

The Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram: Rethinking Military Interventions

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Abstract

This paper is intended to investigate the rule of the Multinational Joint Task Force and its challenges against the Boko Haram violent extremism in West and Central Africa and consider alternative approaches to roll back their activities in particular and violent extremism in general. Boko Haram extremism which started in the North Eastern Nigeria gradually spread into the Far Northern Region of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Benin with devastating consequences. This arguably was due to inadequate mechanisms to investigate into the causes of their actions and make informed alternative decisions to effectively roll back Boko Haram activism. Paradoxically, the affected countries, either due to the pride of sovereignty or mutual suspicion, initially preferred to solve the Boko Haram equation in isolation within their national boundaries, but the persistent excesses of this group continued to threaten the security situation of the entire region. This necessitated concerted action and consequently led to the establishment of the Multinational Joint Task Force to roll back Boko Haram extremisms. To what extent was the military option of the Joint Forces successful? How has Boko Haram influenced the affected countries? What alternative methods are there to check violent extremism in the affected countries and beyond? We are going to use existing literature, declarations and field realities to attempt responses to the questions raised.

Keywords: Multinational Joint Task Force, Boko Haram, Alternative Approaches

Introduction

The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF)¹ was recreated and her activities extended to check the violent extremisms of Boko Haram in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Benin. The MNJTF has contributed to reduce the impact of Boko Haram and rendered the organization to become toothless bulldogs, having very limited powers and engaged in just sporadic attacks. Despite these successes, the MNJTF has encountered several challenges in their mission against Boko Haram in particular and violent extremism in general. It is worth recalling that the clear intentions of Boko Haram were to destabilise the governments of the affected countries, institute *Sharia Law* and establish a Caliphate in their area of influence. Their extremist character was made easy by the availability of radicalized youth transformed by poverty, unemployment and religious fundamentalism. Violence extremism was also made easy by selfish political ambitions, porous frontiers, the acquisition and use of illicit wealth, poor handling of the crises and inadequate determination to check the excesses of the sect. Although the governments of Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria, Niger and Benin have greatly weakened the activities of Boko Haram, the threats from the sect lingers. Their group members are still holding on stubbornly and exacerbating tension and insecurity in the affected countries. We argue that to permanently check the activities of Boko Haram in particular and violent extremism in general, it is important to reconsider the activities of the MNJTF and seriously rethink alternative approaches in dealing with the movement.

I- Origin and activities of the MNJTF

a) Origin

Understandably, the Multinational Joint Task Force was set up in February 2015 with the backing of the African Union. It was made up of about 8,750 military men and women from Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad and Benin with the intention to combat Boko Haram violent extremism in the affected countries.² It is important to recall that the Task Force was established by Nigerian President, Sani Abacha in 1994 to check banditry and ease free movement in Nigeria. By 1998, it was expanded to include Chad and Niger with the intention to tackle cross-border insecurity in the Lake Chad region. In April 2012, the mandate of the MNJTF was extended to combat terrorism in general. Following increasing Boko Haram extremism, characterized by religious fundamentalism, brutal assassinations, kidnappings, hostage-takings, suicide bombings, detonations and wanton destruction of properties, the activities of the MNJTF was extended to all the affected countries.³ Of course, this was because none of these countries could single-handedly check the excesses of the group with their national boundaries, owing to the fact that they had membership, recruits and sympathizers in all the affected countries and beyond.

b) Activities (Achievements) of the Joint Task Force

We do not intend to relate all the activities of the MNJTF, of course, that is not the focus of our paper. However, it is important to mention the mission of the force. The mandate of the MNJTF was to conduct military actions to prevent the spread of Boko Haram activities, conduct patrols, prevent the transfer of weapons and logistics, free all those who had been abducted, encourage

¹ The Multinational Joint Task Force made up of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad and Benin was put in place to combat Boko Haram Violent Extremism in affected countries.

² <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/int/mnjtf.htm>

³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multinational_Joint_Task_Force_\(08/02/2018\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multinational_Joint_Task_Force_(08/02/2018))

Boko Haram militants to defect, share intelligence and respect human rights, among other things.⁴ This required diplomatic cooperation among its initial four-member states: Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger. This diplomatic foundation was established in 2015. In 2016, the MNJTF took to the field proper, and despite some setbacks, recorded consecutive victories against Boko Haram. From June to November 2016, the *Operation Gama Aiki*, an expression in the Hausa language, which literally means Operation finish or complete the job. This operation was carried out around the Lake Chad region and in the state of Borno. Their activities consisted of simultaneous and cooperative military actions by all four of the force sectors: Baga in Nigeria, Baga-Sola in Chad, Diffa in Niger and Mora in Cameroon.⁵ The operation was very successful and became a morale booster for the Joint Forces who secured the release of hostages; liberation of certain areas previously occupied by Boko Haram and caused many defections from within the ranks of Boko Haram extremists.

