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Countering Terrorism in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin: Reassessing the Role of Vigilantism as a Counterterrorism Initiative

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ABSTRACT

Vigilantism is not a new phenomenon in Nigeria. As a state with various "alternatively governed" spaces the country has leant on vigilantes of differing forms as a source of authority where the state has been ineffective. Albeit proving controversial, their successes cannot be unrecognized. This article explores the public's perception on vigilantes and the extent to which they should be deployed in Nigeria. We argue that vigilantes can have a role within counterterrorism initiatives especially in alternatively governed spaces. Vigilantes have a positive perception in Nigeria and with more training and structuring, vigilantes can be more effective in counterterrorism.

Introduction

Since Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999 after a long period of military rule, the country has been plagued with several conflicts and insecurity which have impacted on socio-economic development and hindered the country from reaping full democratic dividends. Although there have been several forms of conflicts and different levels of insecurity, three of these stand out and have resulted in the highest numbers of fatalities and destruction of properties. The first is the Niger-Delta militancy.[1] The conflict arose because of discontent with the Nigerian state by the inhabitants of the oil producing region of the country (collectively referred to as the Niger Delta). The main agitation was regarding the distribution of resources that accrue to the Nigerian government from the region. Despite the oil exploration in the region providing the largest percentage of foreign exchange earnings to the country, poverty and inequality have ravaged the region resulting in widespread insecurity.[2]

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The second is terrorism, particularly the scourge of Boko Haram and its affiliates especially the Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP). Terrorism in Nigeria started around 2002 (3 years after the return to democracy) and has plagued the country till date. Several arguments have been put forward to explain the emergence of terrorism in Nigeria, such as inequality,[3] youth bulge,[4] poverty,[5] religion[6] and more recently political manipulation.[7] Data obtained by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Nigeria security tracker reveals that over 41,000 fatalities relating to terrorism were recorded between 2012 and 2022.[8] Although terrorism in Nigeria is largely confined to the North-Eastern region, recent attacks especially the attack on a church in Ondo state (South-Western) Nigeria[9] has shown that terrorism is a national menace and terrorists have the potential to strike in any part of the country.

Third and more recent is pastoral conflict. These are conflicts between opposing pastoral groups, pastoralist and sedentary farmers as well as pastoralists and cattle rustlers.[10] Although these conflicts have been ongoing for a long time, it has become more sophisticated in the last decade and now involves the use of sophisticated weapons. In addition, more frequent clashes between armed pastoralists and sedentary farmers are being experienced in the North-Central and middle belt regions of Nigeria. While the conflict between farmers and pastoralists is most prevalent in Nigeria, the conflict is ravaging other African countries, such as Ghana, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Senegal, and Ivory Coast. In Nigeria for instance, while the country recorded 67 clashes between farmers and pastoralists between 2007 and 2011, the number rose to 716 clashes between 2012 and 2018.[11] Although factors such as climate change, population explosion and reduction in grazing routes, competition for land and water resources, drought and desertification have been identified as the main causes of the conflict, new forms of cattle ownership resulting in an arms fueled form of pastoralism play a significant role in the dynamics of the conflict.[12]

While these three forms of conflict are prevalent in Nigeria and account for most fatalities, other forms of insecurities such as kidnapping, armed robbery, ethnic and religious conflicts have also been on the increase. In addressing these issues, one common element is the role of non-state actors, especially vigilantes, in maintaining law and order. When the Nigerian state is unwilling or unable to protect its people, vigilantes often step in to fill the void. This article will focus on the role and impact of vigilantes in counterterrorism (CT) initiatives in Northeastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin region. The Lake Chad Basin region is situated in the central-north Africa in the Northeastern part of Nigeria. It is mostly arid or semi-arid "Sahelian zone" just south of the Sahara Desert. The active basin is about 984,455 km2 and divided among Chad (37%); Niger (16%); CAR (20%); Nigeria (21%); and Cameroon (6%).[13]

Previously, terrorism in Northern Nigeria was initially seen as a "Nigerian problem" especially by the other Lake Chad countries

(Cameroon, Niger Republic, and Chad).[14] The menace has now spread to other countries and constitutes a major threat to these countries. For over a decade, Boko Haram and more recently ISWAP have constituted the biggest threat to the Lake Chad countries. The terrorist groups have carried out violent attacks in all the four countries resulting in thousands of fatalities. After an initial period of denial when Boko Haram was perceived a Nigerian problem, the other three countries in 2015 agreed to expand the mandate of the already established Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to include the fight against terrorism around the Lake Chad Axis.[15] The four countries were joined by Republic of Benin who believed that security around the Lake Chad axis is beneficial to the whole West Africa region. An initial assessment of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) commissioned by the Institute for Security Studies in 2016 concluded that after a shaky start, the MNJTF was already gaining grounds and adequate operational efficiency would result in success for the organization against terrorism in the region.[16] This momentum has, however, not been sustained as the organization has struggled in the last few years.

While exploring the impact of the organization in 2021, Ajala argued that the MNJTF has failed to combat the threats of terrorism in the region and stated five reasons for the failure. These reasons include the lack of a clear mandate for the MNJTF, lack of understanding of the neo-patrimonial aspects of politics in the fight against terrorism, underestimation of the threats posed by Boko Haram and its affiliates, the inability of the MNJTF to adapt to new threats as well as the unclear role of vigilantes in the MNJTF structure.[17]

Considering the increase in the attacks carried out by Boko Haram and its affiliates as a reflection of failing counter-terrorism initiatives[18] and community disconnect,[19] this article revisits the role of vigilantism in the fight against terrorism in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin axis. Extant literature reveals diverging arguments about the role of vigilantes in the fight against terrorism around the Lake Chad basin (LCB). Samah argued that despite the effectiveness of vigilantes in countering terrorism in the region, the groups could eventually become sources of insecurity if not properly handed.[20] Maiangwa and Kondu, while advocating for legislations to establish vigilantes formally into present security infrastructure in the LCB countries, stated that human rights abuses carried out by vigilante members and lack of knowledge on how to conduct themselves hinder their activities and are responsible for their lack of recognition.[21] Several other literatures highlight the role, strengths, and weaknesses as well as possible implications of vigilantism in Counter-Terrorism (CT).[22] Despite these depth of literature on the perceived importance of vigilantism in CT, the perception of security forces on vigilantism as well as the extent to which vigilantes should be involved in CT remains under researched. In addition, the perception of the local indigenes on the impact and roles of vigilantes have not been critically explored.

