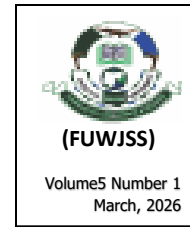


AN ASSESSMENT OF OPERATION SAFE CORRIDOR IN COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NORTH-EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study identifies and examines key activities in the process of deradicalization and rehabilitation of surrendered insurgents referred to as clients at the Operation Safe Corridor Camp, in Malam Sidi, Gombe State, Nigeria. The deradicalization and rehabilitation programme focused on spiritual counselling, psychological intervention, vocational training and drug rehabilitation. Using the containment theory, this study assesses successes and challenges of Operation Safe Corridor in fulfilling its mandate of rehabilitating the repentant insurgents and encouraging defection from the bush. Findings reveal that the programme has recorded successes such as the increase in the number of those leaving the bush and embracing the “safe corridor” with a zero rate of recidivism. However, information about the camp is highly confidential due to the nature of the programme. This has created gaps in the reintegration process as host communities have mixed feelings as to how genuine is the repentance of the surrendered insurgents. The study concludes that there is need for the general public and the members of the communities to be carried along especially by creating a National Coordinating office that would bridge the information gap and harmonize all the reconciliation processes towards finding a lasting solution to the conflict in the North East.

Keywords: Deradicalization, radicalization, rehabilitation, reintegration, repentant insurgents

Introduction

The government's role of providing security and protection for its citizens' lives and property is gradually being eroded due to constant attacks by those who feel they must dictate the affairs of the state according to their distorted views and perspectives. Nigeria has had to deal with emerging national security problems that have not only affected the development of the state but have threatened the very purpose and legitimacy of the state. One of which is the Boko-Haram insurgency. Until recently, the Nigerian military has continued to engage the insurgents with the use of military hardware in trying to deal with the situation. This trend is however changing with the realization of that their recruiters have misled them through an ideology to see the state as an enemy and therefore they need to fight the current order of the day or the government as the case may be. This realization has therefore, orchestrated the introduction of a soft approach by the government towards countering the very ideology that the militant group uses through the deradicalization and rehabilitation of these defector surrendered or Ex-Boko Haram members.

The North East in the past decade has witnessed several terrorist attacks by Islamist extremists popularly referred to as Boko Haram, which means western education is an abomination. The group has consistently and continuously created fear and inflicted harm on the citizens and has also targeted security forces and government installations. The core assumption of this approach is that extremists have been led astray by their recruiters and consequently, harbour incorrect/distorted or inadequate understanding of Islam.

The initial use of the military capacity by the Nigerian government to quell or deal with the situation has not been completely successful. Therefore, the need for a multifaceted approach became expedient. This eventually saw the Nigerian government change its approach to include the use of soft power through the use of a non-violent approach such as deradicalization and rehabilitation as a possible solution to the problem. The setup of the Deradicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration camp has no doubt given the defectors or surrendered Ex-militants an opportunity to be reoriented, rehabilitated and then eventually reintegrated back into society with a new mindset and understanding of society and the workings of government.

The Boko Haram/ISWAP radical Muslim groups share an ideology that justifies the use of violence against citizens and governments considered to be un-Islamic. The radicalization of these citizens has become the main concern in the counter terrorism efforts of governments throughout the world. As a result of significant efforts, several countries have captured and imprisoned large numbers of radical Muslim extremists.

The major challenge for most of these governments, however, is what to do with these extremist populations and how best to deracialize and rehabilitate them to avoid a return to violent militancy.

Deradicalization and rehabilitation programs may be a potential answer to the problem of what to do with defector or surrendered religious extremists but what goes on in the holding centers is unknown. The establishment of the deradicalization and rehabilitation camp in Malam Sidi, Akko local government area of Gombe State offers an approach to handling repentant violent extremist to change their perspectives and give them another lease on life. The problem, therefore, is that little or nothing about the scope of the programme is known. This research work examined the key aspects of the rehabilitation program at the Malam Sidi camp in Gombe state to determine if this deradicalization programme is an effective solution to dealing with the religious extremists by interrogating the components of the deradicalization, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for religious extremists, this was the focus of this study.

Counter Insurgency

Counterinsurgency (COIN) is the blend of comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously contain' insurgency and address its root causes. Unlike conventional warfare, non-military means are often the most effective elements, with military forces playing an enabling role. COIN is an extremely complex undertaking, which demands of policy makers a detailed understanding of their own specialist field, but also a broad knowledge of a wide variety of related disciplines. COIN approaches must be adaptable and agile. Strategies will usually be focused primarily on the population rather than the enemy and will seek to reinforce the legitimacy of the affected government while reducing insurgent influence. This can often only be achieved in concert with political reform to improve the quality of governance and address underlying grievances, many of which may be legitimate. (USG COIN Guide, 2009).