In early November 2015, an offensive by the MNJTF Sector 2 with headquarters in Baga-Sola in western Chad forced about 250 Boko Haram combatants to surrender. Between February and May 2016, the MNJTF in Cameroon neutralized numerous Boko Haram combatants. The force secured the release of hostages, seized guns and ammunition, and destroyed some of the group's training camps. The MNJTF got the support of local vigilant forces from the local population who sought to defend and protect their fatherland from external attacks. Victory songs were hastily echoed across member states of the Boko Haram affected countries. On 24 December 2015 for example, Nigerian President Buhari noted that Nigeria had technically won the war against Boko Haram.⁶ In July 2016 Nigerian Col. Sani Usman declared, "we have come to a point where we can beat our chest and decisively say we have dealt with Boko Haram."⁷ These declarations may have been true but interestingly hasty, as the trappings of the extremist group remains very visible and telling.

II- Challenges of the MNJTF

The successes of the MNJTF notwithstanding, their activities have encountered several challenges as well. The principal challenge was the initial reluctance of Nigeria to allow foreign interventions into her territory since she considered the fighting against Boko Haram to be an internal affair and strictly a Nigerian issue. In fact, the Nigerian authorities considered the MNJTF as a threat to her "sovereignty, national pride and political image".⁸ However, "mounting regional and international pressures to address the increasing threat posed by Boko Haram" forced the Nigeria government to reluctantly accept the joint forces, but with the "contingent deployed within their national territory," and "operations aimed at preventing the expansion of Boko Haram, as well as their terrorist groups and eliminating their presence."⁹ This probably explains why the MNJTF was divided into four national sectors: Sector 1, located in Cameroon with headquarters in Mora;

⁴ Institute for Security Studies, West Africa Report, *Assessing the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram*, Issue 19, September, 2016, pp.2- 3.

⁵ *ibid.* p. 3.

⁶ International Crisis Group No. 120, *Boko Haram on the Back Root?*, May 4, 2016, p. 2.

⁷ *Africa Watch*, Vol. 12, August 18, 2016.

⁸ Lori-Anne Theroux-Benoni, <http://pncp.net/news/regional-multinational-joint-task-force-combat-boko-haram>.

⁹ *ibid.*

Sector 2 based in Chad with headquarters in Baaga-Sola; Sector 3 based in Nigeria with headquarters in Baga and Sector 4 based in Niger with headquarters in Diffa.¹⁰

Another challenge was the suspicious and tense atmosphere that characterized relations among the four principal contributing countries. Prior to the formation of the MNJTF, Chad unilaterally sent troops into Nigeria without the latter's consent. There was also some tension between Nigeria and Niger. Niger referred to the Nigerian troops as being "cowards," while Nigeria referred to the troops from Niger as "serial looters."¹¹ This was not a healthy relationship between forces which were supposed to cooperate against Boko Haram. This initial lack of cooperation led to many persistent and uncoordinated military actions by the forces of the different states. Each time there was victory against Boko Haram by the MMNJTF; individual countries claimed victory and made propaganda of competence and better training. This mutual suspicion probably explains why the Nigerian government did not permit foreign troops into their territory. It needed confidence-building among the Boko Haram affected countries and the international community to ease tension and encourage collaboration for mutual gains.

The MNJTF also faced financial challenges which seriously affected its operations and effectiveness. The contributions from Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger were largely insufficient to permanently hold back Boko Haram activities. This warranted contributions from friendly countries, which could still not meet up the estimated budget of US\$700 million. These financial challenges were further compounded by increasing economic difficulties faced by the affected countries. Even Chad and Nigeria which are the two biggest military contributors to the MNJTF, are currently facing economic hardship with the global economic crisis. Cameroon on her part is facing similar challenges including the huge refugee problems caused by same problem. Funding of the MNJTF has therefore been very slow as member states have not been respecting their pledges. This has forced the military of the individual member countries to pick up the financial burden, thereby, "creating financial strain on already tight budgets."¹²

Human rights challenges have also been identified as one the speed breaks against the MNJTF. The Force has been accused of not respecting the basic rights of prisoners and civilians and the excessive use of force without distinguishing between combatants and civilians. This has attracted criticisms from many international organizations and human rights movements. The case of the Cameroonian soldiers accused of killing two women and their babies for being simply accused of being Boko Haramists readily comes to mind. Amnesty International and many Cameroonian local human rights activists have attested to the fact that the gruesome video on social media was actually carried out in Cameroon. The government of Cameroon in reaction ordered the arrest of the soldier accused for perpetrating the killings.

