take up gainful employment when disengaged from their current security duties. In essence, members of the CJTF do not wish to be discarded once the conflict is over, but hope that their willingness to fight against Boko Haram will leverage some form of employment and status for themselves in the post-conflict period. Moreover, as the International Crisis Group has noted, some joined the CJTF thinking of the rights and prospects they felt membership opened for future state rewards. Such benefits could include “post-war jobs, scholarship or demobilization money in mind. Some CJTF members mention the Niger Delta Presidential Amnesty Program, under which insurgents were pardoned, put on the government payroll and given vocational training or education: “These rebels get something, so what should we get, we who have fought for the state?”<sup>498</sup>

The CJTF further argue that they have lost more than 680 of their members to Boko Haram, that their families have become targets of the insurgents, and that the CJTF cannot be dispensed of without compensation to them from the federal government.<sup>499</sup> Indeed, recognizing the effectiveness of the CJTF, Boko Haram has carried out various espionage patrols of CJTF members and their families to threaten or target them for attack and to learn in advance where the next CJTF operations will take place. Efforts have been made by the Nigerian government to distribute some form of relief to the widows/family members of fallen CJTF members, through the government will have to ensure that moving forward this is continued and equitable.

493 Agbiboa, p. 15.

494 Idayat Hassan, “Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) Signs Memorandum Understanding with Presidential Committee on the North-East Initiative (PCNI),” Centre for Democracy and Development, November 22, 2017.

495 “Watchmen of Lake Chad,” p. 10.

496 Idayat Hassan, interview in Maiduguri, August 2017.

497 In-depth interview conducted in Abuja, May 4, 2016, by the co-author with the leadership of CJTF, Denis Hotel, Abuja, Nigeria.

498 “Watchmen of Lake Chad,” p. 18.

499 Idayat Hassan, in-depth interview, leadership of CJTF, Abuja, May 4, 2016.



While demobilization of the CJTF is high on the agenda of the Borno State government, it is firstly important to note that whatever strategy the government proposes must be exhaustive and timely, lest the CJTF become the next danger for northeastern Nigeria. The CJTF has had access to power since 2013, and Nigeria will have another election in 2019. Nigerian history has been fraught with the use of vigilante groups as enforcers in elections. It is also important to recall that there are several works tracing the emergence of Boko Haram itself to the ECOMOG, a political militia group operating in Borno in the 2000s.

Secondly, the CJTF already has a huge cache of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in their possession. Their leaders continue to argue that these arms can be easily retrieved since the biometrics of CJTF members, including those with arms in their possession, are captured in the CJTF member database. However, there are palpable fears in Borno State that the CJTF is looting the armories of Boko Haram fighters during the clearing off operations and refusing to surrender recovered arms and monies to the authorities.<sup>500</sup>

The CJTF is already facing fragmentation in the rank-and-file of the group. Some of the members are complaining of marginalization by senior members. This led to a reorganization within the group, with the creation of previously non-existent positions such as state coordinator, while the CJTF senate was dismantled.<sup>501</sup> However, this reorganization did not help in keeping the organization united. There are now open factions within the group linked to contestation over resources, with some sectors believed to be enjoying the patronage of the political class more than others. Criminality has since crept in, particularly in the sharing of the loot of war. In the course of writing this article, some of the CJTF members interviewed who preferred to remain anonymous confirmed that they share proceeds from sales of recovered cattle and also spoils of war (i.e., money recovered during operations).<sup>502</sup>

### **Moving to the Future: A Long-Term Plan of Transitioning for the CJTF**

Throughout this chapter, the author has argued that the CJTF has functioned as a vigilante type of CBAG that formed as a direct result of the state's failure to protect the population against excessive forms of violence from Boko Haram. Functioning as a civilian defense movement, the CJTF increasingly cooperated with the Nigerian armed forces to provide local intelligence and to identify and apprehend members of Boko Haram. The CJTF can be credited with turning the tide against Boko Haram, but at the same time, it caused a spike in reprisals from Boko Haram, which wanted to dissuade any civilian cooperation with the government. Over time, the CJTF has grown and become increasingly complex in its hierarchical structures, and as with many CBAGs has faced allegations of abuse of power, human rights violations, as well as questions over the potential for the movement to 'turn bad' in the future. Because of such trends, a focus must be placed on considering the future trajectory of the CJTF within the complex context of winning the counterinsurgency battle against Boko Haram.