This paper fills this gap in literature with empirical analysis and interviews with people living and working in the region. The article also explores the role of vigilantes in filling the voids of ungoverned spaces. Noting that they were part of the original security architecture of the region before the advent of terrorism as the Lake Chad Basin area was mostly an "alternatively governed"[23] region. The data used for this article include : 131 citizen questionnaires and 21 expert interviews consisting of former commanders of the MNJTF and other senior military officers that have served in the region within the 10-year period (2012–2022). The article explores whether the initial success achieved by the MNJTF was due to an efficient use of vigilantes and whether understanding the roles of such organizations remains vital not only in combating the threat of terrorism but in long-term security of the region. The increased reliance on vigilantes for counterterrorism in the region as seen in Burkina Faso makes this study even more relevant. As a significant partner and leader of most MNJTF operations, this paper is representative of Nigerian perspectives of vigilantism and CT. With the use of the CJTF in Nigeria representing the largest use of vigilantism in CT around the region, we are not only exploring a major influence in MNJTF leadership and decision-making but also opening up the debate on the extent to which vigilantes can/should be involved in CT.

The paper is divided into several sections, starting with an introduction and an overview of the conflict dynamics in Nigeria and Lake Chad Basin area. This is followed by the theoretical exploration of vigilantism and the state. The next section discusses vigilantism in ungoverned spaces followed by an analysis of the civilian joint task force in Nigeria. The next section is the methodology. It then engages in the analysis exploring the perception of vigilantism in the Lake Chad Basin area. The article concludes with three contributions to the scholarship on vigilantism and CT in Nigeria

Theoretical framework: vigilantism and the state

Vigilantism takes many forms and, importantly, is subject to immense scrutiny which shapes public and official perceptions. They have different names such as *justicia a mano propia*, meaning "justice by one's own hand" in parts of South America[24] and specifically *justiceiros*, meaning "justice makers" in Brazil.[25] Public-derived reactions leave a major focus on the roles that vigilantes may play to encourage or pervert justice, yet their roles and objectives, as considered within social-science, regularly fall both within and beyond such assumptions. Vigilantism has previously been considered to prevent a socio-political order from becoming a "subversion," thus defending the integrity of an "order" from falling into despair.[26] Vigilantism may proliferate as a "reaction to the transgression of institutionalized norms by individuals or groups – or to their potential or imputed transgression."[27] Thus, it has been

considered as motivated by the protection of the "status quo," or a return to a previous "status quo,"[28] by taking the means of the law into one's own hands.

Some have focused more heavily on the failure of state institutions, considering their inability to effectively combat increasing social disorder, and in some instances, they perpetrate it and put populations under greater stress.[29] Vigilantism therefore would serve to address existing inequalities that continue to be insufficiently, or altogether neglected, by that state and its institutions.[30] What proves synonymous with most literature is that vigilantes feel as though the government and its institutions have failed to deliver "justice" in accordance with societal norms of the territory. This is fundamentally underpinned by a need to defend what is personally believed to be the valid law of the land (sometimes regarding livelihood protection and sustainability) and thus execute "justice"[31] in this context.

It is by considering how and why vigilantism arises that has caused a shift in more recent literature to particularly recognize vigilantism as "extra-legal"[32]; or most specifically, "the extra-legal prevention, investigation, or punishment of offences."[33] This focus on "extra-legal" is significant because it hereby understands vigilantism as existing beyond the law, thus exceeding its scope or severity.[34] This means that vigilantism exists outside of state-enforced legal frameworks,[35] but cannot exist without them as they "challenge, usurp, supplant, or displace the state's authority,[36]" proving a major distinction when considering the relationships between the state and vigilantes.

As vigilante groups cannot exist within a vacuum outside of the state and its authority, both inevitably intersect and contrast with one another. This does not mean that their relationship (or lack of) with the state remains consistent nor mutual. African nation-states are no exception to this, vigilante groups can play a role in collaboration with the state. This relationship consists of vigilante groups representing similar authority to state institutions while not altogether replacing them. In Uganda, vigilante groups complement the police, as research has found that their appearance is positively correlated with police presence, and they play significant roles in protecting local communities.[37] In this sense, vigilantes have maintained police accountability but have also worked with them by referring perceived law evaders to the police for justice,[38] fulfilling a relationship with state institutions.

Relationships have existed through vigilante groups' exercising of the same authority as the state, aside from their institutions. This relationship is characterized by vigilante group's existence as "shadow institutions" which blur the lines between state and non-state actors,[39] meaning that groups "are involved in state-like performances."[40] As a result, they balance on the boundaries between state and society by enacting authority while representing closer links to communities and their concerns.[41] This relationship has been evident in parts of Ghana, where vigilante groups have contributed to both nation-state building and democratic

governance as political vigilante groups have enabled different voices to be heard while promoting democratic participation.[42] It is therefore understood that "if Ghana's democracy is classified as institutionalized and stable, then political vigilantism in Ghana is as well.[43]" Similarly, vigilantism in Kissii County, Kenya, has evolved to take on nonviolent forms of policing at a community level to a greater success than state-led efforts, often assisting to resolve conflict.[44] Thus, non-state actors can exercise authority to promote the promises synonymous with the benefits of a democratic system.

