

De-radicalization Policy in Nigeria: A Focus on Operation Safe Corridor

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Abstract

The Operation Safe Corridor was created in 2016 after the Government of Nigeria realized that it would not defeat the Boko Haram insurgents by military means alone. This was deliberately targeted at low-level jihadist recruits by the two main factions – Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awatiwal-Jihad and Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). The rehabilitation program involves vocational training, access to De-radicalization and civic programs. But many Nigerians expressed skepticism while some feel that there is a need for sufficient community consultation before the development and implementation of the program. The research being qualitative in nature relied on secondary sources of data, this is due to difficulties in tracing the ex-insurgents for interview and also the volatile nature of the villages they came from. At the end of the work, it was revealed that the program is faced with the problem of integrating the graduates in their communities, and there is also the problem of perception of the program by affected communities in the region. It was therefore recommended that the government should embark on sensitization with a view to educate the people in the area.

Keywords: Operation Safe Corridor, Boko Haram, De-radicalization, Rehabilitation and Integration

Introduction

An insurgency though a new phenomenon in Africa has varied definitions and dimensions, but characteristically is a violent, armed rebellion against constituted authority waged by small, lightly armed bands that practice guerilla warfare from primarily rural base areas. The unique feature of insurgency is its asymmetric nature: small irregular forces face the state's large, well-equipped, regular military. Due to this unique feature, insurgents avoid large-scale direct battles in most cases, opting instead to blend in with the civilian population in rural areas where they gradually expand territorial control and military forces. Insurgency often relied on control of and collaboration with local populations to succeed.

Nigeria being the most populous country in Africa with several ethnic groups and different religious inclination among its citizens became a potential breeding ground for different conflicts and some of which tends to be religious in nature. Several Christian and Islamist radical groups exists in most part of the country and with a record of periodic skirmishing and clashes with security operatives, but not as complex as the emergence of Boko Haram Insurgents in the North Eastern

geo-political zone of the country. The Boko Haram group actually started in 1995 with Abubakar Lawan as its leader who left for the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia to study and leadership shifted to Yusuf Mohammed who was young vibrant and versatile with an ability to mobilize followers within a short period of time. When Mohammed Yusuf was captured and brutally killed by Nigerian Police, a hardline cleric in person of Abubakar Shekau took over the leadership of the group and everything started taking a different and new dimension.

Nigeria became the operational base of the group and is one of the countries around the lake chad area where the terrorist group Boko Haram has heightened fears among the citizens due to their incessant horrific attacks in some parts of the country, and over the years the overarching counterterrorism phenomena and approach has been strictly military based, with Boko Haram increasing in members to intensify its attacks. Many people were killed, properties destroyed and displaced from their towns and villages. The Boko Haram Insurgents have a political purpose, which is toppling the existing Nigerian system of government and replacing it with Islamic system guided by laws from the holy

Qur'an. In pursuance of this political goal, the group devised a program of social services and has an overt, even legal, political wing that operates within the area. Their covert wing carries out attacks on military forces with tactics such as raids and , as well as acts of terror such as attacks that cause deliberate civilian casualties. The group raided so many military formations in the region and carted away with sophisticated weapons and some military officers that were abducted.

The *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad) as they wished to be called but popularly known as Boko Haram, very active in poor and arid north-eastern Nigeria (and also active in Niger, Cameroon, and Chad), has caused an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 deaths and displaced over 2.3 million people since 2009. Between 2009 and 2015, the group took control of extensive territories in north-eastern Nigeria, including major cities such as Maiduguri; devastated lives of millions; and constituted a significant threat to the Nigerian state. Overall, some 15 million people have been adversely affected by the insurgency and counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts. Boko Haram fighters inflicted terror by slaughtering civilians in villages and towns, abducted thousands of people, forcibly marrying off women and girls to their fighters, and conducted mass-casualty terrorist attacks against mosques, markets, and camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs).

