**Operation Safe Corridor: Nigeria’s Attempts to Reintegrate Members of Boko Haram**

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***Abstract:***

Nigeria’s conflict with Boko Haram, ongoing since 2002 and reaching its peak of violence in 2014-2015, has caused over 20,000 civilian deaths and the displacement of nearly 2.7 million refugees.[[1]](#footnote-0) As recent successes by the Nigerian military and Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)[[2]](#footnote-1) continue to reduce much of the area once dominated by Boko Haram, the Nigerian government in Abuja now struggles with ways in which surrendered or captured insurgents are handled. In September 2015, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) established Operation Safe Corridor (OSC), a program designed to rehabilitate surrendered Boko Haram insurgents and eventually reintegrate them back into Nigerian society. This paper will further explore OSC, will outline the FGN’s goals for the program, and will end by identifying both challenges and potential and solutions with OSC as a potential model to rehabilitate and reintegrate members of Boko Haram back into Nigerian society.

***Background of Boko Haram in Nigeria***

Discovery of commercial-quantity oil in the Niger Delta in 1956 quickly propelled Nigeria’s economy, which today is the largest in Africa and one of the fastest growing in the world.[[3]](#footnote-2) Most Nigerians, however, are getting poorer. According the data from Nigeria’s National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), poverty rates rose from 42.7 percent in 1992 to 65.6 percent in 1996 to a staggering 69 percent in 2010.[[4]](#footnote-3) Using the dollar-a-day measure, the number of those living in poverty rises to 71.5 percent. NBS statistics also show that northern Nigeria is disproportionately affected by poverty and unemployment, the heartland of Boko Haram and rising Islamic fundamentalism.[[5]](#footnote-4) It was this socioeconomic backdrop that prompted Islamic cleric Mohammad Yusuf to establish the Ibn Taimiyyah Masijid (Mosque) in Borno state’s capital of Maiduguri in 2004.[[6]](#footnote-5) Yusuf, a charismatic and energetic Salafist Muslim cleric, drew a large following by preaching against the oppressive Nigerian government, blamed Western education for corrupting Nigeria’s leaders and advocated for an Islamic society based on sharia law. Yusuf’s messages resonated with many northern Muslims, and young, illiterate and unemployed men proved to be particularly susceptible. By 2007, Yusuf’s followers numbered in the hundreds of thousands and included people from neighboring Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Yusuf and his followers remained relatively quiet until July 2009, when clashes with police over a period of four days resulted in over 800 people killed, including Yusuf, whose extrajudicial murder by police became a catalyst for future violence.[[7]](#footnote-6)

Boko Haram withdrew into the shadows but reemerged in mid-2010 with a much more violent identity under a new leader, Abubakar Shekau. In September 2010 the group conducted a well-planned attack on a prison in Bauchi in northern Nigeria, freeing more than 700 inmates, many of whom were Boko Haram members. Seven separate bombings on Christmas Eve in 2010 in Jos—a major city in Nigeria’s central region—killed at least 32 churchgoers. The violence continued to escalate and spread throughout Nigeria, with an attack on the UN compound in Abuja in August 2011 that claimed 23 lives and another 87 wounded marking one of Boko Haram’s first suicide attacks. The group’s kidnapping of 276 girls from a school in Chibok, a remote town approximately 70 miles south of Maiduguri, in April 2014 propelled Boko Haram into international notoriety and prompted the EU and the UN to place the group on their respective terrorist organization lists. By early 2015, Boko Haram controlled most of Borno state and many areas in neighboring Yobe and Adamawa states in northeast Nigeria.

***What is Operation Safe Corridor?*[[8]](#footnote-7)**

While the program was approved in concept under the Goodluck Jonathan administration in as early as 2013, significant movement toward establishing OSC--location, cadre, structure of the de-radicalization and trade training--did not occur until mid to late-2015. Through research in Nigeria and a series of interviews with a member of the OSC staff, we have learned that specific goals of OSC include:

1. Provide members of Boko Haram with an alternative to fighting.
2. Assist the FGN in implementing a formalized disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) program in Northeast Nigeria and the greater Lake Chad Basin.
3. Provide surrendered Boko Haram insurgents with de-radicalization counseling and trade training, thereby providing Nigeria with a trained and productive labor force.
4. Assist in ending hostilities in Northeast Nigeria.

