


NIGERIAN SOLDIERS ON THE WAR AGAINST BOKO HARAM

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ABSTRACT

This study explores two main questions: What are the experiences of soldiers who have fought against Boko Haram? What can these experiences teach us about the seeming incapacity of the Nigerian military to defeat Boko Haram? Six major themes are explored. These are perspectives on the mission, morale of troops, military equipment and weapons, suicide and murder–suicide among troops, intelligence leaks, and relationships of troops with the Civilian Joint Task Force, an extralegal militia. Soldiers’ discourses on the mission against Boko Haram reveal three overlapping dimensions. First, there are suspicions about the sponsors and political godfathers of Boko Haram. This suggests a belief that Boko Haram is a conspiracy involving the government and top brass of the military. Second, the patronage system involved in deployment into key positions on the war front. Third, participants believe that the war is being deliberately prolonged because it is a moneymaking machinery for the political and military elites. The evidence suggests that availability of weapons varies by unit and the agency of commanders—their networks and influence within the military and willingness to disobey orders from superiors if their demands are not met. This situation produces radically variegated wartime experiences among troops. Non-commissioned soldiers believe senior commissioned officers perpetrate intelligence leaks and are responsible for the protracted war. Senior Army Generals interviewed in this study support this perspective. The study has major policy implications for successful operations against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin area and the broader war against terrorism in the Sahel.

Scholarship on ‘Jama’atu Ahlis Suna Lidda’awati Wal Jihad’ (‘the People Committed to the Prophet’s Teaching and Jihad’) or Boko Haram continues to grow. Dimensions such as the root causes,¹ connections to previous

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1. Olabanji Akinola, ‘Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria: Between Islamic fundamentalism, politics and poverty’, *African Security* 8, 1 (2015), pp. 1–29.

Islamic militant organizations,² religious ideology,³ framing strategies,⁴ and deployment of women⁵ have received attention in the literature. The human displacement,⁶ state crimes such as misappropriation of relief materials at camps of internally displaced persons, and human rights abuses by state agents⁷ have received scholarly attention.⁸ However, scholarly analyses of the experiences of soldiers deployed by states engaged in the war against Boko Haram remain scanty. This is a major gap, given the centrality and interpellation of the armed forces of Lake Chad Basin countries (Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger) in the war.

Available evidence on the engagement of state forces in the war against Boko Haram comes from three main sources. First, there are reports by human rights organizations such as Amnesty International⁹ and Human Rights Watch¹⁰ about large-scale abuse of civilians by state forces. Amnesty International, for instance, reports that Nigeria's military forces extrajudicially killed 1,200 persons and illegally arrested 20,000 young males and 7,000 persons died due to conditions in military detention facilities.¹¹ Military authorities often criticize such reports as biased and driven by a political agenda. Second, dissatisfied soldiers, particularly from Nigeria, have provided anonymous videos and confessional statements on social media regarding their experiences. Such statements and videos are difficult to authenticate or corroborate. Third, there are numerous media reports on issues of poor equipment and unpaid allowances of soldiers. Media reportage tends to focus on sensational aspects of information

2. Iro Aghedo, 'Old wine in a new bottle: Ideological and operational linkages between Maitatsine and Boko Haram revolts in Nigeria', *African Security* 7, 4 (2014), pp. 229–250.

3. Simon Gray and Ibikunle Adeakin, 'The evolution of Boko Haram: From missionary activism to transnational jihad and the failure of the Nigerian security intelligence agencies', *African Security* 8, 3 (2015), pp. 185–211.

4. Temitope Oriola and Olabanji Akinola, 'Ideational dimensions of the Boko Haram phenomenon', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 41, 8 (2018), pp. 595–618.

5. Temitope Oriola, 'Unwilling cocoons': Boko Haram's war against women', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 40, 2 (2017), pp. 99–121.

6. Stephen Adewale, 'Internally displaced persons and the challenges of survival in Abuja', *African Security Review* 25, 2 (2016), pp. 176–192.