Vigilantes can also adopt influence in areas which they believe that state institutions falter or are unable to attend to. This is especially evident at a local level to punish "norm breakers,"[45] for "the potential for vigilantism varies positively with the intensity and scope of belief that a regime is ineffective in dealing with challenges to the prevailing socio-political order."[46] In some South African townships in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth, vigilante popular justice has posed a serious challenge to the state as symbols of resistance.[47] Here, the state is perceived as having failed to address post-apartheid inequalities, failing to attain acceptance, with the South African police and courts having failed to gain legitimacy, leaving space for groups to arise to use violence as defense.[48] Communities have therefore established their own justice system of vigilante force and community courts as "protection" for their social groups where the state has failed.[49]

However, relationships can also prove unfruitful and problematic as state institutions perceive vigilante groups as an encroachment on their power and authority.[50] While it has been assumed that states maintain a monopoly of violence insofar as they are the only entities which can perpetrate it legitimately,[51] vigilante groups juxtapose and challenge this if they are a body which are trusted by communities.[52] By effectively replacing state-led institutions, fractures can appear within an entire system. Such was seen when the Tanzanian judiciary and police felt vigilantes threatened and undermined their roles despite the group's favorability by political bodies to outsource security responsibilities.[53] While a legislative and executive position may be maintained, this does not lie as unanimous truth for a whole system, with the potential to cause greater issues as time passes.

Trusting and allowing vigilante groups to operate with similar authority as state institutions does not come without potential consequences. Vigilante violence is seen in Nigeria and Ghana where groups with links to opposition political parties have been considered to undermine the rule of law set out by the government.[54] In this instance, vigilante attacks by political opponents have been carried out on government institutions close to elections to attain or retain power at all costs and manipulate election results.[55] This has meant that elections inform negative perceptions of crucial institutions, including the executive who may be considered to have gained power illegitimately as

their opponents have been met with abuse.[56] Such violence has proven difficult to control and could lead to state destabilization by undermining democracy.[57] There is a potential that breaking down relations between any state and vigilante groups may result in a continuous increase of violence as structural norms adjust accordingly.[58]

While none of these relationships between state and vigilante groups are simplistic, it is important to understand the array that exist. Under the contexts that have come into fruition over the past two decades, there is evidence that relationships can prove both useful, highly contested, and problematic. More importantly to this paper however, vigilante groups in Nigeria and other countries around the Lake Chad have proven to not only participate in community-level popular justice but also in counterterrorism effort/activity in "ungoverned spaces."

Vigilantism and ungoverned spaces

The notion of "ungoverned space" refers to a territory within a nation-state that is regarded to exist outside of the state-centered civil rule and thus has no official recognized authority as other local governing alternatives lack sufficient capacity, will, or legitimacy.[59] States with "ungoverned spaces" have been understood to leave these territories to avoid responsibility for the geo-political and economic process within it,[60] thus integrating such areas offers few benefits and may pose a high cost to host regimes.[61] This apparent lack of governing structure can lead to an upsurge of violence that if left unaddressed can have destabilizing effects on the surrounding region. This has been the situation in the Chad region for decades.

Ungoverned spaces have therefore been a prevalent topic in post-9/11 Western discourse where the notion has been used to increase attention in regions that may provide sanctuary to terrorists that threaten Western nation-states.[62] The UK's Foreign & Commonwealth Office declares that ungoverned spaces can "help create an environment conductive to a terrorist presence,"[63] influencing specific thought of radical violence toward such areas. The fear of the threat posed by these areas to international security has a long modern history, notably including pressures from the Bush Administration on African nations not taking active steps to control these "terrorist safe havens" with the threat of US invasion. These threats delivered very little success, failing to sufficiently reduce ungoverned spaces through broad-based deterrence strategies.[64] The Lake Chad region is often described as "remote and ungoverned."[65]

Such imagery can create a somewhat myopic view of these territories, casting a Euro-centric expectation of state-centered governance.[66] Conceptualizing such areas as entirely "lawless" or "anarchial" in this regard

is counterproductive to really understanding their social relations. Assimilating these spaces exclusively through their Westphalian conceptualizations is therefore narrow and ultimately disregards the existence of an "alternatively" governed space; ungoverned spaces are not necessarily "ungoverned."[67]

Martazashvili recognizes the ability for spaces to self-govern productively, recognizing the formal and informal systems in place that make them socially "productive."[68] In these circumstances, local institutions can be established in step with local norms at their core. Raleigh and Dowd argue that these supposed "ungoverned spaces" are extensively and effectively governed by a range of actors.[69] They find that within the Sahel governance is largely operated by regional actors with local issues that they challenge their regional authorities over. The "ungoverned space" within Nigeria, as they identify, is in fact governed by groups of natives who "act on explicitly articulated (ethno-) national agendas" in response to specific issues such as their perceived marginalization.[70] This is not the image of violence that has painted the "ungoverned space" narrative identified previously.

However, recognized alternatively governed spaces are still regularly subject to violence and insecurity of varying degrees. Nigeria's "ungoverned spaces" have enabled an environment for warlordism, religious fanaticism, and tribal self-defense forces which stimulate the illegal movement of arms and drugs, requiring greater attention by state authority.[71] Since 1999, vigilantism in Nigeria has risen with a focus on crime fighting, ethnic threats, and social control[72] as a civilian response to instability and impoverishment from gangs, bandits, and a lack of state control. In 2005, Ginifer and Ismail discussed small arms and light weapons to have been "freely available" with the state unable to protect civilians against armed violence.[73] In these circumstances, vigilante groups rose to fill the gap that the state had little to no control and authority over as seen in the early 2000s.

The Bakassi Boys for instance arose as a solution to capturing and deterring local criminals in Aba, Abia State, were considered as an effective alternative authority after many had lost faith in the new Nigerian government's ability to provide civil security. The group achieved a decrease in robbery rates across the Southeastern states where they operated and appeared to have deterred criminals with their ability to serve swift justice to perceived perpetrators. Locally, they emphasized the role of the community as partners of community policing with intelligence gathering and closer understandings of these communities which they are already a part of.[74] Their popularity has been considered as a response to the state's inability to deliver on economic and democratic promises, while allowing crime to increase unchecked.[75] Such "hybrid governance," may thus prove successful when distinguishing the historical contexts of localized non-state order over conceptualizations of centralized power.[76] Vigilante order, especially in a case of extreme neglect

and insecurity, may therefore be understood as legitimate alternative to state authority.

