

# Defeating Boko Haram Terrorism: Who is Winning this War?

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## Introduction

Peace, security, and stability continue to evade Nigeria despite the presence of foreign intelligence, satellite imagery, counter-terrorism teams and a burgeoning Nigerian national army and police force. Even though the country has received billions of dollars in aid and assistance to fight terrorism which is ravaging the northern part of the country, its social, economic, and political systems remain in a dire state, with Nigerians themselves showing little faith in the search-and-rescue efforts of the 276 Chibok girls abducted in 15 April 2014 at Chibok Government Girls School, Chibok local government, Borno State.<sup>1</sup> The U.S.-led team of officials in Nigeria in April 2014, supported by the international community (France, Israel, Iran and China),<sup>2</sup> had three aims. The first was to capture or kill Abubakar Mohammed Shekau, the leader of the Boko Haram group '*Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad*' (People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad). The second was to rescue the abducted Chibok school girls held by Boko Haram. The third aim was to end Nigeria's incessant instability in the north-eastern region. The strategy initially seemed to work with Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau calling for dialogue with the federal government by exchanging the abducted Chibok schoolgirls with the imprisoned members of his group, thereby creating the impression that the strategy was correct and appropriate.<sup>3</sup> The 'counter-terrorism and search-and-rescue operations' effort also appeared to be back on track, following international meetings in the White House and in Los Angeles (16 May 2014). The process of

assisting Nigeria also appeared to be moving forward, as preparations for elections in 2015 continued.<sup>4</sup>

However, this optimism masked the fact that things were slowly unravelling, as disparity between the mission's goals and what was possible became clearer. Mr Shehu Sani, a human rights activist, pointed out that the search-and-rescue operations efforts in Nigeria were never likely to succeed because the strategies and tactics pursued by the international community were incompatible with our local strategy of rescue operations.

As of June 2014, there appears to be no end to the terrorism in Nigeria. So great is the frustration that several contributing countries have called for a strategy that includes such ideas as starting a dialogue with 'Moderate Boko Haram' or withdrawal. Jacob Zenn, a Boko Haram expert in a US counter-terrorism unit declared: 'I think a rescue is currently unlikely and unfeasible.'<sup>5</sup> Shehu Sani and others stress that the Nigerian Boko Haram terrorism is a heterogeneous force, raising the prospect that one could persuade some Boko Haram members to switch allegiance, with Islamism giving way to post-Islamism.<sup>6</sup> Linked to the desire to speak with 'Moderate Boko Haram' is the growing unpopularity of the Nigerian Boko Haram terrorism among the contributing countries and the belief that terrorism as a tactics cannot lead to victory.<sup>7</sup> These changes compelled John Kerry, the U.S. Secretary of State, to engage in a 'media blitz' to persuade Americans, the largest contributors to the search-and rescue operation, not to abandon Nigeria so that it would not revert to being the

<sup>1</sup> The Guardian Editorial, 'Tackling Boko Haram Threats', *The Guardian Newspaper* (3 March 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Chris Okotie, 'Bring Back our girls', *The Guardian Newspaper* (12 May, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Luke Onyekakeyah, 'Why the Boko Haram war is persistent', *The Guardian Newspaper* (18 March 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

terrorist sanctuary that it was under the Boko Haram.<sup>8</sup> Although this is a laudable consideration, it fails to reflect a number of realities. First, Islamist terrorists no longer need Nigeria, as there are many other locations that they can use for their camps and campaigns, starting with Cameroon's northern region located next to the Nigerian border. Islamist terrorists also have bases around the Chad and Niger borders in the north-eastern region of Nigeria. In other words, there are plenty of 'ungoverned territories' providing Boko Haram Islamist terrorists with places from which they can launch attacks against Nigeria, particularly states in the north-eastern region (Borno, Adamawa, Yobe etc).

