

NIGERIAN COMMUNITY MILITIAS: Toward A Solution

NOVEMBER 2019

I. OVERVIEW

This year marks ten years of violent conflict in northeast Nigeria which has claimed more than 39,000 lives.¹ Without a doubt, civilians bear the brunt of the conflict. Across the Lake Chad region, 2.5 million people have been displaced, an estimated 10.7 million people need humanitarian assistance, 5 million people are acutely food insecure, and 490,000 children are severely malnourished.²

Over the last decade, civilians in northeast Nigeria formed community militias to fill the gaps in security left by state security actors as has occurred in similar conflict-affected contexts.³ Community militias – armed groups that operate alongside state security forces or work independently of the state to protect local populations from armed opposition groups⁴ – draw upon a history of community mobilization to further local security. In Nigeria, these groups include the Civilian Joint Task Force (yan gora), vigilantes (yan banga), hunters (kungiyar maharba), and Shuwa vigilantes (kesh kesh).

In 2017, CIVIC explored civilian perceptions of the CJTF (yan gora) in Borno state based on an extensive literature review, primary data collected in December 2017, and CIVIC's engagement with community militias to further the protection of civilians in northeast Nigeria from November 2016 to March 2017. This policy brief draws on further research conducted between January 2018 and June 2019. During this time, CIVIC held 49 one-on-one interviews with civilians and militia members in Maiduguri Metropolitan Council (MMC), Bama, Biu, Damboa, Dikwa, Hawul, Kaga, Konduga, Jere, and Monguno local government areas (LGAs) in Borno state. In addition, we held numerous workshops with soldiers, police, civilians, and community militias which also informed our findings concerning community militias.

We have found that the CJTF fulfilled critical security functions, but the longer they remain in place, the more predatory some members may become. This paper lays out key recommendations for federal, state, and local government, and civil society to mitigate against threats posed by militias to civilians and ensure that members can continue to contribute to the stability of northeast Nigeria. CIVIC will publish an accompanying, in-depth, research paper on community militias in the coming months which will further analyze the protection benefits and challenges associated with these groups as well as options for off-ramps.

II. EMERGENCE AND RELATIONSHIP WITH STATE ACTORS

Throughout northeast Nigeria, sub-groups of community militias formed as a function of local context, including political and security considerations. Of note, these groups emerged for different reasons, and with varied purposes across LGAs.

Hunters: In many parts of Borno, hunter groups existed before the conflict, and were linked to local community leadership structures. Hunters were a distinct livelihood group which hunted animals for consumption and sale. Given members' skills with weapons, some assumed defensive roles to secure communities from attack by outsiders. Moreover, the colonial state relied upon and appointed local hunter leaders to mobilize labor, collect taxes, and suppress dissent, including through the use of local security forces which were not linked to colonial security providers.

Vigilantes: In the 1980s, poverty, insecurity, and crime rose as a result of an economic downturn linked to budgeting issues, population growth, desertification, and changes in climate and rainfall patterns. The frequency with which civilians were robbed on their way to markets and communities increased the need for community security mechanisms to help protect them. Hunters began patrolling roads and communities to deter thieves. The hunters became known as vigilantes (*yan banga*) and some joined the nascent Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN), a national organization which brought together similar groups across the nation. During this time, the *kesh kesh* also emerged from the Shuwa community in response to similar threats.

Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF): A few decades later, civilians in northeast Nigeria faced a new threat in the form of Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lida'awati wal Jihad (JAS). JAS, also known as Boko Haram, began a destructive campaign of killing security officials, civil servants and those who opposed them. In response, Nigerian security forces treated many civilians as prospective JAS

members, engaging in mass arrests, detention, reprisal attacks, and extra-judicial killings. Caught between JAS and the military, the CJTF (*yan gora*) emerged as a "child of necessity"⁵ and was instrumental in ensuring Maiduguri did not fall to JAS. The group also continues to support the Nigerian security forces' efforts to identify, detain, and handover JAS members.

