

ADDRESSING TERRORISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM AMONG YOUTH IN NIGERIA

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I. BACKGROUND

The post-colonial trajectory of Nigeria, particularly the civil war between 1967-1970 and its aftermath, has significantly influenced the emergence and persistence of violent extremism and terrorism in the country. Ethnic and regional divisions, economic disparities and perceived governance failures have all played a role in fostering insecurity.

Nigeria's history with terrorism and violent extremism can be traced back to the early 2000s. In the year 2009 it began to gain global recognition with the rise of the Boko Haram terrorist group, which was originally founded as a religious group against perceived western influences with a goal to establish an Islamic state implementing strict Sharia law. The group quickly transformed into a violent insurgency that has continued to wage war against the Nigerian government and civilians across Nigeria.

The Islamic State in West African Province (ISWAP) on the other hand emerged from a faction of the Boko Haram terrorist group with similar goals and the modus operandi of widespread violence through bombings, kidnappings, and attacks on schools and military facilities.

The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) is a separatist group in Nigeria founded by Nnamdi Kanu that advocates for the secession of the Southeastern region of Nigeria, which the group considers to be the independent Republic of Biafra. The movement harkens back to the Nigerian civil war between when the Southeastern region in Nigeria attempted to secede from Nigeria, leading to a devastating civil war that resulted in over a million deaths.

Over the years since its inception IPOB has engaged in protests that resulted in violent clashes with security forces, and its activities had included calls for a referendum and mobilizing youth to confront state authorities. IPOB's open advocacy for an independent Biafra is viewed as a direct challenge to Nigeria's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Consequently, on 20 September 2017, the Federal High Court granted the order proscribing IPOB as a terrorist organization under the Terrorism Prevention Act 2011. IPOB has continued to operate declaring sit at home orders aimed at suspending movements and work on Mondays in the Southeast and maintains a significant presence online and abroad.

II. TERRORISM IN NIGERIA

A. Nigeria at a Glance

Nigeria is popularly referred to as the giant of Africa. This is because it is the most populous country in Africa with a population of over 200 million people. It is a country endowed with human resources and vast natural resources (Oil and Gas, Gold, Coal, Iron Ore, Tin and Columbite, Limestone, Lead and Zinc, Bitumen and other Minerals), and it is a culturally and ethnically diverse group comprising of more than 250 ethnic groups and tribes.

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B. Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Nigeria

In the past two decades terrorism and violent extremism has emerged as the most pressing issue, threatening the national security and the lives of millions of Nigerian citizens. The rise of terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram, ISWAP and the proscribed IPOB has had a significantly devastating impact on regions of Nigeria. Banditry from unknown assailants has become prevalent and continues to threaten the North Central parts of Nigeria. These groups have carried out heinous acts of violence intended to intimidate, cause widespread destruction and harm to individuals and the Nigerian government with the purpose of advancing their political, religious and ideological causes. This has led to the displacement of millions of people and the destruction of infrastructure and livelihoods in Nigeria.

C. Youth Involvement in Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Nigeria's youth have borne the brunt of the menace of terrorism. Boko Haram and ISWAP often target children and young adults for recruitment to undertake trainings aimed at radicalizing and furthering violent agendas. These recruitments are often done online through digital social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, Telegram and YouTube and through the community mosques, places of worship, camps for internally displaced people and detention centres.

Young people are recruited and trained in weapons handling, bomb making and suicide bombing. They are lured by promises of financial incentives, protection, belonging and purpose. Recruitments are also conducted through abductions, and Boko Haram and ISWAP target clusters with children like schools and places of worship. One of the most notorious abduction incidents recorded in Nigeria was the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from a boarding school in Chibok, Borno State, in 2014 that sparked global outrage and birthed the hashtag #bringbackourgirls. Young girls are especially targeted and forced into marriage to breed children with terrorist combatants and made to convert to Islam.

Kidnapping for ransom is prevalent to finance terrorist activities, attacks are carried out against interstate travellers on the road and on the train tracks and hostages are held for ransoms as high as One Hundred Thousand Dollars (\$100,000) per hostage. Young people are often tasked by financiers to move and hide the cash ransoms on behalf of financiers.