7. Medinat Abdulazez and Temitope Oriola, 'Criminogenic patterns in the management of Boko Haram's human displacement situation', *Third World Quarterly* 39, 1 (2018), pp. 85–103.

8. An engagement with the ascendance, trajectories, and splintering of Boko Haram is beyond the purview of this paper. For more on Boko Haram, see Gray and Adeakin, 'The evolution of Boko Haram'. On Boko Haram's splintering, see Edward Stoddard, 'Revolutionary warfare? Assessing the character of competing factions within the Boko Haram insurgency', *African Security* 12, 3–4 (2019), pp. 300–329.

9. Amnesty International, 'Stars on their shoulders. Blood on their hands: War crimes committed by the Nigerian military', 2 June 2015, <<http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/stars-on-their-shoulders-blood-on-their-hands-war-crimes-committed-by-the-nigerian-military>> (15 August 2015).

10. Human Rights Watch, 'Spiraling violence: Boko Haram attacks and security forces abuses in Nigeria', 11 October 2012, <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/10/11/spiraling-violence/boko-haram-attacks-and-security-force-abuses-nigeria>> (20 November 2015).

11. *Ibid.*

provided by anonymous soldiers and often lack nuance. Nonetheless, these three sources offer important insight into the persistence of the Boko Haram phenomenon and organizational problems in the military architecture. Scholarly work based on direct, face-to-face in-depth interviews with soldiers deployed against Boko Haram is rare. A sociologically informed and non-sensationalized approach is necessary if we purport to understand the positionality of frontline state forces vis-à-vis the failure of the armies of four West African countries to defeat Boko Haram.

This paper fills the vacuum through the interrogation of Nigerian soldiers who have undergone at least one deployment in the war against Boko Haram. Two main questions inform this study: ‘What are the experiences of soldiers who have fought against Boko Haram? What can their experiences teach us about the seeming incapacity of the Nigerian military to defeat Boko Haram?’ The paper is divided into five sections. The first section deals with my methods and data sources. The second section provides a brief context. The third section analyses findings of the study under various themes—perspectives on the mission, morale of troops, military equipment and weapons, suicide and murder–suicide among troops, intelligence leaks, and troops’ relationship with the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). This is followed by a discussion section. The concluding section analyses the implications of the findings.

Data and methods

This paper is part of a broader study on terrorism, politics, and human rights advocacy. Fieldwork was conducted in each of the years from 2015 to 2019 in three cities in Nigeria: Abuja, Lagos, and Maiduguri. Fieldwork lasted between 5 and 12 weeks in the summer months of each year, except in Maiduguri, where due to the volatility of the area, fieldwork lasted about two weeks during two research trips. These cities were selected purposely for various empirical reasons. Abuja was selected for its utility as the location of the defence headquarters (including all branches of the military and the civilian bureaucracy) and home to many of the troops. Like Abuja, Lagos also had several soldiers who had returned from deployment. Maiduguri, Borno state, was included as the main theatre of military operations. While over 120 participants were involved in in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in the overall study, much of the data analysed in this paper is drawn from interviews with soldiers conducted in 2018.¹² The 2018 fieldwork focused on non-commissioned soldiers in the Nigerian Army. Only army personnel were involved in the research although the research did not seek to exclude troops from other branches of the armed

12. Only interviews with senior military officers conducted before 2018 are relevant to the current paper.

forces involved in the operations. Twenty four rank-and-file soldiers were purposely selected and interviewed. All participants in the 2018 fieldwork were in active military service during the interviews. This is a relatively small sample given the thousands of soldiers who have been deployed in the war against Boko Haram. The aim was to have meaningful understanding of the experiences of a select number of soldiers rather than draw a representative sample.