In Biu, a town in southern Borno, the CJTF emerged in response to violence against their community members. During the community's days of mourning for those killed by JAS, a young man stood up and identified those responsible among the mourners. Those present apprehended the men and handed them over to the military. This one incident led to many in Biu taking similar actions, thus giving rise to the CJTF in the area. The group began detaining and interrogating those believed to be members, extracting intelligence on other potential members, and eventually handing them over to the military. They also began house-to-house searches for weapons. Of note, Biu was one of the few communities in northeast Nigeria not to be overrun by JAS, in part due to the actions of the local CJTF.

In areas outside Maiduguri and Biu, hunters and vigilantes also acted to protect their communities. Well versed in the use of local practices for protection, the CJTF instilled fear among JAS members who often only fought them when attacked. Given the success of the CJTF in Maiduguri, the military asked CJTF leaders to take their model to other localities. Bama was the first LGA to 'take gora,' during which the military commander asked community leaders to identify potential members. In some areas, people, including young men, were forced to join the CJTF. One man interviewed spoke about how his village had refused to form this group, believing doing so may lead to reprisal attacks from JAS; subsequently soldiers and CJTF members beat villagers, including community leaders, for failing to support the initiative.

Indeed, some communities (e.g. Ngamdu and Benisheikh in Kaga LGA) chose not to form these groups or, where such existed, they opted for



Members of Civilian Joint Task Force, vigilantes, and hunters at a CIVIC-led workshop on protection of civilians in Gwoza, Borno State, 2nd of May 2019.

CIVIC Photo

them not to fight armed opposition groups (AOGs) for fear of retributive attacks. The emergence of CJTF contributed to JAS' decision to transform from a group primarily focused on attacking the state into one that attacked civilians, especially those suspected of being aligned with community militias, according to respondents. JAS targeted communities in Gwoza and Ngala, which formed militias, with greater frequency than those communities which chose not to form such groups.

In the years following the emergence of the CJTF, the Borno state government created the Borno Youth Empowerment Scheme (BOYES) and absorbed some of its members who receive monthly stipends. The state government provides vehicles for yan gora operations. Some members have received training from the military and/or police. Members go on joint patrols and operations with security agencies. In many ways, they have become extensions of the state though without the levels of training and accountability the formal structures bring. This scheme has also led to grievances among the CJTF,

between those that benefit from the remuneration and those that do not.

III. PROTECTING CIVILIANS

Civilians credit the CJTF for bringing some stability and safety to Borno state. They believe members of the group are proactive in investigating reports received from community members, sharing information with civilians, and serving as a bridge between communities and security forces which enables the transfer of information and intelligence. Given that CJTF members are drawn from communities, speak local languages, and have deep community networks, civilians generally find it easier to communicate with community militias than state security agencies.

CJTF units patrol communities, conduct joint patrols alongside the military, perform security scans and body searches, and run checkpoints. They also screen those entering camps for internally displaced people (IDPs), markets, buildings, and other common areas. Members assist civilians to escape violence and enable

civilians to securely pursue livelihoods such as farming. CJTF members have also played civic roles such as transporting women in labor to health facilities, engaged children in education and sports, and resolved disputes in the absence of community leaders and local government officials.

Members with disabilities play essential roles, for example in screening and engaging in community dispute resolution, particularly when non-disabled members are on patrols and operations. Indeed, members who become disabled during the course of their duties often remain part of the CJTF.

Women members also serve important functions but are often marginalized. While roles played can differ according to gender, women's actions have been crucial to protection. When fighters hide guns in the bedrooms of their mothers or wives, women members were often used to conduct searches given that men are usually not allowed to enter these areas. Women also search other women and girls at checkpoints and entrances to towns which has enabled them to detect people carrying improvised explosive devices. Women members also gathered intelligence by posing as sympathizers for JAS and other AOGs. They play roles in active combat, although not as frequently as their male counterparts. For example, women CJTF members were instrumental in repelling the JAS attack on Biu in 2014, alongside their male counterparts.

While women members are often appreciated by their communities, they can be marginalized within their own group. Some women respondents reported that their male colleagues make derogatory comments, for example, saying that women only take part in militias because "they have nothing else to do" or "to meet their boyfriends." Women members said they were purposefully excluded by CJTF leaders from assistance and training programs, including those provided by the UN and NGOs. However, these gender dynamics vary between groups. For example, women often play more important roles, including those of leadership, among the hunters than among the CJTF.