The Bakassi boys also became renowned for their more extreme measures of justice. Labeled "jungle justice," they gained a reputation for publicly humiliating and beating alleged criminals before performing summary executions in an area where the police had lost their grip of authority.[77] Though for many this was no change from the previous violent operations conducted by state police, the Bakassi Boys became known "defenders" of the "Igbo nation." The lack of state protections for other ethnicities left many vulnerable to what Harnischfeger warned had the potential to become an "ethnic army."[78]

More recently, extensions of insecurity have continued to grow due to clashes in rural communities between pastoralists and farmers, extending beyond prior levels. These conflicts have been distinctly exacerbated by climate change as intense warm weather continues to cause drought and the subsequent reduction of water sources has meant a vast migration of herders toward Southern Nigeria, placing pressure on existing farmland.[79] A shift from traditional pastoralism toward "neo-pastoralism" has therefore become evident as pastoralists lead larger herds that are guarded by groups with access to arms and ammunition depicted as a line of defense.[80] Armed "self-defense" militias have therefore been established by communities as a response to growing violence and criminality, fending against Fulani "bandits" and "cattle rustlers" who have taken advantage of weak rural governance.[81]

State-backed vigilante groups have therefore taken on a politicized community policing role in various Nigerian states, obligating a "self-help" strategy to such groups that have become a part of the state security architecture.[82] Indeed, groups of community-based vigilante youths have embraced this informal policing as a contribution to the management of these pastoral conflicts and as agents of restorative justice. This work has been cited as holding great potential toward creating sustainable peace in these communities.[83] Most states have enacted laws to regulate and guide these vigilante outfits and, in collaboration with state police, they have been considered a valuable means toward the prevention and control of pastoral conflicts.[84]

Despite being placed at the forefront of security management as seen in the pastoral conflicts, vigilante governance in its observed form to date has been criticized for being unable to contain the conflict; therefore, a subsequent intensification of fighting has been witnessed.[85] As these tensions continue to grow with under-addressed consequences, the reliance on vigilantes within the Nigerian security and policing apparatus may prove problematic. With a lack of clear governance and controls, their legitimacy and controllability are questionable. While the initial

intent of vigilante groups may indeed be as a response to growing insecurity within the region, their actions may not constantly adhere to this ethos of protection. This calls into question the mode and manner through which vigilantes are developed and utilized in lieu of effective state governance.

The civilian joint task force- implications for CT in Nigeria

While state sponsored vigilantism could be a solution to policing ungoverned spaces on behalf of the state, it could also result in negative implications for CT. Since 2010, the rise of Boko Haram has made CT a significant focus for Nigerian vigilantes. The involvement of armed pro-government vigilante groups has played a great part in Nigerian efforts to combat the Islamic extremist group over the past decade, most notably in the instance of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in Northeast Nigeria. Formed in 2013, the CJTF, one of the largest vigilante groups in Nigeria, have worked alongside state forces against Boko Haram as "knowledge brokers," helping to identify and capture insurgents in their communities and surrounding region.[86] The group arose because of the Nigerian state's failure to shield citizens from armed insurgents and state violence due to misperceptions of who were allied to these insurgents,[87] and therefore works to protect victimized communities. The CJTF form of vigilantism does not serve to contrast or contest with the government, rather it supports the government as an entity of security provision in the communities they protect.[88]

This has not come without cost. Despite such success, communities associated and identified by Boko Haram as cooperating with the CJTF and state have become more actively targeted in attacks.[89] This has resulted in civilian casualties, with 2014–15 reported as the worst years for civilian deaths and injury.[90] Okoli's 2017 study found similar conclusions that communities who support vigilantes have been subject to intensified violence in redemption attacks.[91] They explain that such outcomes have "smeared the efficacy of the involvement of these vigilantes in counterinsurgency in the area under review."[92]

The power exercised by the CJTF has also gone largely unchecked and includes human rights abuses such as the recruitment of child soldiers and several instances of extra-judicial killings.[93] Concerns were also raised about their integration into a "local war economy," participating in criminality[94] where some members have abused their authority for personal gain. Such concerns are not irrational when considering that the group's misappropriation of power to execute "revenge" for the loss of loved ones has been observed in the killing of Boko Haram suspects in Baga, Borno state as the insurgency attempted to recapture the town.[95] Such observations of the CJTF have risked them being perceived in a similar vein to the Bakassi Boys.

Thus, as time moves forward and the CJTF maintains influence, more will need to be done to keep their powers checked. As the government attempts to reduce the numbers of active members, calls have been made for more state recognition and support for the members of the CJTF[96] with a need to "checkmate" the behaviors of decommissioned members to reintegrate them back into society.[97] Many of the CJTF's members may seek compensation for their roles in protecting communities, and while efforts have been made to address this,[98] success has been limited.[99] An inability to effectively transform this group could mean that "Nigeria may be left with another angry armed group in the troubled northeast."[100] While the success of the CJTF is evident, more must now be done to avoid them morphing into a group of increasing hostility such as a - remodeling,[101] seeking ways to meet the economic needs of currently unpaid members,[102] institutionalization, and rehabilitation.[103]