Operation Safe Corridor is physically located in a Nigerian military camp in Borno state’s capital of Maiduguri. Currently, approximately 1,000 former Boko Haram militants are said to be in the program, of which approximately 80 percent are males and 20 percent are females. The average age of the participants is said to be approximately 30 years old. OSC consists of a 12-week de-radicalization and vocational training program in which 37 different Nigerian agencies are involved. These agencies include but are not limited to: Department for Counter Violent Extremist at the Office of the National Security Adviser, National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), National Orientation Agency, National Youth Service Corps, Nigeria Identity Card Management Commission, Federal Ministry of Health, Ministry of Interior, National Directorate of Employment, and Nigeria Prisons Services. While the program’s de-radicalization and trade training programs are run predominantly by civilian agencies, OSC’s leadership and security mechanisms are controlled by the Nigerian military. Additionally, participation in OSC is reserved for those who surrender to Nigerian authorities. Captured Boko Haram militants--defined here as those who do not physically surrender--are placed in other detention facilities and are currently not eligible for OSC enrollment. Specifics on how Nigerian security forces differentiate surrendered militants from those who are captured were not disclosed during research in Nigeria or from our interviewee.

The de-radicalization portion of OSC consists of psychological counseling and religious training. Newly surrendered militants are given initial psychological assessments in order to determine the extent of treatment required, particularly for younger militants and those who were forcibly conscripted or kidnapped into Boko Haram. During the course of our research, specific psychological counseling methods could not be determined. Interestingly, OSC authorities claim to have incorporated religious leaders and scholars from the international community, notably Pakistan, into religious de-radicalization efforts. De-radicalization training narratives focus on countering many of the distorted teachings of Salafist Islam used to incite Boko Haram militants, often using Salafist clerics and leaders to speak directly with former militants.[[9]](#footnote-8) The OSC authority we spoke with indicated that the primary component of OSC is religious de-radicalization. However, we could not discern specific metrics that OSC authorities use to initially evaluate surrendered participants and subsequently evaluate at the end of his or her 12-week program.

The vocational portion of OSC involves training in predominantly low-skilled trade: agriculture, wood- and steel- working, and textile manufacturing for instance. This training is intended to provide former militants with skills necessary to become self-reliant once they are deemed de-radicalized and prepared for reintegration back into Nigerian society. Additionally, vocational training provides former militants with a trade that will make them productive members of the communities in which they are reintegrated, as many northern Nigerians have indicated resistance to accepting former militants. Finally, vocational training will provide militants with the skills necessary to earn a living, which theoretically addresses a few of the socioeconomic drivers for initially joining Boko Haram.

From what could be discerned, surrendered militants are psychologically evaluated at least twice during their 12 weeks in OSC; once during their initial entry into the program and once at the culmination of the program to determine whether or not they are prepared to reintegrate back into Nigerian society. We could not discern specifically how OSC officials determine whether or not a former militant is effectively de-radicalized. According to the authority we spoke to, approximately 30 percent of the militants currently entering OSC are deemed to not be completely de-radicalized after the 12 weeks. Those determined unfit for reintegration are placed back into the program, but it is unclear whether they complete the 12 week program again or are inserted into a follow-on program on a case-by-case basis. Those who are determined to be prepared for reintegration are sent to different areas from which they originated in an effort to provide former militants with a “fresh start” and opportunity to reestablish themselves in a community in which they did not participate in hostilities. Specific numbers of those who had been effectively rehabilitated and reintegrated through OSC could not be discerned. Additionally, each community's willingness to welcome former militants into their society was also unclear.

***Challenges with Operation Safe Corridor***

Although much regarding OSC is still publicly unknown, we were able to develop enough of an understanding of the program to identify some of its potential challenges and pitfalls. While most Nigerian civilians understand the merits of a program like OSC, many more have displayed strong resistance to the program. Most northern Nigerians believe that the harms caused by Boko Haram should be addressed before former militants receive treatment and vocational training. Others fear the risk of recidivism to be too high to reintegrate former insurgents back into communities in the near term. How the FGN addresses these concerns will be vital in ensuring OSC or a similar program is successful; without support from those citizens and communities charged with ultimately reintegrating former militants, any such program will undoubtedly fail.