Second, it remains unclear how much of a threat Islamist terrorism of the Boko Haram kind poses to the international community, especially coupled with the increase in home-grown radicalism. Third, it is doubtful whether the international community can salvage the situation in Nigeria with the tools at its disposal: continuous reliance on Goodluck Ebele Jonathan (Nigerian president); a commitment to fight the insurgency within the parameters of the US law that prohibits the US military from working with Nigerian military units, and a policy of counter-terrorism that centres on show rather than functionality. This last point was shown with the April 2014 US operation to transport equipment to the northeastern region, which created much fanfare but has limited value in the rescue mission of the Chibok girls.

Ultimately, these issues require a look at how the international community has approached search-and-rescue and counter-terrorism operations in Nigeria. To that end, the analysis opens with the US search-and-rescue approach, even though the US has a minimal role in Nigeria. The US search-and-rescue mission to Nigeria is quintessentially a political mission, though Security Council Resolution 1401 made US counter-terror teams the focal point for international assistance to Nigeria in the Boko

Haram period.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the US model for counter-terrorism can be helpful, as the US is a leader in the search and rescue operation.<sup>10</sup> The second section reviews some of the key issues affecting Nigeria to better appreciate the challenge that Nigeria poses to those wanting to undertake successful search and rescue operations against Boko Haram Islamist terrorists. The focus is on three main issues: Nigeria's geography and history, its ethnic composition, and the legacy of the Nigerian jihad.

The final two sections explore the 'search-and-rescue mission' strategy in Nigeria to understand why the situation remains so dire in the country, before concluding with some general observations as to likelihood of success of the search-and-rescue efforts.

#### The US Search-and-Rescue Operation Approach

In Nigeria, 2014 was the year of intervention for the US counter-terrorism team and international community. The US counter-terror specialists who arrived in Nigeria started deploying high-grade surveillance technologies to track down the voice, location and the fire power of the Boko Haram terrorists who kidnapped over 200 girls from a secondary school on 14 April 2014 in Borno State. By the end of April, however, serious questions emerged regarding the search-and-rescue approach, since many of the operations had failed in rescuing the girls.<sup>11</sup> Extensive reforms in the US anti-terror team led to a reduction in operations, although it did not reduce the international community's enthusiasm about getting 'positive results'—eliminating the root causes of Boko Haram terrorism as actors in counter-terrorism using other (non-violent) tools to rescue the abducted schoolgirls. Thus, ironically, although the international community reduced its multilateral interventions, its rhetorical commitment to active intervention and the need to reduce conflict remained. The issue of intervention and the search for peace gained greater importance following the

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<sup>8</sup> Oghogho Obayuwana, 'How abandoned pact with neighbours fuels insecurity in Nigeria', *The Guardian Newspaper* (6 May 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Chris Agbambu, 'How US, British forces plan to invade Boko Haram stronghold', *Agency Report* (10 May 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

abduction of the schoolgirls, intensifying the debate regarding the circumstances under which military intervention was legal and moral.

Nigeria encapsulates many of the issues affecting search-and-rescue and counter-terrorism activities, since one of the mission's goals is to transform Nigeria into a viable, functioning state free from terrorism. The US's Nigeria campaign centers on the belief that in order to achieve sustainable peace in Nigeria, the country has to be rebuilt not only structurally, but socially and culturally as well, developing a political system that embraces Nigerian diversity.<sup>12</sup> Such an approach seeks to remove the conditions that had encouraged Nigerians to turn to Boko Haram – chaos, lawlessness, and insecurity. This is why the US demanded that the program be Nigerian-led. Nigerian Major General Olukolade, argued that 'Neither the US nor anyone else, no matter how sincere, may substitute themselves for the Nigerians and solve the problems of Nigeria for them'.<sup>13</sup> Olukolade added that 'if the Nigerian authorities and their international partners set realistic objectives, if the international community has the determination and patience to do what it takes to really help the situation, if, at the same time, we have the humility to realize that we are no wiser than Nigerians about what is better for Nigeria, then there is every reason for optimism'.<sup>14</sup>