All participants gave informed consent to the interviews. No official approval to interview the soldiers was sought from military authorities.¹³ Sources within the army articulated three possible scenarios if higher approval was sought to interview soldiers. First, such approval would likely not be granted. Second, if approval were granted, the authorities would monitor the interview process and third, soldiers might self-censor if approval were granted and no direct monitoring occurred. Participants would likely not want to share any critical insight into military operations or have their interviews recorded due to concerns over the relationship between the research team and military authorities and fear of retaliation. The decision not to seek official approval has some implications. On one hand, the soldiers were able to speak freely about their experiences without any inhibitions. On the other hand, this means that the soldiers took enormous risks to participate in the research. This elevates the need for duty of care towards participants. This includes anonymity, storage, and ethical use of data. Therefore, participants are given pseudonyms due to the sensitivity of the subject and protection from retaliation. Participants' units, specific year(s) of deployment, locations, names of comrades or commanders mentioned during the interviews, and other identifying information are suppressed.

The main inclusion criterion was a minimum of one deployment to the theatre of war against Boko Haram. Participants were selected through a snowballing approach. Each interview was aided by a semi-structured interview guide and lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. The perspectives of the 24 rank-and-file soldiers are cross-articulated where appropriate with those of senior military officers (Brigadier Generals and above) who were interviewed between 2015 and 2017. However, the experiences of non-commissioned soldiers are privileged in the analysis. This is far from whimsical given that, first, numerous instances of anonymous non-commissioned soldiers commenting often critically on the execution of the war against Boko Haram¹⁴ and, second, the objective of understanding the perspectives of rank-and-file soldiers.

13. This differs from interviews with terrorist suspects in military custody as part of the broader research.

14. *The Vanguard*, 'Nigerian soldiers "munity" over lack of weapons', 20 August 2014, <<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/08/nigerian-soldiers-mutiny-lack-weapons/>> (5 July 2018).

Table 1 Participants' demographics.

| Interviewee identification # | Gender | Age | Religion | Geo-political zone | Operations | Number of deployments | Length of deployment(s) |
|------------------------------|--------|-----|-----------|--------------------|------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Interviewee S01 | Female | NP | Christian | NP | JTF | 1 | 2 years |
| Interviewee S02 | Male | 40 | Muslim | NC | JTF | 1 | 3 years |
| Interviewee S03 | Male | 32 | Christian | SW | JTF | 1 | 4 years |
| Interviewee S04 | Male | NP | Christian | SS | JTF | 1 | 3 years |
| Interviewee S05 | Male | 34 | Christian | SE | MNJTF | 1 | 4 years |
| Interviewee S06 | Male | 32 | Christian | NC | JTF | 1 | 3 years |
| Interviewee S07 | Male | 47 | Christian | SE | JTF | 1 | 3 years |
| Interviewee S08 | Male | NP | Christian | SE | JTF | 1 | 2 years |
| Interviewee S09 | Male | NP | Christian | SE | JTF | 1 | 4 years |
| Interviewee S10 | Male | NP | Muslim | NW | JTF | 1 | 2.5 years |
| Interviewee S11 | Male | NP | Muslim | NE | JTF | 1 | 6 months |
| Interviewee S12 | Male | NP | Christian | SE | JTF | 1 | 3.3 years |
| Interviewee S13 | Male | NP | Muslim | SW | JTF | 1 | 2.5 years |
| Interviewee S14 | Male | 31 | Muslim | NW | JTF | 2 | NP |
| Interviewee S15 | Male | 35 | Muslim | NW | JTF | 1 | NP |
| Interviewee S16 | Male | 33 | NP | NE | JTF | 1 | NP |
| Interviewee S17 | Male | 44 | NP | SW | JTF | 1 | 2 years |
| Interviewee S18 | Male | 39 | NP | SS | MNJTF | 1 | 3 years |
| Interviewee S19 | Female | 37 | Christian | SS | JTF | 1 | 1 year |
| Interviewee S20 | Male | 35 | Christian | NE | MNJTF | 1 | 2 years |
| Interviewee S21 | Female | 36 | Christian | SW | JTF | 1 | 8 months |
| Interviewee S22 | Male | NP | Muslim | NW | JTF | 1 | 3 years |
| Interviewee S23 | Male | NP | NP | SS | JTF | 1 | NP |
| Interviewee S24 | Male | NP | NP | NC | JTF | 1 | 2.4 years |

NP, not provided; JTF, Joint Task Force; MNJTF, Multi-National Joint Task Force.