In the process of these operations by the insurgents, they took control of some vast areas and villages and the youth there were forcefully recruited into the group, also in the cause of raiding towns and cities in the area they captured and took some youth along with them while retreating back to their camps. While some converts were recruited through the activities of their agents all over the places and this resulted in attracting, converting and radicalizing a large population of youth within the ages of ten to thirty years old. A large number of youth of all sex were recruited and indoctrinated with the radical ideas of the sect through their teachings. More so, because of the vulnerable nature of the region because of its economic and social backwardness as a result of government neglect, the group capitalized on

that and won the hearts of many youth who thought they have found a safe heaven and an opportunity to fight the corrupt system of government that landed them into all these social degradations.

But with the coming to power by the All Progressive Congress (APC) party, the Buhari led government intensified efforts in the fight against the insurgents through various strategies which so the Boko Haram loosing grounds, and running out of supply of all essential commodities. Factions started emerging within the group and intra-conflicts consumed the whole movement. Most of the leaders of the groups including top commanders were either killed or captured, and their followers started losing faith in the struggle and started surrendering in large numbers to the military, while others flee the battle front and later handed themselves to the authorities. With this development therefore, the government introduced several policies that may lead to rehabilitation, reconstruction and reintegration to consolidate on the victory at the battle front. But counterterrorism requires both a hard and soft approach, and one of the soft approaches is a de-radicalization program.

This program was introduced, practiced, and sustained and successful in some countries of the world where terrorists have been operating. Nigeria is one of the countries where the terrorist group, Boko Haram has heightened fears among Nigerians due to their incessant horrific attacks in some parts of the country. Over the years, the overarching counterterrorism phenomena and approach has been strictly military based, but later it was comprehensive which was ushered through the introduction of 'Operation Safe Corridor' and establishment of de-radicalization center in Malam Sidi, Gombe state. The program involves categorization of the captured Boko Haram members and those who voluntarily lay down their weapons and surrender themselves to the security agencies were considered for the program. The study was conducted using qualitative research approach through content analysis by contextualizing radicalization, de-radicalization and the policy goal of 'Operation Safe Corridor'.

Literature Review

Nigeria undertakes its de-radicalization programs that support Boko Haram defectors from three directions. The first is the Prison Program works with hardcore ideologue members of the group convicted of violent extremist offenses or those on or awaiting trial. The program involves religious clerics teaching classes on non-violent interpretations of Islam, and vocational training handled by other staff so that when inmates fulfill their prison terms, they can integrate with the society with that vocational knowledge and with less risk of reverting to terrorism. Then the Yellow Ribbon Initiative which targeted and supports women and children associated with Boko Haram by providing psychosocial therapy and reintegration programs, and 'Operation Safe Corridor' launched by the Nigerian military in 2015 for addressing extremist ideology and providing the target group with trauma counseling. All these programs are targeted at de-radicalizing members of these sects that were radicalized teachings of clerics from the insurgent's groups and therefore understanding scholarly contributions on radicalization will aid understanding of the work.

Radicalization

Radicalization is the process by which an individual or a group comes to adopt increasingly *radical* views in opposition to a political, social, or religious status quo. The ideas of society at large shape the outcomes of radicalization; for example, radical movements can originate from a broad social consensus *against* progressive changes in society or from a broad desire *for* change in society. Radicalization therefore is a product of several complex social phenomena ranging from social, economic and political problems that may trigger negative reaction.

According to Randy (2011:8), he held the opinion that:

Radicalization can result in both violent and nonviolent action – academic literature focuses on radicalization into violent extremism (RVE) or radicalization leading to acts of terrorism.

Radicalized group can either be violent in their

actions or nonviolent depending on the cause and attention given to group by the surrounding environment, but in most cases attention is focused on violent extremism because of its negative impact on the community and the political system as whole. A number of variables can hatch and promote the process of radicalization in different circumstances dimensions and which can be independent but are usually mutually reinforcing.