Boko Haram’s insurgency ravaged northeastern Nigeria and dramatically altered the lives of millions of Nigerians. As mentioned earlier, nearly 3 million Nigerians have been forced from their homes, many of whom are forced to live in under resourced internally displaced persons (IDP) camps or “host communities”—essentially shantytowns with extremely limited means of life support—and are draining already scarce resources. Additionally, as more areas of northeast Nigeria become accessible, a growing humanitarian crisis is emerging. The latest report from the United Nation’s Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs (OCHA) estimates that over 7 million people are in need of emergency life-saving assistance, of which an estimated 4.4 million remain in unsecure or inaccessible areas due to ongoing violence.[[10]](#footnote-9) An estimated one million northeast Nigerians suffer from severe acute malnourishment, including 250,000 children under six years of age. Médecins Sans Frontières and UNOCHA officials warn that unless immediate steps are taken to improve security and access in northeast Nigeria, 50,000 children will likely die.[[11]](#footnote-10) For many northern Nigerians, these problems created and perpetuated by Boko Haram must be addressed *before* surrendered militants benefit from a program such as OSC. To do otherwise, in the eyes of many Nigerians, would amount to rewarding former Boko Haram militants for their violence while simultaneously punishing the millions of Nigerians affected by the conflict.

During a discussion among community and government leaders from Borno state in Maiduguri in June 2016, many of the participants exhibited concern about the high risk of recidivism among militants deemed de-radicalized by OSC authorities and reintegrated into their communities. Specifically, most were skeptical of OSC’s ability to determine whether or not a former militant no longer held radical religious views and would subsequently resist rejoining Boko Haram or similar violent extremist groups such as Ansaru and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Most participants believed reintegration in the near term was dangerous and called for a ten-year period to pass before reintegration should begin in northern communities, allowing the population to heal first after such a long period of sustained violence. While the feasibility of a ten-year period is likely unrealistic, the stakeholders’ sentiment and strong resistance to reintegration in the near term displays a strong lack of Nigerian community acceptance of the program. Therefore, we believe that OSC must be implemented in conjunction with similar programs aimed at developing vocational skills and access to jobs for the millions of IDPs effected by Boko Haram. Psychological counseling and rehabilitation must also be afforded to those who have been witness to Boko Haram’s violence and security force operations, as many Nigerians have become radicalized against Boko Haram and will prove to be a significant inhibitor to the public accepting OSC’s legitimacy. Establishing a rehabilitation and reintegration program in which both former militants and civilians can participate is critical to receiving public support for OSC and ensuring the desired outcomes of the program are realized.

Another challenge of OSC is that, while 37 different civilian agencies are involved, the program is perceived to be a military-run initiative. OSC is commanded by a Nigerian Army Brigadier General, has a predominantly military officer staff, and it is physically located on a military camp that is guarded by Nigerian soldiers. Nigeria’s military has been widely criticized for its brutality and disregard for human rights, particularly during its fight with Boko Haram. In a highly critical report on Nigerian security force war crimes and human rights violations, Amnesty International documented 27 incidents of extrajudicial killings committed by security force members in 2013 and 2014 alone. The report claimed that at least 1,200 people, mostly men and young boys, had been killed and another 7,000 had died in under-resourced and overcrowded detention facilities.[[12]](#footnote-11) The most notorious of these incidents occurred in March 2014 after Boko Haram attacked a detention facility at Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri and released an estimated 700 prisoners. In the days that followed, Nigerian soldiers and members of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) began house-to-house searches of local residences in an effort to recover the released prisoners. Amnesty International’s investigation presented overwhelming evidence that at least 640 men and boys, most of whom were released during the Giwa Barracks attack, were extra-judicially killed by soldiers and CJTF volunteers.[[13]](#footnote-12)

Given this history of abuse, it is a fallacy to assume that many Boko Haram militants will willingly surrender to Nigerian security forces. The benefits of surrendering and participating in OSC must outweigh the potential cost of continuing to fight under Boko Haram’s banner. Due to the Nigerian security forces’ violent history, OSC is likely not attractive to militants who would otherwise be prone to surrender. Thus, it is important for OSC’s future that military involvement be limited, with the ultimate goal of being completely removed in the near future. Physical security for OSC’s camp should be transferred to Nigeria’s National Police Force, Civil Defense Corps, or other security agency run and operated by Nigerian civilians. Additionally, the OSC camp should be immediately removed from a military base and transferred to an area deemed acceptable by the new agency responsible for physical security. These changes will display Nigeria’s sincere commitment to rehabilitating and ultimately reintegrating surrendered militants back into Nigerian communities and not simply deceiving militants into overcrowded and under-resourced prisons.