D. Root Causes of Terrorism in Nigeria

In Nigeria, widespread poverty, unemployment, insecurity, hunger, perceived injustice, diminished trust and confidence in public institutions and officials, social and political marginalization, educational gaps and ideological indoctrination are the root causes of terrorism. Terrorism is a byproduct of the vulnerabilities and grievances that stem from a breakdown of the rule of law in society. Terrorist groups like Boko Haram, ISWAP and IPOB have presented themselves as alternatives to the perceived neglect and injustice experienced in communities in Nigeria.

III. NIGERIA'S RESPONSE

A. Legal Framework

The Nigerian government has taken steps over the years to address the rise of terrorism and violent extremism through its counter-terrorism efforts and the development of a legal framework for terrorism. *The Terrorism (Prevention) Act of 2011*, later amended in 2013 and now the *Terrorism (Prevention and Prohibition) Act 2022* provides the legal basis for prosecuting terrorism-related offences. Our robust legal framework criminalizes acts of terrorism, support for terrorist activities and the financing of terrorist operations. Financial institutions like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Nigerian Financial Intelligence Units (NFIU) are active and responsible for tracking the financial flow that supports terrorism to ensure that those involved in funding extremist activities are held accountable. In Nigeria several laws govern and protect children and youth, ensuring their rights, welfare and development.

Nigeria recognizes that terrorism is transnational and has sought cooperation with international partners to strengthen its counter-terrorism capabilities. Nigeria is a signatory to a host of United Nations counter-terrorism conventions and protocols and African Union counter-terrorism instruments and has ratified them as such:

PARTICIPANTS' PAPERS

1. International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings (1997)
2. International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism (1999)
3. International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism (2005)
4. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes Against Internationally Protected Persons (1973)
5. International Convention Against the Taking of Hostages (1979)
6. Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft (1970) and its protocols.
7. AU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism (1999)
8. Protocol to the AU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism (2004).
9. African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
10. United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (2000)
11. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
12. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999
13. The Child Rights Act 2003
14. The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015
15. The Labour Act (Cap L1, LFN 2004)
16. The Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition, Enforcement and Administration Act 2015)
17. Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015
18. The Cybercrimes (Prohibition and Prevention) Act 2015

B. Federal Ministry of Justice

The Federal Ministry of Justice in Nigeria is headed by the Attorney General of the Federation and Minister of Justice who serves as the chief law officer and Nigeria's Central Authority. The Federal Ministry of Justice recognizes the transnational nature of terrorism-related offences in that the Complex Casework Group Unit (CCG) responsible for prosecuting terrorism, terrorism financing and financial crimes is domiciled at the International Criminal Justice Cooperation Department to foster international judicial cooperation in criminal matters such as terrorism more efficiently. Mutual legal assistance, extradition and transfer of sentenced persons requests are processed through the Federal Ministry of Justice in Abuja, Nigeria.

C. Interventions

Beyond legal interventions, Nigeria has recognized the importance of addressing the socio-economic and ideological drivers of terrorism that have gravely impacted the youth population. To this end, the government is still implementing deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration (DRR) programmes for youth such as Operation Safe Corridor that was launched in 2016 as a non-kinetic approach to the insurgency in the Northeast aimed at encouraging defection from extremist groups and providing rehabilitation for former terrorists. This programme includes vocational trainings, psychological counselling and religious re-education aimed at facilitating reintegration into society. Special attention has been given to youth, recognizing the links between unemployment, lack of education and radicalization with terrorism, efforts to rebuild educational infrastructure in conflict zones, alongside campaigns to encourage citizens to return to school that are ongoing in the Northeast region of Nigeria. While these responses represent the current Nigerian approach to addressing youth involvement in terrorism, challenges persist in practice and implementation.