In addition to Nigeria's issues with insurgents, all three states that join Nigeria's borders at the Lake Chad basin (Cameroon, Chad, and Niger) experience the threat of Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) to varying degrees. The four states are also increasingly trying to deploy vigilantes to fill the void of governance in the relatively ungoverned spaces where terrorism seems to be thriving. Cameroon's northern region has particularly witnessed heightened violence and insecurity due to insurgency with thousands having joined Boko Haram between 2012 and 2016, resulting in as many as 2,860 civilian deaths between April 2013–2017.[104] Insurgents have utilized Cameroon's long porous border with Nigeria to flee and simultaneously attack nearby villages in suicide bombings, targeted killings, and kidnappings, leaving it labeled as "increasingly the most vulnerable in the Lake Chad Basin to attacks."[105] In response, vigilantes have appeared as visible and effective security providers, local surveillance operatives and intelligence gatherers which complement the state-led Rapid Intervention Battalions which are focused on combatting Boko Haram in the region. They have been found a useful solution to the insurgency[106] with as many as 14,000 members recruited as scouts and guides for the Cameroonian forces and engaging directly with jihadists since 2014.[107]

Similarly, the Chadian government has increased the powers of traditional chiefs to govern areas lacking state governability and mobilize civilians in neutralizing Boko Haram's expansion into Chad. Albeit in a more limited capacity than their Cameroonian and Nigerian neighbors, the resulting groups primarily act as the "eyes and ears" of the Chadian military and are equipped with locally produced weapons.[108] This is a synonymous theme with Niger where state authorities have been cautious and conservative in utilizing vigilante assistance. Thus, vigilantes operate primarily as knowledge brokers and intelligence gatherers for local authorities in this region of the Lake Chad basin with restricted powers.

Aside from state-led militaries, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), a professional combined force from the area against Boko Haram, has also benefited from the assistance of local vigilantes. Most notable has been the intelligence sharing with the CJTF who have collaborated on some counter-insurgency operations within Nigeria,[109] other vigilante groups have not been as actively mobilized. Vigilante cooperation within the MNJTF has, however, proven somewhat problematic in military circles as member are not trained to understand the rules of engagement and have questionable involvement in combat roles.[110] Thus, the role of vigilantes within the MNJTF structure remains unclear.

Methodology

This paper is part of a broader study on terrorism and pastoral conflicts, and the resultant forced displacement in Nigeria. Fieldwork was conducted between 2019 and 2022 (although interrupted by COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021) in Borno, Yobe, Nassarawa, Plateau, Benue and Abuja. These cities were selected purposely for various empirical reasons. Borno and Yobe states were selected for research into terrorism especially exploring the impact of terrorism on forced displacement while Nasarawa, Plateau, and Benue were selected to explore the impact of farmers/pastoralist conflict on migration and forced displacement. Abuja was selected, being the country's capital and the seat of the military organizations. In both strands of research, the role of vigilantism as a CT mechanism was thoroughly explored.

The broader study includes over 70 in-depth interviews and focus group discussions involving military officers of different ranks (serving and retired), police officers, politicians, community leaders, government officials and selected NGOs and civil societies. In addition, 424 questionnaires were conducted. Although we used a survey instrument to measure perception and to back up the interviews, the methodology is primarily qualitative in nature. For this article, 21 in-depth interviews and 131 questionnaires were analyzed as they particularly focus on the link between counterterrorism and vigilantism and were conducted in the areas where Boko Haram/ISWAP had operated or still carry out attacks. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify and select the most suitable people to be interviewed. Of the 21 in-depth interviews, eight were senior military officers that have served or still serving with the MNJTF, three were senior police officers that have previously served in the region where Boko Haram operates and the others were community leaders, government officials and members of the civilian joint task force. Due to the volatile nature of the region, most of the interviews in Borno were conducted virtually but all the questionnaires were administered in person using locally trained research assistants. The questionnaires were administered in Borno and Yobe states as these states witnessed the highest

Table 1. Showing interview respondents.

Respondent identification	Designation	Rank/Status	Active/Retired
Mil 1	Military	Maj General	Active
Mil 2	Military	Lt General	Active
Mil 3	Military	Colonel	Active
Mil 4	Military	Colonel	Active
Mil 5	Military	Colonel	Active
Mil 6	Military	Colonel	Active
Mil 7	Military	Colonel	Active
Mil 8	Military	Lt Colonel	Active
Pol 1	Police	ASP	Active
Pol 2	Police	CSP	Active
Pol 3	Police	Commissioner	Retired
Loc 1	Civilian	Local Leader	Active
Loc 2	Civilian	Local Leader	Active
Loc 3	Civilian	Local Leader	Retired
Loc 4	Civilian	Local Leader	Active
NGO 1	NGO	Senior officer	Active
NGO 2	NGO	Senior officer	Active
Vig 1	CJTF	Sector commander	Active
Vig 2	CJTF	Sector commander	Active
Vig 3	CJTF	Area commander	Active
Vig 4	CJTF	Area commander	Active

numbers of terrorist activities. Kobo Collect, an android-based application was used to collect and analyze the survey data. The respondents were selected from local community groups and farmers cooperative societies in selected local government areas. This was based on the researcher's experience of working with farmers in Northern Nigeria.

The aim was to have a meaningful understanding of the experiences of the roles of vigilantes in the fight against terrorism, especially from senior commanders at the theater of war rather than draw a representative sample of the entire military structure. All participants gave informed consent to the interviews. Furthermore, interviewing active security officers under strict anonymity allows them to speak freely and openly, engaging actively with the research and recommending other colleagues that might be willing to share their insight and experiences. This increases the need for duty of care toward respondents involving anonymity, storage, and ethical use of data.

All the participants are given pseudonyms due to the sensitivity of the subject and for protection from facing disciplinary actions for granting unsanctioned interviews. The main inclusion criterion for the security operatives was deployment at theater of war against Boko Haram. Each interview was aided by a semi-structured interview guide and lasted between 40 and 60 min. The other interviews also followed strict anonymity and most of the respondents were reached through snowballing. The questionnaires were more direct in nature because of the use of interpreters in order not to lose the context of the responses.

All the security forces (military and police) shown in Table 1 have served with the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), an organization comprising troops from Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Benin, and Niger with most of the participants serving within the Joint Task Force (JTF), Nigeria's military entity

responsible for combatting Boko Haram. Others are civilians living or working in the area as well as four members of the civilian joint task force.