This notwithstanding, there was also inadequate background information based on local realities. No doubt, the Joint Task Force has successfully reduced the size and strength of the terrorist movement, but has not completely wiped out their influence in the affected countries. This is arguably because the affected governments of Cameroon, Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Benin; foreign conflict managers and conflict resolution experts either do not adequately engage in identifying and analyzing the causes and the local understanding (knowledge, attitudes and practices) in matters related to the existing conflict. Most often the affected governments have been

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multinational_Joint_Task_Force (08/02/2018)

¹¹ <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/int/mnjtf.htm>

¹² Africa Watch, Vol. 12, August 18, 2016.

highly dependent on military force to resolve the Boko Haram extremism without considering other conflict management alternatives based on local realities. They have often got in with too-late solutions to the conflicts when much damage has already been done. Of course, inadequate knowledge of the conflicts only lead to conflict management approaches which are foreign to the local realities. There are inadequate early warning mechanisms to detect and prevent potential conflicts. Otherwise, the Boko Haram equation should have been solved or relevant local approaches adopted to roll back their activities.

III- Alternative Approaches to roll back violent extremism

Following the above arguments, we argue that in order to effectively roll back the Boko Haram insurgency in particular and violent extremism in general; and enhance practical, quality, inclusive, visible, concerted and sustainable peace and development in the entire Boko Haram affected countries, there is need for a proper understanding of the causes, course, local understanding and likely consequences of the conflicts in the affected countries and beyond. This would mean blending military expertise, force and traditional methods of peace-building in the affected communities. This would influence state-building and the effective reconstruction of the affected countries. We also argue that, the Multinational Joint Task Force, even with the most sophisticated of weapons cannot automatically stamp out youth unemployment, poverty, ideological and religious fundamentalism and illiteracy. Instead of military high-handedness, inadequate dialogue, humiliation and the abuse of human dignity only provide the matrix for Boko Haram activism and survival. It is therefore important to note that the MNJTF should permanently move from just military interventions to genuine dialogue and reconstruction.

a) More dialogue and less force

The Boko Haram insurgences in particular and violent extremism in general are man-made crises that can be resolved through genuine dialogue. The MNJTF and the affected countries initially depended on excessive force to respond to Boko Haram. Most often, pictures of captured or killed Boko Haramists, were projected and shown on different media outlets, either as a sign of victory or to deter would-be extremists. However, this is tantamount to humiliation which is, “the nuclear bomb of emotions”.¹³ This only propels the desire for revenge, hence, counter-productive to sustainable peace. Instead of using excessive force, the MNJTF and the affected countries should pick up “the political courage to sincerely discuss with the Boko Haram group.”¹⁴

The question has always been, how could dialogue proceed with unidentified terrorists? Such a question is quite misleading if one considers the fact that many captured hostages have regained freedom after negotiations. It means that Boko Haramists are identifiable. Better still, many of their top leaders and sponsors have been arrested by either the MNJTF or by the affected countries. Proper dialogue should determine what the Boko Haramists really want. Genuine dialogue should lead to general amnesty for all de-radicalised, disarmed and rehabilitated Boko Haram supporters. In return, the Boko Haramists should accept, recognise and protect religious

¹³ Evelin Lindner, *Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflicts* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006), p. xiii.

¹⁴ Okachikwu Dibia, “Resolving the Boko Haram Challenge,” in <http://www.gam.com/article9000/NEWS9626.htm>, 11/12/2014

diversities because their *Sharia Law* agenda is not feasible in diverse religious and secular communities.