IV. CHALLENGES IN ADDRESSING YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN TERRORISM

Despite the robust legal framework and the counter-terrorism efforts summarized above, Nigeria faces significant challenges in the effective prosecution and management of youth involvement in terrorism which has impacted public perception. The sheer volume of suspects detained in connection with terrorism has overwhelmed the judicial system and has led to delays in trials and extended pre-trial detention and has sparked many fundamental rights concerns. The backlog that exists has hampered the ability of the courts to dispense justice efficiently.

Furthermore, the capacity of law enforcement agencies to determine the age of a suspect, conduct thorough investigations of online platforms and gather actionable intelligence is often hindered by the poor record-keeping of births and the absence of a centralized birth registration system, limited resources,

insufficient training and inadequate inter-agency cooperation, which often results in weak cases that do not meet the evidentiary requirements for a successful prosecution.

A. Rehabilitation and Reintegration

One key challenge in the rehabilitation and reintegration of former extremists is the stigma they face within their communities. Especially when young people have gone through deradicalization programmes and have demonstrated a willingness to change, community members often remain sceptical about their intentions.

Community resistance is particularly pronounced in areas that have suffered the most from terrorist attacks, where memories of the violence and loss remain fresh. The resistance and lack of trust is often justified when some rehabilitated and reintegrated individuals return to extremist activities, which begs the question of the efficacy of DRR programmes such as Operation Safe Corridor.

Reports from the Joint Task Force in Maiduguri in 2024 suggest that many of the new arrests are former and repentant terrorists that were reintegrated into society and went back to terrorist groups like Boko Haram and ISWAP. The challenge is in effective rehabilitation, preventing recidivism and fostering reconciliation in their communities.

B. Inadequate Funding

Adequate funding and lean resources remain a challenge in Nigeria's counter-terrorism and reintegration efforts. Budget constraints have limited the scope and reach of government programmes. Rehabilitation centres, educational initiatives and youth empowerment programmes like the N-Power initiative under the National Social Investment Program (NSIP) operate under tight financial conditions, reducing their capacity to deliver meaningful support and to provide long-term impact.

V. CONCLUSION

The challenge of youth involvement in terrorism and violent extremism in Nigeria remains a pressing issue, exacerbated by poor birth record-keeping, socio-economic vulnerabilities and ideological indoctrination. While Nigeria has made significant strides in developing a robust legal framework and counter-terrorism strategies, challenges in enforcement, rehabilitation and reintegration persist. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted and sustainable approach. To strengthen Nigeria's response, the following key recommendations are proposed:

1. Development of a Centralized Birth Registration System: A nationwide digital database for birth records should be established to ensure accurate age determination. This will help law enforcement and judicial authorities verify individuals' ages, particularly in terrorism-related cases and prevent prosecutions of minors. It will also prevent adult accused persons from falsely claiming to be minors in order to evade full legal responsibility.
2. Enhanced Training and Funding for Law Enforcement: Law enforcement agencies require specialized training in counter-terrorism intelligence, digital monitoring of recruitment platforms and community engagement. Increased funding is necessary to equip personnel with the skills and tools needed to combat terrorism effectively.
3. Strengthening Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programmes: Deradicalization programmes like Operation Safe Corridor must be evaluated for effectiveness, with improvements in psychological support, vocational training and long-term reintegration monitoring. Addressing community resistance through sensitization and reconciliation efforts is critical to ensuring the successful reintegration of rehabilitated individuals.
4. Adoption of a Community-Based Approach: Nigeria can learn from Japan's *hogoshi* (volunteer probation officers) and BBS (Big Brothers and Sisters) programmes, which focus on community-driven rehabilitation and reintegration. By involving trusted community figures in mentorship and

rehabilitation, trust can be rebuilt, and recidivism reduced.

5. Sustained Investment in Education and Youth Empowerment: Educational initiatives and employment programmes must be expanded and properly funded to provide viable alternatives for young people susceptible to radicalization. Government programmes like N-Power should be strengthened to ensure long-term impact and sustainability.

By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can enhance the effectiveness of its counter-terrorism efforts, reduce youth radicalization, and ensure sustainable reintegration programmes that prevent recidivism. A holistic, community-based and well-funded approach will contribute to long-term national security and stability.