As shown in [Table 1](#), while some of the participants (three out of 24 or 12.5 percent) served with the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), an organization comprising troops from Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Benin, and Niger, most of the participants (21 out of 24 or 87.5 percent) served within the Joint Task Force (JTF), Nigeria's military entity responsible for combatting Boko Haram. Consequently, the analysis in this paper focuses on Nigeria's military; no attempt is made to generalize findings to other state forces in the region. Thirteen of the participants (54.16 percent) are from southern Nigeria, ten (41.66 percent) are from the North, while one participant (4.16 percent) did not specify. Twelve participants identify as Christians (50 percent), seven are Muslims (29.16 percent), while five (20.83 percent) did not provide information about their religion. These demographic variables are important given Nigeria's identity politics¹⁵ although participants in this study direct their criticisms towards senior officers and political leadership, as articulated in the concluding section. The primary data are complemented with secondary sources—reports of human rights organizations and media articles on the war against Boko Haram.

Context: African militaries and conflicts

Contemporary studies on inter-state and intra-state wars in Africa tend to focus on rebel forces,¹⁶ child soldiers,¹⁷ integration of former rebels into conventional militaries,¹⁸ return of ex-soldiers into civilian life,¹⁹ and the process of peacekeeping.²⁰ Most studies on the African military focus on professionalism,²¹ their role in democratic stability²² given the history of coups. Much of the concern about armed conflicts revolve around the possibility of coups.²³ Besides, the nearly five decades of scholarly engagement

15. Eghosa Osaghae, 'Explaining the changing patterns of ethnic politics in Nigeria', *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 9, 3 (2003), pp. 54–73.

16. Lephophotho Mashike, "You are a time bomb..." Ex-combatants in post-conflict South Africa', *Society in Transition* 35, 1 (2004), pp. 87–104.

17. Lucinda Woodward and Peter Galvin, 'Halfway to nowhere: Liberian former child soldiers in a Ghanaian refugee camp', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99, 5 (2009), pp. 1003–1011.

18. Maria Baaz and Judith Verweijen, 'The volatility of a half-cooked bouillabaisse: Rebel-military integration and conflict dynamics in the eastern DRC', *African Affairs* 112, 449 (2013), pp. 563–582.

19. Saskia Baas, *From civilians to soldiers and from soldiers to civilians: Mobilization and demobilization in Sudan* (Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2012).

20. Jonah Victor, 'African peacekeeping in Africa: Warlord politics, defense economics, and state legitimacy', *Journal of Peace Research* 47, 2 (2010), pp. 217–229.

21. Joseph Soeters and Audrey Van Ouytsel, 'The challenge of diffusing military professionalism in Africa', *Armed Forces and Society* 40, 2 (2014), pp. 252–268.

22. Naila Salihu, 'Concordance civil-military relations in Ghana's Fourth Republic', *Armed Forces and Society* 46, 4 (2020), pp. 618–634.

23. Patrick McGowan, 'Coups and conflict in West Africa, 1955–2004: Part I, theoretical perspectives', *Armed Forces and Society* 32, 1 (2005), pp. 5–23.

with African soldiers as ‘a new political class’²⁴ applies to a relatively small crop of highly privileged senior commissioned officers.

Luckham’s study *The Nigerian military: A case study in institutional breakdown* is one of the earliest works on the Nigerian military.²⁵ Luckham articulates how the Nigerian military was patterned after the British military but violated the ‘Sandhurst formula of the political neutrality of the military’ by executing a coup six years after independence.²⁶ Luckham argues that the ‘army then began to fragment and discipline to break down under pressure from the primordialisms of tribe and region...It is suggested that careful analysis of the process of fragmentation in the army will be a way of raising a number of more general issues’.²⁷ Luckham’s conclusions have proven prescient.