In the same connection, local religious leaders should adopt reasonable and community-based approaches to identify, discourage and weed off extremism and religious fundamentalism in their communities. Meanwhile, the MNJTF and country-based military, should, with a gun in one hand and an olive branch in the other hand, collaborate with the local community and religious leaders in weeding out unrepentant extremist. The MNJTF should engage in providing social services like teaching (re-education), health services, civil engineering and modern methods of cattle rearing, among other things. This will transform communities sympathetic to Boko Haram activism. It is quite understandable that the military are experts not only in using the guns, but in community development as well. Many are engineers, medical doctors, educators, and all. They should use force only when absolutely necessary and essentially for self-defense.

b) Peace-building and tolerance education

Boko Haramism, which is the ideology behind Boko Haram should be checked through education and re-education. Being experienced educators and community developers as well, the MNJTF should engage in “the transformation of conflictual and destructive interactions into more co-operative and constructive relationships,”¹⁵ because “for peace to reign, the forces of peace within and around us must oppose and overcome the forces of aggression.”¹⁶ Whether peace is seen through the Jewish and Christian expression “Peace be unto you” or through the Muslim expression “*Asalaam Aleikum*,” peace is the foundation for concerted development. This is truer because peace has to be permanently constructed through education. According to Boulaga, peace “is never achieved in advance or forever...Peace is order, achieved by man, for man, through human means.”¹⁷ Sustainable peace can only be possible through Peace Education which “is the permanent struggle to minimize, transform and resolve conflicts, in order to guarantee effective co-existence, concord and harmony among diverse interests, peoples and their cultures through formal and informal peace-building efforts.”¹⁸ The MNJTF should roll back Boko Haram extremism in particular and violent extremism in general by promoting good practices of peaceful co-existence, especially among the Christian and the Muslim population.

c) Professional and Vocational Education

One of the causes of Boko Haramism and violent extremism is Illiteracy¹⁹. In Northern Nigeria for example, the distinction between schools that provide Western education (*Makarantan Boko*) and Koranic schools (*Makarantan addini or Makarantan allo*), and the preference for the

¹⁵ Hizkias Assefa, *Peace and Reconciliation as a Paradigm: A Philosophy of Peace and its Implications on Conflict, Governance, and Economic Growth in Africa*, NPI Monograph series , No. 1, 1993. p. 4.

¹⁶ Gilbert Mboubou, “Peace, A Controversial Concept”, in *Dialogue and Reconciliation*, Review of the Ecumenical Service for Peace No. 001, 2nd Semester 2000, *What is Peace?: Presuppositions, Stakes and Implications* (Yaounde: The Ecumenical Service for Peace, 2000), p.62.

¹⁷ Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, “In Favour of the Emergence of a Culture of Peace”, in *Dialogue and Reconciliation*, p.23.

¹⁸ Willibroad Dze-Ngwa, “Introducing Peace Education in Cameroon Schools: A Blueprint for Sustainable Development,” p. 30, in *International Journal of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 2 No. 3, April 2014, pp. 27-40.

¹⁹ Illiteracy here is not the inability to read and write, since many of the people here are well educated in the Koranic schools. Therefore, it is used to refer to the inability to read and write in Western educational values.

latter, have caused those who attend “Makarantan Boko” to be treated with hatred.²⁰ This is similar in the Muslim communities of the Far Northern Region of Cameroon and in some communities of the affected countries. Whatever the case, the MNJTF and the governments of Boko Haram affected countries should encourage and provide necessary resources for quality education that should create relevant employment. This should go a long way to build confidence between the military and the civilian populations in the affected areas.

d) Youth de-radicalization through employment and job creation

Excessive force and brutality only radicalizes the young people, especially when military incursions are blinded between real terrorists and civilians. The MNJTF and the governments of the affected countries should de-radicalize the youth by creating “jobs for educated, strong, vibrant, patriotic and productive citizens, ... [who] need to be nurtured, mentored and monitored so that they can progress along the path of profitability, success and sustainability.”²¹ Although no government can employ all its youth; governments should promote effective human security and design sustainable development programmes based “primarily on protecting people while promoting peace and assuring sustainability.”²² For this to happen, there should be “concerted efforts” and people should agree to agree no matter the elements of disagreement, with the focus to achieve a common objective.²³

The youth should be involved in decision-making that affects them because any decisions taken on behalf of the youth, without the youth, is against the youth! The youth on their part should build political maturity, tolerance, fair play and actively take part in competitive politics. They should vote and be readily voted into positions of responsibility within all the political parties.²⁴ Backed by the necessary education and training, the youth should be appointed into respectable government positions as well. Indeed, there should be legislative disposition on the proportion of youth representation in all political offices. There should equally be tax-free initiatives for young start-ups who genuinely wish to begin petty businesses. Such enabling environment should de-radicalise the youth.