IV. HARMING CIVILIANS

Respondents also pointed to concrete ways some community militia members harm civilians. Most respondents said that more members of the CJTF harm civilians than the hunters, vigilantes, or kesh kesh. In general civilians believe that members of hunters, vigilantes and kesh kesh are more mature, and less motivated by money and support from political patrons.

CJTF members have been involved in assaulting and killing those thought to be associated with armed groups, and restricting civilian movements outside of IDP camps. Respondents cited cases where CJTF members were engaged in sexual violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) through conditioning the provision of food, money, and protection upon sex.

Some CJTF members also intimidate civilians, employ punitive justice measures to settle personal scores, and trade drugs according to respondents. Members have been implicated in the commission of extortion and theft, including the diversion of humanitarian aid. The CJTF has also been listed by the United Nations for recruitment and use of children for tasks such as intelligence gathering, to staff guard posts, to conduct night patrols, and help with crowd control. In 2017, the CJTF committed to stop the use of children by signing an action plan and, although progress has been made, the extent of demobilization and reintegration of these youth into communities, particularly in difficult to access areas in northern Borno is hard to assess.

Civilians felt that opportunities to seek redress for harm committed by these groups do not exist and were reticent to go to the police or military with their cases given the group's close relationship with security agencies.

When civilians have taken cases to authorities, they were told to exercise patience rather than receive justice.

However, in locations in which it works, CIVIC has been able to address civilian harm committed by

the CJTF through its engagement with community groups (community protection committees) as well as engagement with security agencies, and community militias themselves. For example, in one location, CJTF members screening entrants into IDP camps were using their positions to approach women and girls, particularly those whose husbands and fathers were missing, and offer places on food distribution lists in exchange for sexual acts. Protection committee members spoke with CJTF and military leaders in the area. After these conversations, CJTF leaders warned their members to stop this behavior and told them to no longer enter the camp.

Military officials also spoke with the CJTF and threatened punishment if this behavior continued. Following these actions, the community protection committee from the IDP camp reported a drastic reduction of sexual exploitation and abuse committed by CJTF members. This case demonstrated that interventions with CJTF leadership and the military can help to halt or punish those responsible for harming civilians.

V. EVOLUTION AND FUTURE TRAJECTORIES

Respondents expressed concern about how the CJTF had changed over time, and shared fears over the group's future. Conversely, respondents also said other community militias, including hunters and vigilantes, played important community roles that should continue and followed codes of conduct and ethical boundaries.

The CJTF were initially viewed as important actors to protect communities. However, over time, these incentives morphed as the group became involved with politicians, more engaged with the state, and involved in BOYES. Respondents viewed these processes as profoundly corrupting because it shifted members' incentives toward money, power, and status rather than protection. Respondents believed the process Borno state used to select BOYES members to receive stipends was inequitable and influenced by personal connections rather than commitment to

civilian protection and performance. This selection process has caused grievances among the CJTF members who left their livelihoods to protect their communities and have been side-lined with no opportunities to sustain their livelihoods. Civilians believe CJTF members have benefitted from training and access. Respondents expressed concern over the group becoming increasingly mobilized by politicians to advance their agendas, which could give rise to criminality and gangs once political patrons no longer have use for their services. Civilians were also concerned about the prospect of tensions within the CJTF, and between the CJTF, hunters, and vigilantes. In particular, respondents felt that donors' preference to focus interventions solely on CJTF could potentially aggravate the tensions between groups. Lastly, respondents expressed concern that the dynamics around and between community militias, if left unaddressed, could contribute to a new phase of the conflict in the northeast.

It is important to note that the community militia members interviewed for this research acknowledged the risks and future trajectories noted above as well and asked for urgent interventions to mitigate future risks. Many members interviewed said they wished to halt their involvement and asked for support to access education and livelihoods to make changes in their lives. Above all else, members said they want peace and a return to normality. Many even supported the government engaging in dialogue with AOGs to advance peace.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

To mitigate harm to civilians in the present, and head off risks of future manifestations of the conflict, the federal and Borno state governments and NGOs should take the following actions:

Enhanced Coordination:

1. Hold regular meetings with Borno-based civil society working on peace and security to develop policies and programs to address community militias.