There are six overarching themes in the literature on the Nigerian military in general and the army in particular. These are (i) the military’s penchant for coups (pre-1999) and consequent disruption of the democratic process; (ii) internal military operations and human rights abuses; (iii) performance and conduct in peacekeeping missions outside Nigeria; (iv) corruption; (v) the salience of ethno-religious loyalties in poor bureaucratic practice and limited professionalism, and (vi) the effects of the stated factors (1–5) on Nigeria’s development.

The dominance of the military in Nigeria’s body politic has garnered significant scholarly attention. The concomitant praetorianism is arguably evident in the current democratic process given that two of Nigeria’s four civilian presidents since the return to democracy in 1999 are retired army generals. Such is the influence of the army on the entire federation that one scholar of the army titles his book ‘The federal republic of Nigerian army: The siege of a nation’.²⁸ Available studies focus on sociological variables behind a succession of coups and counter-coups and democratic stability since 1999.²⁹ Scholars have also problematized the consequences of structural reforms in the military following the reinstatement of democracy. Given Nigeria’s history of coups, keeping the military in check was a priority.³⁰ The new civilian administration led by President Olusegun

24. Ali Mazrui, ‘The lumpen proletariat and the lumpen militariat: African soldiers as a new political class’, *Political Studies* xxi, 1 (1973), pp. 1–12.

25. Robin Luckham, *The Nigerian military, 1960–1967* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1971).

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*

28. Chris Alli, *The Federal Republic of Nigerian Army: The siege of a nation* (Malthouse Press, Ikeja, 2001).

29. William Ehwarieme, ‘The military factor in Nigeria’s democratic stability, 1999–2009’, *Armed Forces and Society* 37, 3 (2011), pp. 494–511.

30. Emmanuel Ojo, ‘Guarding the “Guardians”’: A prognosis of panacea for evolving stable civil–military relations in Nigeria’, *Armed Forces and Society* 35, 4 (2009), pp. 688–708.

Obasanjo, a former military head of state, implemented reforms in 1999 which led to the retirement of 'politicised military officers'.³¹

Widespread human rights abuses in internal military operations and peacekeeping missions have generated a lot of attention. The role of the military in Nigeria's fratricidal civil war (1967–1970) is well documented.³² The consequences of deployment of the military in 30 of Nigeria's 36 states³³ have been a focus of recent literature. Nigeria's military have taken over several internal policing duties such as control of non-violent protests, organized crime, oil insurgency, secessionist agitations, and domestic terrorism. This has strained the military's capacity. The human rights abuses against civilians in the Niger Delta region,³⁴ efforts to curtail the Biafra secessionist movement in the southeast region³⁵ and repression of the Shites in the Northwest³⁶ are three of the most egregious demonstrations of military overreach and abuse. De Montclos describes these spaces as 'the killing fields of the Nigerian army'.³⁷

Other macro-sociological and organizational variables such as corruption have been explored. Such analyses focus on the permeation of corruption in the fabric of the military from the purchase of military equipment to rehabilitation of barracks.³⁸ The arms scandal known as 'Dasukigate' uncovered by the Buhari administration is one example. The audit of the defence sector covering 2007–2015 revealed that Colonel Sambo Dasuki (rtd), President Goodluck Jonathan's National Security Adviser, had illicitly distributed \$2.1 billion.³⁹ Actors alleged to have

31. Olumuyiwa Amao and Benjamin Maiangwa, 'Has the *Giant* gone to sleep? Re-assessing Nigeria's response to the Liberian Civil War (1990–1997) and the Boko Haram insurgency (2009–2015)', *African Studies* 76, 1 (2017), pp. 22–43.