Bolstered by international help, US officials claim that the Nigerian-led search has now expanded to include an ungoverned area of desert that crosses the porous borders into neighbouring Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. According to reports however, the girls' locations are still unknown.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, mounting US frustration with the case spilled into the open at a US Senate hearing, where US officials complained of a lack of decisive actions on what had been harvested so far. 'It is impossible to fathom that we might have actionable intelligence and we would not have the wherewithal - whether by the Nigerians themselves or by other entities helping the

Nigerians - to be able to conduct a rescue mission', said Senator Robert Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.<sup>16</sup>

### **Understanding Nigeria and Boko Haram**

Nigeria's geographical location has made it one of the most important countries in the world, yet its topography has made it one of the hardest to govern. The country's rough terrain – high mountains, isolating fertile valleys, deserts, and wild rivers – has led to isolation between groups of an ethnically diverse population, augmenting separation in place of unity. In addition, the harsh climate (brutal winters and very hot summers) requires that groups keep within their settlements instead of expanding to other areas. This has led to strong internal loyalties within north-eastern communities, they do not withstand these conditions, but overcome their harshness as less important and protects the group from any invaders seeking to take control of the area. So limited is access to the outside world in many parts of north-eastern Nigeria that I have elsewhere argued that individuals in Nigeria live and die in their home valleys unaware of what is around them.<sup>17</sup> When globalization and modernization came to Nigeria, they created many problems for a society that fostered traditionalism by challenging the communal codes the society lived under. For example, modernization allowed young men to leave the village to work in the towns, where they could earn more money. Upon their return, their new status undermined the position of the elders, for examples the Emirs, Ikimis and the village heads. Linked to Nigeria's population and its dispersion are the country's porous borders, another core reason for Nigeria's instability. In the north-eastern region of the country there are Hausa, Kanuri, and Fulani people who have more in common with the peoples of Cameroon, Chad and Niger than with their Northern brethren. In fact, they used to live as part of a single province known as Emirate council.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Oluwaseun Bamidele, 'Domestic Terrorism in Nigeria: The Grown 'Monster' Within?', *Defence Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (2013), pp. 413-436.

Nigeria has major ethnic and religious cleavages that undermine unity and Nigerian nationalism, leading the noted Nigerian academic Professor Toyin Falola to declare that ‘the Nigerians are neither one people nor one political community, while the state itself is broken-backed and the country divided between two rival governments (northeastern states government and the federal government): a Hausa-Fulani-ruled state competes for control of northern regions under mutually rival warlords. Ethnic, tribal and sectarian divisions have worsened and further fragmented the country’.<sup>18</sup> This state of affairs is a result of the way Lord Lugard created the Nigerian ‘state’ through conquest, guile and indirect rule. However, Nigeria’s long history of ethnic, religious and communal armed conflicts dated back to the military era between 1966 and 1999, which though suppressed, came to the fore despite the heavy-handed tactics of the military junta. The best example of this was the 1980’s violence in and around the city of Kano that was associated with a Muslim preacher and self-proclaimed prophet, Mohammed Marwa or ‘*Maitatsine*’ (a Hausa word meaning ‘the one who damns’). After thousands of deaths caused by Nigerian military, including Marwa, his movement was largely wiped out in the early 1990s, although some maintain that Boko Haram is an extension of the *Maitatsine* riots.<sup>19</sup>

Many domestic conflicts and the groups that fight them found more freedom after the return to civilian rule in Nigeria in 1986 and 1987.<sup>20</sup> One such group is *Jama’atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda’Awati Wal Jibad*, which became the Boko Haram sect. ‘Boko Haram’, which translates as ‘Western education is forbidden’ in Hausa,<sup>21</sup> originated in and around Maiduguri, the largest capital city of Borno state. Starting out as a radical group at the Ndimi Mosque in Maiduguri about 2002, they regarded society, particularly the government of Mala Kachalla, as irredeemably corrupt. So, in the middle of 2002, the group, under its founder, Mohammed