Counterinsurgencies are difficult and dangerous endeavors for nations to undertake. Soldiers, government officials, and non-governmental organizations are required to place themselves between the insurgents and the population in a struggle over the population's cooperation. Insurgency is a form of warfare in which all decision-making and action revolves around the population's security and 'hearts and minds.' Programs such as the Afghan Local Police (ALP) and Sons of Iraq (SOI) are examples

500 Idayat Hassan, focus group discussion with communities in Maiduguri, March 2017.

501 The senate is akin to an elders' council.

502 Idayat Hassan, three separate focus group discussion with communities in Damaturu, Yobe State, March 2017. (The groups included the CJTF of Borno State and Hunters Group in Yobe State.)

that Nigeria can borrow from for the post-conflict engagement of CJTF.<sup>503</sup> Nigeria can also learn from mistakes made by other governments (including itself) when CBAGs were not effectively managed or reintegrated into society. The CJTF are valuable allies that Nigeria must engage after the insurgency to guard communities as the people relocate back to their locales.

Modern counterinsurgency doctrine states that between 20 and 25 counterinsurgents should be employed for every 1,000 residents.<sup>504</sup> However, Nigeria has a population of around 167 million people with an estimated police strength of 370,000, so the police to population ratio stands at one to 432 (or approximately two to 1,000 residents). This raises the question of the numerical strength of the government to successfully prosecute the counterinsurgency without the CJTF. Presently, the police are yet to be fully deployed in any of the villages (particularly in Borno State), so language and knowledge of the terrain will always constitute a challenge.

However, the continued incorporation of the CJTF into the counter-Boko Haram campaign will require flexibility and decentralized decision-making. As experiences from the ALP and SOI reveal, what works in one area may not necessarily work in another. The forces must be engaged only in defensive operations such as checkpoint defenses and infrastructure security and intelligence gathering. These civilian volunteers should not be employed in offensive operations, except when their assistance is necessary in guiding military and other security forces to known Boko Haram locations.

A security program in which the CJTF are employed must also be largely supported by the local population. It was Boko Haram's own brutality that prompted civilians to organize into CBAGs, and it was local civilian cooperation that "did far more to help expel the insurgents from Maiduguri and other major population centers than did the state's at times indiscriminate and retaliatory violence against civilians."<sup>505</sup> The public *must* continue to view these citizen volunteers as protectors and defenders and not individuals who conduct raids on private residents and businesses. Civilians in Borno State must see these groups as legitimate members of the larger Nigerian security forces. Therefore, alleged abuses by CJTF must be swiftly and publicly handled.

Credibility with the local population is crucial if the CJTF is to continue to collect the vital 'grassroots' intelligence that will eventually lead to a complete disruption of Boko Haram and help to prevent the group's reemergence. A review of Boko Haram since its departure from preaching to full-blown destructive jihad in 2010 has shown the group to be resilient and adaptable. While some of the Boko Haram camps in Sambisa Forest have been dismantled, the group has continued asymmetrical attacks in both rural and urban centers through the use of suicide bombing, including females, IEDs, and kidnapping-for-ransom. Unless official policing can be improved upon and until civilian militia groups such as the CJTF are involved in gathering intelligence while also providing community policing services, the war against the insurgency will drag on and casualties may increase.

503 Michael Bush, "The Invited Leviathan in Iraq and Afghanistan: Strong-Men, The Afghan Local Police, And the Sons of Iraq," Naval Postgraduate School, December 2012.

504 Ibid.

505 Nathaniel D. F. Allen, "Unusual Lessons from an Unusual War: Boko Haram and Modern Insurgency," *Washington Quarterly* 40:4 (2017): p. 128.