Radicalization that occurs across multiple reinforcing pathways greatly increases a group's resilience and lethality. Furthermore, by compromising a group's ability to blend in with non-radical society and to participate in a modern, national or international economy, radicalization serves as a kind of sociological trap that gives individuals no other place to go to satisfy their material and spiritual needs (Eli, 2009). The violent atrocities committed by radical groups are often associated with the ways and manners the group is perceived and treated by constituted authorities otherwise, they often engage in social services that attracts large group of followers.

Shira, (2010:7) held the opinion that "Radicalization is a dynamic process that varies for each individual, but shares some underlying commonalities that can be explored." Though there are many end products of the process of radicalization, to include all manner of extremist groups both violent and nonviolent and sometimes a gradualist process where it started from the non-violent strategies and resulting in a violent end. Radicalization therefore because of its dynamic nature is not only limited to religious but even political activities.

From the Islamic point of view, Vincent, (2017:14) stated that:

Jihadist have a "tried and tested model" of contact with different vulnerable, and extremist individuals through online messaging services or social media platforms, and then rapidly manipulating them towards participating in violent action in their name.

This is one of the modern means of recruiting followers by groups with extremist ideas by

using modern communication methods where they make contacts and propagate their ideas. It was also realized that jailed extremists attempt to recruit violent criminals into radical groups so they carry out attacks on the public once release (Arun, 2012). *In most cases, convicts are vulnerable of being recruited into extremist groups by their fellow inmates and it is sometimes referred to as an avenue to create cells and circles for spreading extreme ideas. Through this channel criminals are indoctrinated with religious fundamentalism changing their past criminal track.*

Radical right-wing terrorism is motivated by a variety of different right-wing/far-right ideologies, most prominently neo-fascism, neo-Nazism, white nationalism and to a lesser extent "Patriot"/Sovereign citizen beliefs and anti-abortion sentiment (Stefan, 2004). *This type of radicalization is often associated with the western world, and is distinct from religious radicalism.* Modern radical right-wing terrorism appeared in Western Europe, Central Europe and the United States in the 1970s, and Eastern Europe following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Groups associated with right-wing radicals include white power skinhead gangs, right-wing/far-right hooligans, and sympathizers (Assaf & Lee, 2006). *These radical right-wing groups are often associated with racial attacks and are playing an important role in the Ukraine/Russia conflict.*

Left-wing terrorism is terrorism on the other hand are often committed with the aim of overthrowing current capitalist systems and replacing them with Marxist–Leninist or socialist societies. Left-wing terrorism can also occur within already socialist states as criminal action against the current ruling government (Assaf & Lee, 2006). *The groups of radical left-wing insurgents were popular during the Bi-polar period with the sole goal of overthrowing right-wing regimes and change the existing system.* Most left-wing terrorist groups that had operated in the 1970s and 1980s disappeared by the mid-1990s. One exception was the Greek Revolutionary Organization 17 November (17N), which lasted until 2002. Since then, left-wing terrorism has been relatively minor in the Western world in comparison with other forms, and is now mostly carried out by insurgent groups in the developing world (Silke, 2018).

Furthermore, with the demise of the eastern-bloc and the gradual transition to a uni-polar world religious and Islamic ideological spread and struggle to capture power assumed a center-stage in world politics and brought the policy of de-radicalization into focus of studies.

De-radicalization

De-radicalization refers to a process of encouraging a person with extreme political, social or religious views to adopt more moderate positions on the issues (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). The process specifically targets people or group of people with extreme political, social and religious ideas that resulted into actions that are detrimental to existence of peace among people. This is referred to primarily as working with radicalized individuals, but also involves the people in their social environment. Family, friends, teachers or other persons close to such individuals that tends to be the first to notice signs of radicalization and can play an important role in stopping the behavior (CEIP, 2023). De-radicalization process here covers a wider spectrum beyond the individual or the group to all surrounding social settings because of proximity and primary contact.

It is in realization of this that Boucek, Rabasa, Pettyjohn, & Ghez, (2011:2) Opined that;

Deradicalization programs will likely remain a necessary part of larger counter-radicalization and counterterrorism strategies. To succeed, deradicalization programs must include affective, pragmatic, and ideological components and considerable aftercare

De-radicalization from this angle must be pragmatic and comprehensive if the program is to achieve its goal. It must target the right group and genuinely meant for that purpose not another elitist tactics of syphoning public funds. This is necessary because the complex nature of the insurgent groups in Nigeria is peculiar to what is obtainable in some parts of the world, although there is a communication link between them, but the difference is glaring.