Study results and analysis

Understanding how vigilantism and vigilantes are perceived in the fight against terrorism is essential in deciding whether (or how) to embed them in the security architecture of the Lake Chad region. In this section, we will analyze the questionnaire responses and the 21 in-depth interviews that were carried out, 11 of which were security operatives (military and police) that have served or still currently deployed to the MNJTF.

In the survey conducted, respondents were asked if there are vigilante groups in their communities, 61% said Yes, 25% said No and 14% were not sure. This shows that vigilantism is already prevalent in this region and many of the citizens are aware of their activities.[111] More than 50% of the respondents stated that military forces alone are insufficient in liberating territories and maintaining grounds previously taken by terrorist groups. Therefore, it is important to consider reverting to the initial security infrastructure before the advent of terrorism at least in some form. While it has been proven that vigilantes are important in surveillance and intelligence gathering, they are also important in protecting and helping to govern areas liberated by the military forces due to their local knowledge and personal effect. It is also cheaper to use "locals" to protect their areas rather than utilizing a lot of military resources on guard duties. As previously stated, since a large part of these areas were previously alternatively governed and not ungoverned entirely, reconsidering the role of vigilantes is essential.

Vigilantism as a necessity

When asked if vigilantes should be embedded in the security architecture of the areas around the LCB, 88% of the respondents surveyed agreed that there's a need for vigilantes to play active roles around the LCB region especially in areas liberated by the military or areas "not yet attacked"[112] by the terrorists. One of the respondents stated

> By integrating the vigilante group with the police force as a form of policing in the community, we can achieve peace. Since the vigilante group knows more about the community and understand the terrain and those in the community too well to provide security information when necessary to the law enforcement agency, they are very important.[113]

Further considering the context of alternatively governed spaces within which the CJTF operates, this wide reach and recognition of vigilantism in Nigeria is not surprising. Existing in areas where arms are "freely available"[114] and

tensions remain, Nigerian vigilantes operate at a level separate from the state insofar as state authority does not effectively exist. Thus, the "self-help" strategy[115] that the CJTF have followed as a reaction to the effects of Boko Haram on their local communities, and more recently with some operational security assistance from the Nigerian military, has been recognized as effective policing. It is therefore popular for this policing role to continue in the areas liberated from Boko Haram as the state's reach remains lackluster in such spaces.

Understanding this, 10% of the survey respondents still argued against further integration of vigilantes in existing security architecture, while 2% stated they "don't know." The apprehension by those who stated "No" stems from the human rights abuses attributed to some vigilante members. One of the respondents who opposed the use of vigilantes stated

> If the police force is overhauled there is a chance that they would be up and doing. This will mean vigilantes are not necessary because they are mostly untrained and take the laws in their hands. Sometimes it is as if they joined the group for revenge.[116]

Respondents were additionally asked to rate the "performance and effectiveness" of vigilante groups in their area on a scale of 1–5 with 5 being excellent and 1 being poor. Most of the respondents (54.3%) scored the vigilantes 3, 24.5% scored them 4, 9.6% scored them 5, 8.5% scored them 2 while only 3.2% gave them a score of 1. This indicates that a large percentage of citizens are impressed by the performance of vigilante groups in their areas. While positive perceptions from respondents do outweigh the negatives, there are, however, a few people who think security should be the sole responsibility of the state. Some others mentioned issues relating to human rights abuses, lack of proper training and the "open ended" nature of vigilantism where anybody can join including criminals.[117]

Such concerns are not without foundation. Concerns over "revenge" for lost loved ones and damage to their community have additionally been echoed in further analyses of the CJTF and the reasons for taking up action against jihadi forces.[118] As previously discussed, such intent has been evidenced by the actions of CJTF members toward Boko Haram fighters, particularly where extrajudicial killings, beatings, and mass arbitrary arrests[119] have been observed. Therefore, as documented and suggested by respondents, it is not unlikely that some members of the CJTF will have joined to extract revenge on those they perceive as having caused great harm to their communities and has resulted in human rights abuses.

Vigilantism as part of security architecture

Seven out of the 11 security operatives interviewed had a positive perception and agreed that vigilantes should be included in the security architecture of the region in "some form." A former theater commander stated

> Vigilantes were used as translators and for intelligence gathering initially. They possess knowledge of the terrain, insight into the norms and customs. The nuances of custom and tradition of the LBC region was not initially taken into consideration during the first deployment, and this impacted on outcome as we found it difficult to secure the support of the locals. Vigilantes also help in identifying Boko Haram elements and served as the bridge between local communities and the military.[120]

The role of vigilantes, especially in navigating difficult terrains, was also highlighted by another military officer. He stated

> In March 2017, the places we went to, we had never been to those areas before and we didn't have up to date maps of the area, so we had to rely on Google maps and local vigilantes. I don't think vigilantes hindered the success of the MNJTF as they were really helpful. However, attention must be paid to their mode of recruitment and how they are used.[121]

The importance of vigilantes as local "knowledge brokers"[122] with the critical ability to direct and assist security forces with specialist knowledge that would not specifically be available otherwise is respected and recognized within military circles. Having lived and embedded themselves firmly within the communities they aim to protect, vigilantes are trusted by and familiar with their communities. In line with previous literature, they continue to prove particularly useful at assisting in intelligence gathering due to their local trusting relationships, an ability to speak an array of local languages, and an in-depth understanding of the local physical and social terrain.[123] This is supported by the lack of the baggage that comes with the state's institutional reputation for corruption,[124] particularly focusing on the police,[125] alongside a history of neglect in areas with no/alternative governance while spurring extremism in some.[126]

Military officials are therefore suggestive that this community-based role that the CJTF has occupied which includes intelligence gathering/reporting and some policing could remain as a vital part of everyday governance in some areas. The role of vigilantes especially in providing intelligence was succinctly analyzed by Mil 4. He stated