Ali, embarked on a *hijra* to Kanama in Yobe state. In Islam, a *hijra* is a journey from the bad world to be closer to God, like the *hijra* the Prophet Muhammad undertook in 622, going from Mecca to Medina. Usman dan Fodio, the Fulani religious and political leader of the early 1800s, also undertook his own *hijra*, to Gudu, when Yunfa,<sup>22</sup> a king in Hausa land, wanted to kill him.<sup>23</sup> The *hijra* to Kanama is likely where Mohammed Ali and his group had their first foreign contact with other Islamic militant groups. While in Kanama, more members joined; some of these new members were the children of influential Northerners, such as the son of Yobe’s governor at the time, Bukar Abba Ibrahim. Bukar Abba Ibrahim is now a senator, and his son’s involvement meant that the group was, more or less immune from punishment in Kanama.<sup>24</sup>

Towards the end of 2003, Boko Haram group had a communal clash with the Kanama community over fishing rights, which led to police intervention. In the crisis that followed, they defeated the police, which in turn led to the Army getting involved, and the revolt was crushed. Mohammed Ali was killed and the group scattered. A few of the survivors, including one called Shekau, went north to training camps in the Sahara desert run by Islamic militants in the region. The other survivors of the Battle of Kanama returned to Maiduguri and reintegrated into the Ndimi Mosque, where they were now led by Mohammed Yusuf (former leader of Boko Haram), and embarked on the process of establishing the group’s own mosque in Maiduguri. This new mosque, named the Ibn Taimiyyah Masjid, was built on land north of

<sup>18</sup> Toyin Falola, (ed.), *Nigerian History, Politics, and Affairs: The Collected Essays of Adiele Afigbo* (Trenton, NJ, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> The Nation Editorial, ‘Boko Haram History’, *The Nation Newspaper* (29 January 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Yunfa (reigned 1801 - 1808) was a king of the Hausa city-state of Gobir in what is now Nigeria. He is particularly remembered for his conflict with Islamic reformer Usman dan Fodio. Yunfa appears to have been taught by Fulani religious leader Usman dan Fodio as a young man. Though dan Fodio helped Yunfa succeed Nafata to the throne in 1801, the two soon came into conflict over dan Fodio’s proposed religious reforms. Fearing dan Fodio’s growing power, Yunfa summoned him and attempted to assassinate him in person; however, Yunfa’s pistol backfired and wounded him in the hand. The following year, Yunfa expelled dan Fodio and his followers from their hometown of Degel.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

the centre of town, near the railway station. Baba Fugu Mohammed, Mohammed Yusuf's father-in-law, donated the land on which the new mosque was built. Baba Fugu Mohammed was an influential, but moderate, figure, who was never a full member and was later murdered by the group. His crime was to attempt to negotiate with former President Obasanjo after things got out of hand in 2001.

After the death of Baba Fugu Mohammed, Boko Haram was apparently left alone by the authorities, and it expanded into other states, including Bauchi, Yobe, and Niger state. During that time, they started a farm, provided employment for their members, provided welfare for those members who could not work, and gave training to those who could. In short, they provided a viable alternative to the government of the day, which attracted more members and a lot of *zakat* (the practice of taxation and redistribution) donations from prominent members of the Northern elite. The incident that brought them to national prominence happened in 2007; Sheikh Ja'afar Mahmoud Adam was murdered. Ja'afar had started criticising the group, and predicted that someday, because of their extremist ideologies, they would clash with the government. It is generally believed that Mohammed Yusuf ordered his murder. For another two years after the Ja'afar assassination, the group was largely left alone, growing and attracting more followers from other Islamic extremism associations.<sup>25</sup>

Then, in 2009, the government of Ali Modu Sheriff banned riding bikes without the use of helmets. This seemingly innocuous event is what triggered the meltdown. Five months later, in July, a prominent member of Boko Haram died and a large number of them were on the way to bury him. They were stopped by police, who quizzed them about their lack of helmets as the new law dictated. An argument began, and in the process shots were fired. People on both sides were injured and violence escalated. Boko Haram attacked in Bauchi, Borno and Yobe states, killing several

policemen. In Maiduguri, they took over the town, and controlled it for three days, until the army was called in to resolve the situation. Eventually, the army regained control and arrested many Boko Haram members, including Mohammed Yusuf.