Multiple Western Europe countries have

implemented de-radicalization programs in a variety of forms, specifically after September 11, 2001 attack on some location in the United States of America. In more recent years, some countries across the world saw drastic increases in the number of jihadist's attacks, especially France, Some African countries and parts of Asia. In September 2016, France opened its first de-radicalization Centre in Pontourny. The original plan was to have the Pontourny center the first of multiple in the country, however, the Pontourny Centre turned out to be failure. Less than a year after it opened, the de-radicalization Centre in Pontourny had no residents (Samaan & Jacobs, 2018). *This experience is lessons to Nigeria especially with the location of the centre in rural area and the divergent interest of key players in the program.*

Humera Khan, executive director of the Islamic de-radicalization group Muflehu, states that de-radicalization also needs human interaction and a supportive community backing up the person's decision to turn away from extremism (Greenberg, 2016). *The program needs human interaction and community backing but this can only be possible if those negatively affected by the activities of these groups are not only satisfied with the measures taken so far, but the believe that the crisis is over.*

From the French experience, it was also noted that personal relationships play a major role in the transformation of involvement in violence to non-violent activity, because change often hinges on a relationship with a mentor or friend who supports and affirms peaceful behavior (Horgan, 2010). *Personal relationship can either be with those responsible for the mentorship in the camp or after graduating the group that accepted the graduate can significantly influence his behavioral change.*

Since 2005, the U.K. government on the other hand has attempted to identify and intervene with individuals considered at risk of radicalization, those considered radicalized extremists, and those convicted of terrorism-related offenses (Weeks, 2017). Several programs were introduced to achieve the set goal over the period, but sustained among these are those considered 'at risk' are managed under The Channel Program while those in prison or

on license are managed under the Desistance and Disengagement Program (DDP), which supplements a de-radicalization program called Healthy Identity Intervention (HII). The approach is multi-facet in nature and based on level of assessment of individuals. These programs were all administered in the prison to inmates so that at the end of their service they will be changed from what they were before to law abiding citizens.

Operation Safe Corridor

Nigeria has three de-radicalization programs that support Boko Haram defectors. The Prison Program works with militants convicted of violent extremist offenses and core ideologues that were the initial members of the groups or those on or awaiting trial. During the program, Imams teach classes on non-violent interpretations of Islam, and other program staff provides vocational training so that, when inmates fulfill their prison terms, they can reenter society with less risk of reverting to terrorism. Second, the Yellow Ribbon Initiative that supports women and children associated with Boko Haram by providing psychosocial therapy and reintegration programs to them and finally, Operation Safe Corridor, launched by the Nigerian military in 2015, works with Boko Haram defectors by addressing extremist ideology and providing them with trauma counseling. More than two thousand members of Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA) have defected through Operation Safe Corridor since its inception.

The Nigerian government created Safe Corridor in 2016 after concluding that it would not be able to defeat the Boko Haram insurgency, which it has been battling since 2009, by military means alone. The program's core target group is low-level jihadist recruits who perform combatant and/or non-combatant roles and are important to the daily functioning of Boko Haram's two main factions – Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad, or JAS) and Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). The Operation Safe Corridor is considered to be a home-grown prison-based for de-radicalization purposefully designed by the Federal Government of Nigeria for low-risk

repentant Boko Haram members (Salisu, 2021).

The program is joint initiative which saw the participation of the military and other sister security agencies to assist in the de-radicalization process with wider spectrum. It was stressed further that necessary equipment for various vocations like welding, tailoring, barbing, furniture making cosmetology are usually provided for the clients having successfully, learnt the vocations while in the camp are provided these equipment so that graduates of the center can start effectively upon relocation to their communities. Some members of the sect considered the initiative by the Federal Government as an opening for safe exit due to the skepticism of the group's prospect of winning the war, exposure to atrocious violence, the danger posed to them and their families, aversion to the factions' unfair and brutal internal politics, the lack of material gain after years of service and, for some, the desire to escape a movement they were coerced into joining, are some reasons that made some members of the group to defect.