> The operations carried out by MNJTF are driven by intelligence and logistics. It is difficult to identify who is who and vigilantes have enhanced more than inhibited the success of the MNJTF. Our major partners are the United States and France especially in the area of intelligence gathering. After a while, the support provided by the partners through real time intelligence became belated because they sometimes have to send information to Washington and Paris, and this was creating a problem because the intelligence was coming late. We all know that the terrorists are always moving and by

the time they are cleared by their military commands to pass information to us, the Boko Haram elements might have moved. We then resulted more to using intelligence gathered through vigilantism.[127]

A former commissioner of police interviewed continues this thought and finds the use of vigilantes within the state's security apparatus as being near inevitable, stating

> Whether we like it or not, vigilantes have a role to play in CT. The areas we are talking about are very difficult areas and the terrain must be critically understood. Have you not read about Boko Haram laying ambush and killing scores of officers? Vigilantes must be involved because of personal effect. They understand the terrain, they are directly impacted, and they sometimes know these terrorist elements. What needs to be done is proper selection, orientation and training, especially in the areas of human rights. The military and police forces cannot win the battle alone.[128]

Indeed, at the height of the CJTF's intervention in 2017/2018 as seen in Figure 1 above, the mean number of Boko Haram attacks significantly reduced[129] with much of this success amounting from seizing arms, vehicles, and intelligence gathered which led to the capture of terrorists in north-eastern Nigeria.[130] This view was echoed by the civilians and vigilante members interviewed. The topography of the region, the multiple languages spoken, difficulty in identifying Boko Haram fighters and the need for real-time intelligence all make vigilantes necessary.

However, while most of the military officers supported the involvement of vigilantism in the fight against terrorism, some of the officers oppose the idea.
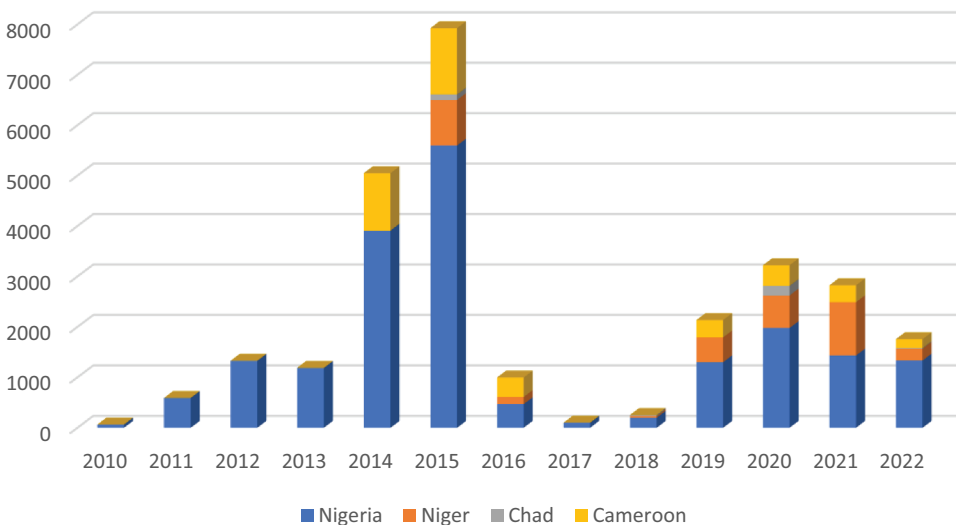

Figure 1. Recorded fatalities due to attacks carried out by Boko Haram and ISWAP in the Lake Chad Basin countries. Data source: armed conflict location and event data, 2024.

Notably, the main concerns relate to recruitment, as displayed by Mil 7 who argued that gaps in recruitments have resulted in some vigilantes working as double agents.[131] Other issues emphasized by respondents included poor training, lack of proper coordination, human right abuse, and the use of child soldiers. Such concerns are not unfounded, with an OHCHR study finding that many in the communities where the CJTF operate, including children, felt under pressure to join the group or otherwise be considered as Boko Haram suspects.[132]

Another military officer further objected to the use of vigilantes in counter-insurgency or counterterrorism, stating

> It is a double-edged sword and Nigeria likes to fly before they can crawl. Most of the vigilantes were deployed out of anxiety and too early and they were elevated beyond their capabilities. If they are used for their primary roles – guard duties then that is fine. I don't think vigilantes have a place in CT.[133]

This view was also echoed by a member of the Nigerian police force, arguing that vigilantes should only be used to guard liberated towns and not in active CT.[134] The CJTF are, in this context, categorized as agents of security due to their unique skills but there appears to be doubts about their role in the broader security architecture. Although the view was held by a minority in our findings, they are important in establishing what the CJTF should look like in the future.

Therefore, we argue that vigilantes have a role to play in Nigeria's security and defense apparatus and CT either as intelligence brokers or as local police but not in the framework of active combat. This should be done after a careful vetting and selection process. The progress of Boko Haram has been successfully hindered both by the CJTF themselves and state authorities, therefore it would appear counterintuitive to no longer utilize their skills and knowledge hereafter. While a cloud of questionability has sat over the group, especially as a minority were found to commit human rights abuses, it is important to look forward to how the group must appear in the future with the assistance of the state. Such controversies have already resulted in a downsizing of the group and now it is time to continue refining their role in CT.

The analyzed data reveals that there is support for increasing the use of vigilantes both by security operatives and the locals. In addition, almost all the respondents highlight the importance of rigorous vetting and adequate training before vigilantes are allowed to work with security operatives. They also believe that the oversight must rest firmly on the government limiting the impact of ungoverned/alternatively governed spaces. Structured vigilantism is the most effective solution to the governance and protection of alternatively governed spaces. A good example of this is Volunteer for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP) in Burkina Faso.[135]

Structured vigilantism (whereby the process of recruitment and engagement are enshrined in law) would hopefully satisfy many that have fought against extremism in their communities and still believe that they are "owed" something in return for their success and participation. With the minority of those entrenched within Nigerian CT being viewed with caution especially due to the human right issues and lack of proper training, much remains unclear when considering the future of the CJTF. As we have discussed, the power of the CJTF has remained largely unchecked by the state for a prolonged period, however, properly embedding them in the security architecture after a thorough selection and training process could positively impact CT.