However, while Mohammed Yusuf was in police custody, he died. According to the police, he died 'while trying to escape'. Boko Haram, on their part, says that he was murdered extrajudicially, in cold blood.<sup>26</sup> There is evidence that Mohammed Yusuf's arrest and an eventual trial would have exposed some prominent people. One of the Boko Haram members killed at that time was the former Borno state commissioner Buji Foi, who was shot in the back by policemen. Besides Yusuf and Foi, a large number of people were also shot by the police without trial. For Boko Haram, these police attacks were the beginning of a war for revenge and survival. Abubakar Shekau, who had returned to Nigeria and had become Mohammed Yusuf's right hand man, relocated the group to Northern Cameroon. Abubakar Shekau adopted the Al-Qaeda model of organisation, and broke the group into cells that are largely independent from each other.

Sometime in 2010 Boko Haram returned to Maiduguri and started a campaign of assassinations. This campaign began with hit-and-run attacks against police checkpoints in Borno and Yobe. The group's favoured method was to steal a motorcycle, then ride against a police post, kill the policemen there and seize their weapons. Gunmen also forced their way into the homes of local leaders who had cooperated with the police by naming Boko Haram members. The people who had taken over houses formerly belonging to escaped Boko Haram members were also killed if they refused to leave.

Although they have been committing atrocities since 2009, Boko Haram eventually grabbed world headlines in 2014. In February, the group killed more than 100 Christian men in the villages of Boron Baga and Izghe, and later also killed 59 students in the same village's Federal

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<sup>25</sup> A. Adesoji, 'The Boko Haram Uprising and Islamic Revivalism in Nigeria', *Africa Spectrum*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (2010), pp. 95-108.

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<sup>26</sup> Terje Ostebo, 'Islamic Militancy in Africa', *Africa Security Brief*, no. 23 (November 2012), pp. 4-5.

Government College in north-eastern Nigeria. In April 2014, Boko Haram gained international notoriety by kidnapping an estimated 276 female students from a government school in Chibok, a Christian village in Borno State. They broke into the school around 3:00 am, shooting the guards and killing one soldier. The students were taken away in trucks, possibly into the Konduga area of the Sambisa forest where Boko Haram is known to have fortified camps. Houses in Chibok were also burnt down in the incident.

Britain, the United States, France and other members of the international community, including civil society groups (BringBackOurGirls Group, Vigilante Group etc), have pledged to support search-and-rescue efforts aimed at rescuing the kidnapped girls. This search-and-rescue approach helped to undermine the peace and counter-terrorism program in Nigeria, since a number of those who had committed egregious human rights violations in the past – including during the Nigerian jihad (Maitatsine riots of 1986-1988) - could not be prosecuted because most of them belong to the country's religious-political elites. Human Rights Watch argues that the Joint Task Force (JTF) was designed to manoeuvre between the demands that the international community and US support the Nigerian government and to ensure that nothing derails the search-and-rescue process.<sup>27</sup> This means that human rights concerns must take a subsidiary role, as they may undermine the US's two-pillar approach.

## Conclusion

In many respects, counter-terrorism in Nigeria is a doomed mission. Although there has been some substantive change in the infrastructure – the building of schools, hospitals, sewage, as well as construction of roads and availability of electricity – the reality remains that despite billions of dollars in assistance and an increased international presence, security continues to elude Nigeria. As of 2013, the Nigerian government is unable to exercise power in

about two-thirds of the country, the Nigerian army and police are heavily dependent on coalition forces (JTF), corruption pervades all aspects of Nigerian society, and crude oil, the production of which appears to be on the wane, is still the major natural resource for the Nigerian economy.