Policy Thrust of Operation Safe Corridor

The Operation Safe Corridor was designed with the sole aim of achieving three goals. These goals are to de-radicalize, rehabilitate and reintegrate willing repentant among the insurgents that surrender to forces of Federal Republic of Nigeria. Operation Safe Corridor set up a rehabilitation center and facility for low-risk women and children and for reconstruction; women and children who have exited from the rehabilitation facility; men, women, and children who spent time in detention for alleged association with Boko Haram and were released and relatives of others who were detained by the Nigerian government or the Army and to strengthen and implement the program, the authorities, with donor support embarked on the following;

- i. Fix screening systems to effectively identify Boko Haram recruits who are in the program's target group.
- ii. Accelerate work to improve detention conditions.
- iii. Augment efforts to coordinate the return of Safe Corridor graduates with state authorities and local security services to help smooth their arrival back into

society.

- iv. Beef up public awareness campaigns to persuade Nigerians of Safe Corridor's merits and to overcome any hostility to the idea of rehabilitating former Boko Haram recruits

However, as the management of the conflict in the North East dictates, the eligibility for the program was expanded to include the released convicted associated persons and discharged associated persons (Operation Safe Corridor, 2020).

The center designed five processes to be followed in the reformation of ex-Boko Haram Members in the camp. The first stage is the arrival of ex-members of the group to the camp. The next stage is the debriefing and buy-in stage, where members are orientated on why they are at the camp and are debriefed with the aim of building trust of the ex-combatants in the program and staff of the program. Experts of the OPSC engage the clients in a large auditorium to explain the aim of the program, the role of all stakeholders in the program and the need for them to see benefits in the program. This is followed by team-to-group engagement in which a group of experts engage with lesser number of ex-combatants, to personalize the process for greater interaction and better observation of the clients and their needs. In doing this buy-in, the role of the clergymen especially the imams is very significant particularly in seeking the trust of the ex-combatants in the program and engaging ex-fighters who had been radicalized by religious reasons to join Boko Haram. Achievement of the policy was highlighted in a speech by Ayuba (2023: 5), where he disclosed that;

Since the inception of the OPSC, DRR program, 2,167 clients have graduated comprising 2,140 Nigerians and 27 foreigners (Cameroun, Chad and Niger). They were successfully handed over to their national and state authorities for reintegration.

Graduating these numbers of notwithstanding, monitoring their activities after the graduation is very significant to the success of the policy because as they are back into the larger society

the very reason behind their joining the group if not holistically addressed it may result in their joining camps with other groups. In addition to this also the success of the program hinges on the understanding and perception of the people of the affected region and then the country at large.

Challenges to Reintegration

Operation Safe Corridor's de-radicalization curriculum is a comprehensive and well-designed policy that may instead of wasting the potentials of the youth involved, it may ultimately make the best use of their talents for the benefit of humanity and the country at large but the general assessment of the program reveals several challenges that are an impediment which includes; difficulty on the eligibility of those that are to be de-radicalize because the authority does not sufficient and reliable information on the people selected and therefore there is a high risk of including die-hard members that pretended and hide their true identity and after graduation they may change location and escape justice although officials are adamant that their criteria are clear.

Another challenge facing the program is its failure to be gender sensitive. Among those that were de-radicalize in the camp the graduates predominantly if not all are males as such, it is an indication that women that have been staying with the extremists in the bush for several years and either escape or is rescued is not considered a threat to the society or cannot contribute to the development of the country after being de-radicalized. Therefore from the initial take-off of the program it failed to consider the female members of the group, and women by their social status are very important in containing the spread of the belief among young children. The program does not handle female participants even as authorities acknowledge there are hundreds of women returnees associated with the group.