NATO doctrine defines counter insurgency as comprehensive civilian and military efforts made to defeat an insurgency and to address any core grievances. Insurgents seek to compel or coerce political change on those in power, often through the use or threat of force by irregular forces, groups, or individuals. Counter insurgents must not only develop short-term solutions to provide security for the targeted population and change disruptive behaviors, they must also determine the sources of the unrest and dissatisfaction fueling the insurgency. Counter insurgents conduct long term 'operations to eliminate those sources of unrest. This may require improving governance, developing the economy, or restoring

essential services. These tasks require the participation of relevant civilian agencies, both indigenous and international.

De- Radicalization

Essentially, the main goal of de-radicalization is to apply the most pragmatic and efficient means to eliminate the potent threat of radical extremism thereby safeguarding National Security. Hogan (2009) sees de-radicalization as an attempt to disengage individuals from following the path of radicalization. This assertion rightly underscores the process where an individual experience a change in role or function, which is usually associated with a reduction in violent extremism. This brings forth the need to distinguish between disengagement, which is behavioral modification and de-radicalization that refers to attitudinal modification. If the attitude is not changed, there is no guarantee that the behavioral change will not be reversed, thus if de-radicalization processes are not pursued to the latter, there is no guarantee that the ideological beliefs held by radical individuals will not later be a justification for them re-engaging in violent behavior. However, it has not captured the essence of de-radicalization, which is to ensure a disengagement from the use of violence as a weapon in ideological conflicts. Furthermore, it has also not defined the full attributes of deradicalization such as reintegration of the former extremists; hence it is not comprehensive for this study.

The study by Barkindo & Bryans (2016) view de-radicalization as a government funded initiative involving several agencies working at encouraging those with extreme religious or political ideologies to adopt more moderate views, while ensuring they are monitored to ensure their full reformation. This definition, pinpoints two major ingredients associated with the de-radicalization process, which are the cooperation among several agencies in implementation of the program and an effective monitoring system that will check on former extremists to guard against recidivism. These give the definition a good standard, relevant to this study. However, it is vague on other attributes that are needed to make a definition of de- radicalization apt for this study, such as the reintegration process that is to guide against recidivism. In other words, this definition does not capture some ingredients or may not be comprehensive enough.

Ashour (2009) defined de-radicalization as a process of relative change, in which an extremist group reverses its ideology and delegitimizes the use of violence to achieve political goals while also moving towards an acceptance of gradual, political and economic changes within a pluralistic context. This definition has identified the two important attributes that need to be achieved for a de-radicalization process to be successful, which are the delegitimization of violence, and

reintegration within pluralistic environment. This position, however, did not capture clearly the process towards de-radicalization. It also did not consider aspects of reintegration which are critical to de-radicalization thus, deeming it unsuitable for the study.

Based on considerations of the positions by these scholars, the proposed working definition of de-radicalization for this research would be understood from Barkindo and Bryans (2016) and Ashour (2008) definitions of de-radicalization. It thus would be defined as a well-funded activity of several agencies at initiating a process in which an individual or extremist group delegitimizes the use of violence-, while being monitored to ensure the person or group, does not relapse but moves towards an acceptance of changes within a pluralistic society.

Rehabilitation

According to WHO rehabilitation is defined as a set of interventions designed to optimize functioning and reduce disability in individuals. This is the action of restoring someone to health or normal life through training and therapy after imprisonment, addiction, or illness. In other words, rehabilitation in the deradicalization camp refers to a set of activities that is directed at the overall welfare of the Clients to ensure they are fit for return to their community of reintegration. These activities include medical health both physical and psychological, social and cultural well-being, economic empowerment, educational reorientation and most importantly spiritual guidance.

Reintegration

According to the UN (2005) Secretary-General on financing peace support operations, reintegration is the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain employment and income. Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open time frame, primarily taking place in communities at the local level. It is part of the general development of a country and a national responsibility and often necessitates long-term external assistance.

The Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) Draft Dafur Peace Document (DDPD) 2011, also defined reintegration as the means or process and assistance measures by which former combatants acquire civilian status and are assisted in order to increase the potential for their economic and social absorption in to civil society. Reintegration also refers to the assistance measures and processes by which IDPs and returning refugees are able to regain the physical, social, legal and material security needed to maintain life, livelihood and dignity and to resume a normal life either following their return to place of origin or resettlement.