e) Creation of a Regional Commission for Religious and Moral Education

It is worth recalling that Boko Haram extremism germinated from the radical “Maitatsine” group of Muhammed Marwa which started in Nigeria in the 1980s. The group got a galloping influence until the birth of Boko Haram in 1995 with the same principles, doctrine, targets and strategies.²⁵ To check the Boko Haram activities, with strongly believe that a sub-Regional Council of West and Central Africa, and of the affected countries, should be carefully selected among civilians and the military, Muslim and Christian clerics; statesmen and respectable African past

²⁰ N. D. Danjibo, (n.d) “Islamic Fundamentalism and Sectarian Violence: The “Maitatsine” and “Boko Haram” Crises in Northern Nigeria.” p.8.

²¹ Nigeria Tribune, 30 May 2014.

²² <http://www.humansecurityinitiative.org/definition-human-security>.

²³ Emmanuel Kamdem, *Concertalism, Concertocracy and Social Economy: Concertation at the Centre of Economic, Managerial, Political and Social Systems in the 21st Century* (Paris: L'Harmattan-Cameroun, 2012), p. 25.

²⁴ Willibroad Dze-Ngwa, “Youth and Politics in Cameroon from Colonial to Post-Colonial Periods: A Historical Perspective,” in *Epasa Moto: A Bilingual Journal of Arts, Letters and the Humanities*, Vol. 3 No. 1, (Buea: University of Buea, August 2008), pp. 40-41.

²⁵ Danjibo, “Islamic Fundamentalism and Sectarian Violence.” p.6.

leaders to coordinate such a commission. The African Union (AU) should also establish a Pan African Commission for Religious and Moral Education (PACRME) to monitor and regulate religious literature and doctrines of both Christian and Muslim preachers in the entire continent. The PACRME should be a synergy of National and regional Commissions for Religious and Moral Education (NCRME) from all AU member states and regional bodies.

f) Effective Security and Intelligence-sharing

The determination and successes of the MNJTF is worth-saluting. It is clear signal of the success of international collaboration against violent extremism of all sorts. The threats from Boko Haram should ignite greater international collaboration for pre-emptive security measures to check the further spread. There should be adequate intelligence-sharing, among all Boko Haram affected countries, and the international community in general. Since intelligence guarantees the stability in every government, the various stakeholders should engage in gathering and sharing of relevant security information. Intelligence is the pivot on which security operations are predicated...Intelligence is knowledge, power and security.²⁶ Friends of Africa and the affected countries like Japan and other countries like China, Great Britain, France, Germany and Israel, should use their advanced technologies for better training in intelligence gathering and sharing among security personnel of the MNJTF members-states.

g) Controlling the porous borders

The MNJTF has also been faced with the problem of porous boundaries within the affected countries. There should be effective border control in order to reduce the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. The boundaries between Nigeria and Niger; Nigeria and Benin, Nigeria and Cameroon; Nigeria-Cameroon-Chad are very porous. This situation is compounded by the conflicts in Libya, Chad, Niger, Sudan, Central African Republic, Somalia, which facilitate the smuggling of weapons in to the ready hands of Boko Haramists. With the Arab Spring which reigned instability on North Africa and Boko Haram's collaboration with other terrorist groups, weapons were procured for the interest of religious fundamentalism.

h) The responsibility of the UN, AU and the International community

The affected countries and the MNJTF should respect international conventions on arms embargoes, targeted sanctions, export and import regulations and disarmament which have not been very successful.²⁷ However, sufficient international cooperation should determine the sources of such weapons in order to cut their supplies and funding. Africans do not produce heavy weapons.

Conclusion:

The MNJTF no doubt, has been very contributory in seriously checking the spread of Boko Haram extremism within the affected countries. However, political, economic and social constraints have limited the effectiveness of the force from rolling back Boko Haram activities and violent extremism on permanent bases. We strongly believe that it is possible for the MNJTF to roll

²⁶ Nigeria Tribune, 30 May 2014.

²⁷ Solomon Effiong Udounwa (Colonel), "Boko Haram: Developing New Strategies to Combat Terrorism in Nigeria," M.A. Strategy Research Project, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, 2013, p. 14.

back violent extremism in affected countries in particular and Africa as a whole if there is a strong will to consider alternative methods based of local realities.

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