Balanced Engagement with Groups:

2. Focus interventions on members of all community militias, not just the CJTF, recognizing that excluding some groups could exacerbate tensions between different militias.

3. Design interventions that are age, disability, and gender sensitive. Girls, women, boys, men, and people with disabilities have taken part in community militias and have different experiences and needs.

Establish Off-Ramps:

4. Establish processes for profiling and documentation of community militia members, ensuring that women members are included in the new database. This process should include triangulation of data sources, including community-based inputs, data from community militia leaders, secondary data (e.g. from GSM providers), and instant bio-data capture. The process should be handled in a transparent manner and through an approach that mitigates against actors' using the data to advance their own political or economic interests. Establish healthcare, outreach, psycho-social, reorientation and drugs rehabilitation programs and services.

5. Conduct surveys of community militia members to discern future plans and interests, including regularizing into security forces or demobilizing and pursuing livelihoods and educational opportunities.

6. Recruit those capable and willing into security forces, and integrate others involved in community militias into community policing. Where regularization is not possible or desired, support demobilization and transition through livelihood and educational activities.

7. Based on robust market assessments, create and/or strengthen livelihood and educational opportunities while taking care to ensure these are not linked to politicians.

Further Accountability:

8. Provide training on human rights, international humanitarian law, protection of civilians, and peacebuilding to all those still engaged in community militias.

9. Engage with community militias to develop and implement codes of conduct and rules of engagement that are in line with human rights law, international humanitarian law, and best practices in civilian protection and harm mitigation.

10. Put in place proper oversight and accountability mechanisms, including reporting mechanisms accessible and responsive to communities (inclusive of women, young people, people with disabilities, minority religious, ethno-linguistic groups, and other groups that can be excluded from processes) to ensure investigation of human rights violations and other instances of civilian harm.

11. Call on all political parties and aspirants to ensure their candidates and supporters refrain from use of community militias in campaigning and impose sanctions for those who do not comply.

- 1 ACLED, <https://www.acledata.com/dashboard/>, Accessed August 13, 2019.
- 2 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Lake Chad Basin Crisis Overview, (UNOCHA, 2019).
- 3 Nearly two thirds of all civil wars fought between 1989 and 2010 have involved militias: Jessica Stanton 'Regulating Militias: Governments, Militias, and Civilian Targeting in Civil War,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2015 59(5) 755-769, 899-923.
- 4 Corinna Jentsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas and Livia Isabella Schubiger, 'Militias in Civil Wars,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2015 59(5) 755-769.
- 5 Respondents speaking during interviews conducted in Maiduguri in December 2017.

ABOUT CENTER FOR CIVILIANS IN CONFLICT (CIVIC)

Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) works to improve protection for civilians caught in conflicts around the world. We work with armed actors and civilians in conflict to develop and implement solutions to prevent, mitigate, and respond to civilian harm. We bring the voices of civilians themselves to those making decisions affecting their lives.

CIVIC's vision is for a future where parties involved in conflicts recognize the dignity and rights of civilians, prevent harm, protect civilians caught in conflict, and amend harm. To accomplish this, we assess the causes of civilian harm in particular conflicts, craft creative solutions to address that harm, and engage with civilians, governments, militaries, and international and regional institutions to implement these solutions.

We measure our success in the short term by the adoption of new policies and practices that lead to the improved wellbeing of civilians caught in a conflict. In the long term, our goal is to create a new global mindset around robust civilian protection and harm response.

This policy brief was written by Chitra Nagarajan, who also conducted data collection, and Sarem Ugoh. The recommendations were developed by the Northeast Peace and Security Network of which CIVIC is a member. William Meeker provided useful comments and Shannon Green supported editing. Kate Raley copy-edited and designed this brief.

This policy brief was produced with support from the UK's Department for International Development.

RECOGNIZE. PREVENT. PROTECT. AMEND.

T +1 202 558 6958

E info@civiliansinconflict.org

civiliansinconflict.org