The CJTF could also play a significant role in the governance of hitherto ungoverned spaces. As we have outlined, the group have provided the state with crucial contextual knowledge of local communities with their language skills, understanding of the terrain and landscape, and trust from civilians. Since such communities have generally supported the CJTF in stemming Boko Haram's spread, their role in filling this governance gap, or at least supporting a new structure of governance, could prove invaluable. Given careful vetting process and support from the state, the CJTF can indeed support governance within these areas.

Conclusion

This article offered an insight into the role of vigilantism in the fight against terrorism in Nigeria and around the Lake Chad Basin region. Using qualitative data collected via survey questionnaires and in-depth interviews, we explored the perception of vigilantism and the extent to which they could be deployed in counterterrorism operations in the region. Focusing more on the Nigerian side of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), we explored the roles vigilantes have played previously in CT and the perception of vigilantes by the military and civilians in the areas ravaged by Boko Haram and its affiliates. After initial success in CT operations at the height of their deployment in 2017/18, data reveal that there has been an increase in attacks and fatalities, hence, the need to evaluate what worked previously and what could work in the future.

The article makes three contributions to the scholarship on vigilantism and CT in Nigeria. First, a large percentage of civilians in the region (80%) agree that vigilantes should play an essential part in CT in the region. There is a consensus that it is more difficult for military officers to remain in areas that have been liberated from terrorists, hence, the need for an alternative form of security governance. While a few respondents argue that it is the duty of the police to secure regions liberated from terrorists, it is important to remember that the inability of the government to protect these regions previously allowed terrorists to take over. Furthermore, some of these regions have been

previously "alternatively governed" with limited exposure to central government; hence, the need to revert to that pattern of governance "in some form" was echoed by several respondents.

Second, in relation to how vigilantes should be deployed, most civilians see vigilantes as relevant primarily for guard duties while the military and other security officials think their roles could be more than that especially if adequate training is provided. Vigilantes have been deployed in CT operations in activities such as acting as interpreters, for surveillance and navigation as well as in identifying terrorist suspects. Most of the security officials interviewed argue that with adequate vetting and training, vigilantes could provide more functions than guarding liberated towns and villages. The region where Boko Haram and its affiliates operate is quite difficult and requires local knowledge. Vigilantes could fill this gap and help maintain an alternative governance aligned with the State.

Third, the article argues that for vigilantes to be effectively incorporated into the security architecture of the MNJTF, there needs to be a thorough selection and training process. We describe this as structured vigilantism. The issue of personal effect should also be considered. While most of the vigilantes have engaged due to the need to protect and preserve their communities, some have engaged because they have lost properties and loved ones. The reasons for engagement could determine attitude and actions and this sometimes explain human rights abuses and extra judiciary killings that some vigilante members have been accused of carrying out. In addition, a thorough selection process and vetting could reduce the number of double agents who act as spies and informant for terrorist groups.

The findings illustrate that there is a need to reevaluate CT operations and the role of vigilantism in the structure of the MNJTF. The countries involved have used vigilantes at varying degrees and the role of vigilantes in CT from different forces have been different. There is a need to harmonize this and Nigeria being one of the principal parties in the cooperation could lead the way by defining and embedding vigilantes in CT activities. Further research is required to understand the extent to which other MNJTF countries engage vigilantes to achieve harmony and effective deployment from all sides.

Notes

1. The Niger-Delta is the oil-producing region of Nigeria. Although the unrest in the Niger-Delta started before the country returned to democratic rule in 1999, it became more pronounced after 1999 and there are still some forms of unrest in the region till date (2022). For details of the conflicts and reasons for the agitations, please see Johnson Osagie, Akinpelu 'Funmilayo, Adegoke Fred, Ezeani Samuel, Causes of Conflicts in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria as Expressed by the Youth in Delta State, *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences* 5, (2010): 82–89; Uwafiokun Idemudia & Uwem E. Ite, Demystifying the Niger Delta conflict: Towards an integrated explanation, Review of

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8. Nigeria Security tracker Nigeria Security Tracker (cfr.org) (accessed July 21, 2022).

9. Nigeria Owo Church attack: Gunmen kill Catholic worshippers in Ondo, BBC news Nigeria Owo church attack: Gunmen kill Catholic worshippers in Ondo – BBC News (accessed July 21, 2022).

10. Cattle rustlers is the name given to cattle thefts carried out by armed bandits or organized crime syndicates either within or outside of the pastoral communities. With the price of an adult cow hovering around $500, armed cattle thefts have increased in the Sahel and West African regions.

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14. See Ajala, Olayinka. "Interorganizational Cooperation and the Fight against Terrorism in West Africa and the Sahel." *Information & Security: An International Journal* 48, no. 1 (2021): 97–114. https://doi.org/10.11610/isij.4811 page 106

15. The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) was initially created by Nigeria and Republic of Niger in 1994 to combat armed trafficking and smuggling around the

Lake Chad Basin area. The mandate of the organization was changed in 1998 to cover a broad range of security challenges around the Lake Chad Basin with Cameroon joining the alliance. The mandate of the organization was again changed in 2015 to cover the challenge posed by Boko Haram in the region with the Republic of Niger joining the security alliance. See Ajala, Olayinka. "Interorganizational Cooperation and the Fight against Terrorism in West Africa and the Sahel."

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Disclosure statement

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Ethical approval

This research was approved by the ethics committee of the School of Social Sciences, Leeds Beckett University. All the participants were given an informed consent form to fill before participating in the research. Due to the sensitive nature of the research and the people involved especially serving military and police officers, we have used relevant codes to describe the categories of the participants without disclosing their identities.