The legal status of surrendered Boko Haram members is another issue that OSC officials will eventually need to address. Public support for OSC is limited due in large part to northern Nigerians demanding justice for many of the harms perpetrated by Boko Haram. Amnesty for militants, even those who are surrendered or were forcibly conscripted, is nearly unanimously rejected by most Nigerians. Prosecuting thousands of militants, however, will prove difficult due to the lack of clear evidence on individual fighters and the FGN’s limited legal resources. Certain punishment, regardless of the extent of each militant’s involvement in the insurgency, will also play a factor in the number of those willing to surrender. Many low-level fighters and supporters of Boko Haram, particularly those forced into the group or coerced into directly supporting the group’s activities, may be unwilling to surrender if their punishment is equal to that of mid-level leaders or those who took part in rape, murder and other war crimes. The FGN must develop a robust method for delivering prosecutorial justice to Boko Haram militants while simultaneously avoiding a homogenous approach that disproportionately alienates low-level fighters and supporters. Without striking this careful balance, both public support and militant willingness to surrender and participate in OSC will likely prove inadequate.

***Conclusion***

Operation Safe Corridor has many egregious flaws that must be addressed if the program is to be successful. However, OSC also represents a positive step forward for the FGN, which just two years ago seemed completely incapable of defeating Boko Haram militarily. The inauguration of President Muhammadu Buhari in May 2015 ushered in a reinvigorated effort against Boko Haram and reversed six years of the group’s gains. However, Boko Haram will not be defeated with military force alone. Similar to other successful counterinsurgencies, Nigeria will have to incorporate a way for Boko Haram militants to lay down their arms and eventually return to Nigerian society. We believe OSC represents the beginning of such a program and should be built on using lessons learned from conflicts throughout the world. With assistance from international governments and other non-state actors, OSC could prove to be the program most responsible for bringing Boko Haram’s seven-year insurgency to an end.

1. Accurate numbers of deaths, wounded and internally displaced people (IDP) perpetrated by Boko Haram and Nigerian security forces are difficult to come by, largely due to the lack of accurate reporting from the conflict. Most sources indicate the numbers provided in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) is a government and military alliance between Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Benin originally established in 1994 to establish a joint headquarters for rural banditry and cross-border security. The MNJTF’s mandate was expanded in April 2012 to encompass counterterrorism operations in the Lake Chad Basin region. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. “United States Central Intelligence Agency World Fact Book,” U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, accessed October 27, 2016, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Olu Ajakaiye et al, “Spatial and Temporal Multidimensional Poverty in Nigeria.” *Growth and Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. John Campbell, *Nigeria: Dancing on the Brink* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Borno State is the most northeastern state in Nigeria and has suffered nearly 75% of Boko Haram’s violence in the past seven years. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Mike Smith, *Boko Haram: Inside Nigeria’s Unholy War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 97-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Much of our knowledge of OSC is derived from the author’s research in Abuja and Maiduguri from June to August 2016 and a series of interviews with a member of the Operation Safe Corridor staff. For confidentiality purposes, we will not disclose the interviewees name or position. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Centre for Democracy and Development, “Counter-Salafist Narratives Pamphlet.” July 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. “Nigeria: Humanitarian Dashboard,” last modified August 25, 2016, UN OCHA, accessed October 29, 2016. http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/nga\_humanitarian\_dashboard\_as\_of\_august\_2016.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. “UN and partners step up assistance in north-east Nigeria, urge more action.” last modified July 10, 2016, OCHA Press Release, accessed November 3, 2016. http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Press%20Release\_Nigeria\_30062016.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. “Stars on their shoulders. Blood on their hands. War Crimes Committed by the Nigerian Military.” Amnesty International, (AFR 44/1657/2015), 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)