Generally, reintegration usually means creating conditions for normal living and gradual inclusion of the persons who have returned in all spheres of living in their place of origin or the re-entry of formerly internally displaced persons into the social, economic, cultural and political fabric of their original community or new place of settlement.

Reintegration can therefore, be said to refer to the process or processes that ensure that a repentant and rehabilitated terrorist is returned to his community and accepted by the community for them to contribute meaningfully to the positive development of that community.

Theoretical Framework

This study made use of the Containment Theory as postulated by Walter Reckless in 1961. The Theory shows the interactions of external social factors and internal natural qualities that effectively prevent certain individuals from getting involved in violent crimes even when ecological values induces others to engage in it.

The principal social control concepts of containment theory are inner and outer containment. Inner containment involves the personal, social controls over behavior. Reckless believed that these included self-control, a good self-concept, ego strength, and so on. In essence, these are the qualities that serve as inner regulators against delinquent behavior and outer containment dealt with the structural buffers in the youth's closest social environment that served to restrain them. These immediate social constraints included such things as a consistent moral front to the person, institutional reinforcement of his norms, goals, expectations, the existence of a reasonable set of social expectations, effective supervision and discipline (social controls), provision for reasonable scope of activity which includes limits and responsibilities as well as alternatives and safety valves, opportunity for acceptance and belonging. To Reckless, these structural factors around the individual served to "contain" the youth against delinquency and crime (Cardwell S.M, 2013)

Containment Theory is relevant to this study based on arguments that align with the focus of the study. This points to the fact that behaviour as explained by the theory is the product of influence which could give birth to negative impacts such as crime. This evident by the fact that those who joined Boko haram are believed to have been wrongly misdirected or to erroneously believe that the only way to achieve their ultimate aim is to engage in terrorism. Reckless also further suggested for social controls which can be aligned to policies that would control behaviour such as the Deradicalization camp which serve to reorient them to understand acceptable social norms and conform to them, this process he said should be handled by professional such as psychologist as is evident in the

deradicalization programmes for violent extremist in Nigeria. This is an assurance that if the theory is adopted and implemented in OPSC deradicalization programme, it will anchor policies that will achieve success in ensuring the restoration of peace in the North East.

Research Methodology

This research is a qualitative explanatory research. It employed the use of the ex-post factor design, which seeks to answer and address if a problem exists but knowledge about its characteristics or possible causes is not much known. Analysis were done using content and field analysis.

The study area covers the Deradicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DRR) Camp located in Malam Sidi a Suburb of Kwami Local Government Area of Gombe State North East Nigeria.

The Purposive sampling technique was adopted for the Key Informant Interviews of 9 key staff and a focused group discussion with the local treatment team at the camp in Malam Sidi, Gombe State.

Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC)

The Operation Safe Corridor initiative is the resultant of a National security meeting held in September 2015, to encourage willing and repentant Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa province (ISWAP) members to drop arms and embrace peace. The most important primary objective of the initiative is to ensure that the operation i.e. OPSC would help to deplete the fighting forces of BH and ISWAP in the bush. The purpose of the initiative was therefore, to provide of facilitate easy access and passage for the surrendering insurgents to security agencies for subsequent deradicalization and rehabilitation to prepare them for reintegration back into the society. For the sole purpose of actualizing this initiative high powered committee was convened by the Secretary to the Government of the Federation and Chaired by the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in 2015 (The Client, 2019). The composition of the OPSC National Committee includes:

1. Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)
2. Executive Governors Adamawa, Borno and Yobe States
3. Chief of Army Staff (COAS)
4. Chief of Air Staff (CAS)
5. Chief of Naval Staff (CNS)
6. Inspector General of Police (IG)
7. Director from Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA)
8. Director General Department of State Service (DG. DSS)
9. Chief of Defence Intelligence (CDI)

10. Director General National Emergency Management Agency (DG NEMA)

By April 2016, Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) was established and a Deradicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Camp (DRR Camp) was officially opened in Malam Sidi, Kwami Local Government Area of Gombe State. This effort is to ensure and contribute to other operations in order to determine a lasting solution to the situation in the North East region.