A core problem with the counter-terrorism operation in Nigeria is that Nigerian leadership, which speaks to two different audiences, domestic and foreign, severely impedes the counter-terrorism effort. Incidents of corruption, such as the alleged irregularities that marred the 2011 general election in Nigeria, make it difficult to determine what Nigerian leaders stand for, besides protecting their own interests.<sup>28</sup> This makes it hard for the international community to devise a strategy for counter-terrorism and search-and-rescue operations, especially when it has pinned its hopes on the current leadership, which not only fails to deliver, but arguably benefits from Nigeria's lack of progress which guarantees international presence and aid. The leadership's reaction and attitude makes it seem fickle, divisive and ultimately untrustworthy.

Second, it is clear that the Nigerian political system is corrupt and inept. Those living in the countryside, who form the majority of the population, are rejecting the Goodluck Ebele Jonathan government, which they see as corrupt, inept, and Western-dominated.<sup>29</sup> This is why the insurgency is more than simply Boko Haram-led, but is a reaction to the ineffectiveness of the federal government. Third, as most commentators agree, economic poverty and poor social conditions are a root cause of the Nigerian insurgency.<sup>30</sup> Due to the high-level of corruption, Nigerians often do not receive the international aid that has been allocated to them. This is exacerbated by the lack of security, which also prevents aid from being fully distributed in locations where the insurgency is raging. Moreover, if aid is

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<sup>27</sup> Sunday Ehindero, 'National Security: How to Tackle Boko Haram Threat?', *The Nigerian Nation Newspaper* (4 August 2011).

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<sup>28</sup> Adam Nossiter, 'Election Result fuels Deadly Clashes in Nigeria', *The New York Times* (24 April, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Ade Adesomoju, 'Jonathan lead a corrupt government, says New York Times', *The Nigerian Punch Newspaper* (14 June 2012).

<sup>30</sup> K. Awojekemi, 'Poverty: Causes of Boko Haram Menace', *The Nigerian Nation Newspaper* (5 April 2012).

delivered, insurgents often seize or destroy it. Ordinary Nigerians may appreciate the challenge of distributing aid, but ultimately their view is that hundreds of NGOs have been in the country for almost a decade, yet their conditions have not improved. Thus, they are weary of the intervention.

Real counter-terrorism in Nigeria requires a debate regarding the role of Chad, Cameroon and Niger and the development of a Nigerian economy. These states must change some of their policies to ensure effective counter-terrorism in Nigeria, as Nigerian dependency on Chad, Cameroon and Niger stems from its geography, land-locked as it is in the North-Eastern region. Such a move could also prove beneficial to those countries, since when a problem affects one country it impacts the others. For example, in the 1990s, when there were tensions between Cameroon and Nigeria over the Bakassi Peninsula, Cameroon simply closed the border. This had a huge impact on the Nigerian economy. This situation is as true today as it was in the 1990s. Thus, the Nigerian-Cameroonian trade agreement in the 1990s was a positive development, but as long as Nigeria lacks basic infrastructure, many Nigerians will not feel the benefits of the agreement. It also discourages the millions of Nigerian refugees living in Cameroon from returning, as they would rather live in the relative squalor of the border region than face the insecurity of Nigeria's northern region.

The final issue affecting counter-terrorism and search-and-rescue operation efforts in Nigeria from a domestic perspective is human rights. As of 2009, Nigeria's human rights record remains one of the world's worst.<sup>31</sup> Many military officers have participated in gross human rights abuses. While it is unlikely and unrealistic for Nigeria to place all those individuals on trial, these violations need to be addressed. The international community excuses such violations, despite the talk of protecting and developing universal human rights norms. On the international front, the counter-terrorism process has been

undermined by many shortcomings. The US counter-terrorism team is simply trying to do too much and faces conflicting tasks. As a consequence, security conditions have deteriorated while coalition teams seem to suffer from low morale. Ultimately, the approach of the international community has suffered from the typical post-Cold War 'liberal peace' arrogance, misunderstanding, lack of appreciation of the specific local political context, and the poor allocation of resources. Unless this is remedied, the program will continue to provide very little return on investment and even less reason to hope for an improved situation in Nigeria.

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<sup>31</sup> ICG (International Crisis Group), 'Curbing violence in Nigeria (11): The Boko Haram insurgency,' *Africa Report*, No 216 (2014), pp. 1-54.