**The Federal Government of Nigeria, Boko Haram and Operation Safe Corridor**

Nigeria’s attempt to rehabilitate and reintegrate former militants, problems with its current approach and recommendations for the future.

Justin W. Crocker

M.A. Global Affairs Candidate 2017

Jackson Institute for Global Affairs

Yale University

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-1) As recent successes by the Nigerian military and Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)[[2]](#footnote-2) 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. 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

While OSC or a similar program will likely prove vital to ending Boko Haram’s insurgency, problems implementing such a program are profuse. The legal status of ex-combatants, sensitivity to the local population’s need for justice and revenge, programs addressing the millions of victims of Boko Haram’s violence and the possibility of recidivism must also be addressed. The following will discuss the current structure of OSC and potential problems with the program. This, combined with models of rehabilitation and reintegration from similar conflicts, will allow us to provide recommendations on ways to assist the FGN in their efforts to end hostilities in the country’s northeast.

***What is Operation Safe Corridor?[[3]](#footnote-3)***

Operation Safe Corridor is operated from a 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 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. Those who are captured 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.

The de-radicalization portion of OSC largely consists of psychological counseling and religious training. Newly surrendered militants are given initial psychological assessments in order to determine the extent of treatment needed, 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 or the extent of such counseling 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 times using Salafist clerics and leaders to speak directly with former militants.[[4]](#footnote-4) The OSC authority we spoke with indicated that the primary component of OSC is religious de-radicalization. However, we could not discern specific metric that each militant is initially evaluated and subsequently evaluated at the end of his or her 12-week program

The vocational portion of OSC involves training in predominately 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, addressing a few of the socioeconomic causes of the insurgency and reasons why northern Nigerians were initially susceptible to joining the group.

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 mentally prepared to reintegrate back into Nigerian society. It could not discern specifically how OSC officials determine whether or not a former militant is effectively de-radicalized. According to the authority we spoke with, about 30 percent of militants are deemed to not be completely de-radicalized after the 12 weeks. Those deemed unfit for reintegration are placed back into the program; 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.

***Potential Problems with Operation Safe Corridor***

While much regarding OSC is still publicly unknown, we were able to develop a good enough understanding of the program to identify some of its potential pitfalls. While most Nigerians understand the merits of a program like OSC, many have displayed resistance. Primarily, most northern Nigerians believe a many of the ills 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.[[5]](#footnote-5) 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.[[6]](#footnote-6) 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, as many believe the FGN is currently doing, would amount to rewarding former Boko Haram militants for their violence while simultaneously punishing the millions of Nigerians effected 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.[[7]](#footnote-7) 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 Nigeria’s lack of community acceptance of the program.

Another problem identified with 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, its administrative staff is predominately military, 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. 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-judiciously killed by soldiers and CJTF volunteers. In a widely-distributed video, soldiers and CJTF members are seen systematically beheading civilians who were later identified as former prisoners in Giwa barracks. 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 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. Given this, it will be important for OSC’s future that military involvement be limited, with the ultimate goal of being completely removed in the near future.

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 into the group, is almost unanimously insupportable to northern Nigerians. Prosecuting thousands of militants, however, will be difficult due in large part to lack of clear evidence on individual fighters and limited legal resources in the FGN. Blanket punishment, regardless of the extent of each militant’s involvement in the insurgency, will likely also play a factor in the number of those willing to surrender. Regardless of the troubles with regard to legal status, this is an issue that Nigeria will be forced to manage in the very near future.

Operation Safe Corridor has its flaws, many of which are egregious and will have to 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. Like most other successful counterinsurgencies, Nigeria must incorporate a way for Boko Haram militants to lay down their arms and eventually reenter Nigerian society. OSC represents such a program. With assistance from international governments and other non-state actors, OSC could very well 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-1)
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-2)
3. Very little has been written on Operation Safe Corridor. The authors of this paper received the majority of our information from a first-hand source who has a close working knowledge of the program. For reasons of anonymity, we will not disclose the individual’s name. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. CDD Salafist Narratives pamphlet. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. OCHA, “Nigeria: Humanitarian Dashboard (as of August 25, 2016).” http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/nga\_humanitarian\_dashboard\_as\_of\_august\_2016.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. OCHA Press Release, “UN and partners step up assistance in north-east Nigeria, urge more action.” July 10, 2016. http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Press%20Release\_Nigeria\_30062016.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Centre for Democracy and Development, “Policy Brief: Stakeholder’s Dialogue on Government Approaches to Managing Defecting Violent Extremists.” August 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)