The strategic headquarters of OPSC is located at the Defence Headquarters in Abuja, while the Deradicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Camp, which is the operational headquarters is located in Malam Sidi Kwami Local Government Area of Gombe State. Operation Safe Corridor is a fully integrated hybrid operation, which essentially is driven by the combined core competence of various Military, Para-military and civilian agencies. While the civilian agencies handle the core aspects of de-radicalization and rehabilitation program using their different expertise and professionalism, the military provides leadership, coordination and security, through the established channels of command and control. The Integrated nature of this operation has made it special, distinct and peculiar, especially with the current successes being recorded. It has brought to fore the relevance of inter-agency cooperation and interaction for the achievement of a common goal (The Client, 2019).

OPSC is a Joint multi-agency humanitarian operation that involves security agencies law enforcement agencies, Federal Government Ministries and departments/parastatal (FG MDAs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Governmental Organizations (GOs), Para-military law enforcement Agencies, Governmental Intelligence Agencies and the Armed Forces I.e. Army, Air force and Navy. The DRR camp currently draws its expertise from different Ministries, Departments, and agencies of the federal government. The professionals who work together in synergy to the mandate of OPSC are drawn from the following agencies:

1. Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA)
2. Armed Forces of Nigeria (AFN)
3. Nigeria Police force (NPF)
4. Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA)
5. Department of State Services (DSS)
6. Nigeria Intelligence Agency (NIA)
7. Nigeria Correctional Service (NCOS)
8. Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS)
9. Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC)
10. Federal Ministry of Justice
11. Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs

12. Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development
13. National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA)
14. National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA)
15. National Identity Management Commission (NIMC)
16. National Orientation Agency (NOA)
17. National Directorate of Employment (NDE)
18. North East Development Commission (NEDC)
19. Civilian Professional Staff (Gombe)

OPSC also partners with both local and International Organizations such as

1. International Organization for Migration (IOM)
2. United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF)
3. Center for Democracy and Development (CDD)
4. North East Region Initiative (NERI)

(Source: The Client, 2020)

4.2 The Vision of OPSC

To encourage defection within the ranks of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) through the corridor of opportunity offered by the Deradicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration program as part of the Federal Government of Nigeria's overall efforts to end the insurgency in the North East.

4.3 The Mission of OPSC

To Deradicalize, Rehabilitate and prepare the Clients for Reintegration

4.4 The Core Values of OPSC

1. Accountability
2. Patriotism
3. Humanity
4. Confidentiality
5. Neutrality
6. Cooperation

(Source: The Client, 2009)

Findings

A total of nine key stakeholders at the Deradicalization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration camp and the local treatment team members (FGD) were interviewed using a semi structured questionnaire and the following are the findings about the most important aspects of the deradicalization of the surrendered religious extremist otherwise referred to as Clients at the camp.

Spiritual Counselling

Psycho-spiritual counseling is a process of providing psycho-spiritual aid/counseling to a Client. The DRR Camp Psycho-spiritual team is composed of professional spiritual counselors (Imams and Pastors) and Psychologists. These professionals operate together as a team to achieve a particular goal, which is disabusing, changing or correcting the perspective or minds of Clients in the DRR Camp from the extremist religious ideology of Boko-Haram. The professionals carry out this important task through a series of related and complimentary processes. This is done through the use of several instruments such as: The Holy Quran, Hadith and other relevant Islamic books and documents which are adopted and used by the Imams to support their counter-narratives. Conversely, the Psychologists use several counter narratives from schools of thought with related issues/case such as; Observation Interaction (Interview) and Experimentation and Cognitive Psycho-Therapy to seek for solutions to identified Client's problems. (Source: KII, FGD 2021)

Psychological Intervention

The therapeutic engagement process is carried out by an expert Psychologist and it is one of the most important key elements in the rehabilitation and reformation process of Clients. Due to the unfortunate environment and circumstances of the Clients former living conditions and activities, some Clients suffer acute psychologically related issues such as anxiety, abnormal behavior, schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and mental instability. Once a Clients situation is ascertained he is immediately referred to the appropriate Psychologist to commence the required treatment. Depending on the nature of the problem the Psychologist adopts the Cognitive-Behavioral therapy (CBT). (Source: KII, FGD 2021)

Drug Counselling

The DRR Camp OPSC is designed for the rehabilitation of especially repentant insurgents. The program comprises various teams of professionals, where each team has its own professional role to play toward achieving the desired goal. Therefore, the drug Counselor's team is one among the teams of great concern. This is necessary because a lot research has linked crime with drug abuse. In other words, most crimes are executed under the influence of hard and prohibited drugs. Evidence has also shown that the Clients or repentant insurgents are not an exception. Hence, the intervention of the drug Counselors who are expertly trained National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) officers. The NDLEA team is incorporated into the local treatment teams

of those Clients. Their responsibility is inevitably to address the Clients drug related problems before their graduation and re-integration into the society. Drug Abuse is a major menace among the Clients. The intervention by trained drug Counselors is to manage Clients who are/were involved in drug abuse during their time in the bush and those Clients who were compelled to engage in other drug related vices. The intervention is aimed at addressing their drug related problems before their re-integration into the society. The scope comprises the use of counseling, counseling aids, and counseling processes (Source: KII, FGD 2021) .