The communities affected by the activities of the group who suffered much were not carried along at the initial stage of formulating the policy. People and communities that lost their loved ones and belongings and instead of organizing enlightenment exercise that may reduce tension and distrust among them and the graduates, the program was just flag-off based

on elitists' notion of understanding the psyche of the people in rural areas. Therefore most of the communities are not willing to accept the graduates of the program, and are always looking for an opportunity to revenge the pains inflicted on them.

Result revealed that Operation Safe Corridor has attracted demobilization of Boko Haram Members; however, communities are unwilling to accept them back due to the problems of distrust and widespread perception that government is prioritizing the welfare of the group members above the victims upon all the atrocities committed. In response, communities are attacking, stigmatizing, keeping incommunicado as well as enforcing socio-economic blockade on the members' reintegration into their communities. In turn, reintegrated members are isolated from community activities, frustrated into committing crimes and this is dis-incentivizing members who are willing to demobilize.

The policy is also faced with the problem of reinsertion mandate because the Operation Safe Corridor's leadership deems reinsertion of the graduates with their communities is outside its mandate and has tried to get state governments to take up that role; state governments have indicated little willingness to do this.

The major challenge is the lopsidedness of Nigeria's de-radicalization and reintegration program. Abuja is investing enormous resources to prepare ex-combatants for reinsertion into communities, but little to nothing is being done to prepare the communities that are expected to receive them. This failure is a major reason why reinsertion has not actually yet occurred for any of the graduates. De-radicalization seems virtually pointless if de-radicalized individuals cannot be reinserted at the end of it all.

The problem of insurgency and youth radicalization is not only within Nigeria's boundary but rather a regional if not global phenomena and the operation safe corridor program is a domestic policy cutting out some major neighboring countries such as Niger Republic, Chad, Cameroon, in the formulation and implementation stages of the policy. While a significant number of nationals of these countries are among those in the camp, there is currently no plan for how to return non-

Nigerian former militants to their countries and communities and or any effort to reach out to these countries at the diplomatic level. Although countries such as Niger is currently in the process of passing a law that would define its de-radicalization strategy, after which the country is expected to start handling the cases of hundreds of fighters who have waited for years. It is eyeing funding from U. S. State Department for this effort which is not forthcoming with current political situation in the country. Cameroon also has set up an inter-ministerial committee to articulate and implement a de-radicalization strategy to deal with its defectors, and Chad struggling with the same challenges but all these ended up at policy conceiving stage without concrete action.

Operation Safe Corridor and the center are marred by wide-spread corruption and manpower waste. The resources that government and donor agencies are contributing for running the center attracted corruption among the military hierarchy and struggle to secure posting there because it is lucrative business. Instead of using the resources to rehabilitate victims, it is wasted chasing shadow and institutionalizing corruption. The resources wasted are not commensurate to the output received.

Conclusion

The de-radicalization policy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria meant to de-radicalize, rehabilitate and reintegrate ex-Boko Haram members is a well-conceived and timely initiative, but it is faced with a number of huddles among which the paper identified and made the following recommendations:

- Government should give more priority to victims of Boko Haram attacks in terms of welfare and to explore other alternative dispute resolution mechanisms within the affected communities with a view to encouraging community acceptance of the program
- It is also recommended that community-level transitional justice and reconciliation programs be constituted to reconcile ex-Boko Haram Members with victims of their attacks
- There is a need for a human rights-based approach as well as for community

involvement throughout the demobilization, de-radicalization, rehabilitation and integration of ex-Boko Haram fighters

- The Nigerian government and its international partners need to articulate and implement a plan of action for this final stage of de-radicalization
- Involving members of affected communities onboard from the start of the program. This could be done by inviting political, religious, and traditional leaders of local affected communities to visit the camp, see things for themselves, and report back to their constituents in such a way that does not compromise security and safety of the participants.
- Neighboring countries that are victims of the problem need to learn the lesson of the Abuja government's experience and consider de-radicalizing former fighters from their countries
- Government need to investigate and check the financial activities of the center to understand leakages and minimize corrupt practices and waste of resources.

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