Vocational Intervention/Training.

Vocational training is one of the core aspects of the program. This is because this is the beginning point of the process of economic empowerment for proper reintegration and self-sufficiency in the community of return. It helps equip Clients through a short term skill acquisition training period by introducing the Clients to vocations of their interest and preparing them for reintegration. The Clients are asked to identify their specific interest among the options available after which they are grouped and taught the specific training's they have opted for by professionals from the National Directorate of Employment, Nigerian Correctional Service and other Civilian Professional Staff. These trainings are received from the Camp Staff in order to assist Clients to be relatively financially stable upon reintegration to their various communities after completing their rehabilitation program. The vocational training is specifically targeted at ensuring that the Clients at graduation and upon reintegration back to their community of return have some form of skill to assist his livelihood and by extension his family. It is also worthy of mention that at the end of their rehabilitation and deradicalization the Clients are issued a starter pack at the point of the Clients graduation. This starter pack is or must be in line with whatever trade training he must have received during his six months stay in the camp. Apart from the starter pack other incentives are issued to the Clients upon graduation to help facilitate their smooth transition in the general society. The various vocations are as follows:

- i. Tailoring
- ii. Barbing
- iii. Shoemaking/Leatherworks
- iv. Cosmetology (Soap, household cleaning agents, perfume etc)
- v. Farming
- vi. Furniture Making
- vii. Welding

- viii. Fishery
- ix. Poultry farming (broilers and layers)
- x. Animal rearing (Cows, Goat, Sheep etc.)
- xi. Greenhouse farming
- xii. Laundry Services
- xiii. Cap Weaving/Embroidery

For agricultural practices, all Clients are made to participate due to its popularity in all areas of the Northern part of Nigeria. Interestingly and worthy of mention is that the Clients and staff also eat from the agricultural produce that they help to learn and cultivate. This is aimed at showing and teaching them that you can benefit from the work of your hands. This is one aspect the rehabilitation process that the Clients enjoy the session most. Staffs here are drawn from ministry of Women affairs and Social development and the local staff sourced from the surrounding communities. Interested Camp staff who are professional in any vocational area are also allowed to participate and make their general contributions to this aspect of the camp activities. These agricultural practices in the camp are largely supported by International Organizations who partner with the camp through provision of manpower, infrastructure and raw materials needed for the training to include: day old chicks, fish fingerlings, chicken and fish feeds etc. (Source: KII, FGD 2021)

The major challenges as revealed by those interviewed are inadequate Finance, the language barrier especially because most of the Clients are Kanuri from Borno State. Lastly is the closed security nature of the programme which restricts information to the public.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The deradicalization and rehabilitation process is not a simple process that a single model can be applied. This is because every social unrest comes with its unique variables. In other words, we can have similar program but certainly not the same program applied in a different context. This means that though the problem may look the same but the actors and the environment are different. The major essence or purpose of the Camp is to rehabilitate and change the Clients perspective especially from a religious background. This is because the type of issue we are facing in Nigeria is directly linked to extremism in terms of religion. All over the world, violent extremism is being countered by setting up a program such as the DRR program by countries who have experienced violent extremism. The essence of deradicalizing ex-combatants or violent extremist is solely for the purpose of especially depleting the ranks of the violent extremist sect. In other words, the Camp was set up as a mission to persuade those in the bush to embrace an opportunity to be given

another opportunity at living a life that is beneficial to themselves and the society they leave in. It is like an olive branch extended to the Clients to leave the bush and become better citizens in the society. This opportunity helps to reduce the fighting force of the Boko-Haram sect.

Recommendations

The Federal Government should establish a holistic and comprehensive National Deradicalization Agency (NDA) by an act of the National Assembly that will be responsible or handle and monitor all the activities that would relate to preventing and countering violent extremism. The federal government through the National Orientation Agency should establish an office for Community Engagement Programme on Countering Violent Extremism (CEPCVE) in all NOA offices nationwide. Community ownership of the program, dialogue and advocacy on activities at the camp.

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