32. Kenneth Chukwuemeka Nwoko, 'Counting the cost: The politics of relief operations in the Nigerian civil war, a critical appraisal', *African Study Monographs* 35, 3&4 (2014), pp. 129–148; Abdul-Ganiyu Garba and P. Kassey Garba, 'The Nigerian civil war: Causes and the aftermath', in Augustin K. Fosu and Paul Collier (eds), *Post-conflict economies in Africa*, pp. 91–108. International Economic Association Series (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2005); Chibuike Uche, 'Oil, British interests and the Nigerian civil war', *Journal of African History* 49, 1 (2008), pp. 111–135.

33. Samuel Ogundipe, 'Insecurity: Soldiers deployed in 30 of Nigeria's 36 states,' 4 August 2016, <<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/more-news/208055-insecurity-soldiers-deployed-30-nigerias-36-states-report.html>> (30 December 2020).

34. Cyril Obi, 'Oil extraction, dispossession, resistance, and conflict in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta', *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 30, 1–2 (2010), pp. 219–236.

35. Amnesty International, *Nigeria: At least 150 peaceful pro-Biafra activists killed in chilling crackdown* (Amnesty International, Nigeria, 2016).

36. Gray and Adeakin, 'The Evolution of Boko Haram'.

37. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, 'The killing fields of the Nigerian army: Any lessons learned?', *African Security* 11, 2 (2018), p. 110.

38. Emile Quédraogo, 'Advancing military professionalism in Africa' (Research Paper, Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, Washington, DC, 2014).

39. Garba Shehu, '#Dasukigate: Buhari orders probe of Badeh, other ex-Generals', *Premium Times*, 15 January 2016, <<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/196809-dasukigate-buhari-orders-probe-of-badeh-other-ex-generals.html>> (13 January 2017).

shared the funds cut across Nigeria's political system, media, military, traditional institutions, and the clergy. Seventeen serving and retired senior military officers were implicated. The scandal revealed the intricate connection between corruption in the military and involvement of the political class.

Two of the few studies on the Nigerian military's war against Boko Haram focus on the political process.⁴⁰ They attribute the failure to defeat Boko Haram to ineffective national leadership during the Jonathan presidency (2010–2015), the role of politics in the national security architecture, and decline in military professionalism since 1999. Using data from senior military officers, Victor Iwuoha⁴¹ argues that the failure to defeat Boko Haram may be explained by the multifaceted disconnection between countries like Nigeria seeking counter-terrorism support and their foreign power sponsors such as the USA. Consequently, the support provided is uneven and fragmented. These are remarkable contributions to the literature. However, there has been little empirical engagement with how these issues affect troops on the frontlines. This study attempts to fill this research gap by focusing on the micro-sociology of the war against Boko Haram—the perspectives of rank-and-file soldiers who have served in the war theatre.

A 'rubbish' mission?

Soldiers are required to follow orders. Going on a mission is one of such. However, this does not mean soldiers have no opinion about the mission, its value and likelihood of success. Existing studies on the missions of African militaries overwhelmingly focus on peacekeeping missions.⁴² These are qualitatively different from combat missions. Therefore, attitudes of soldiers to a peacekeeping mission may be different from a combat mission. For instance, a study on US soldiers found that troops' attitude towards peacekeeping and deployments became more negative during a mission in Kosovo.⁴³ Such a change of attitude has implications for current and future deployments. Attitudes towards peacekeeping issues can also be problematic. Nearly half (49 percent) of US soldiers deployed to Operation

40. Amao and Maiangwa, 'Has the *Giant* gone to sleep?'. Habibu Bappah, 'Nigeria's military failure against the Boko Haram insurgency', *African Security Review* 25, 2 (2016), pp. 146–158.

41. Victor Iwuoha, 'Clash of counterterrorism-assistance-seeking states and their super-power sponsors: Implications on the war against Boko Haram', *African Security Review* 28, 1 (2019), pp. 38–55.

42. Victor, 'African peacekeeping in Africa'.

43. Carl Castro, Robert Bienvenu, Ann Huffman, and Amy Adler, 'Soldier dimensions and operational readiness in US Army forces deployed to Kosovo' (U.S. Army Medical Research Unit-Europe, Walter Reed Army Institute of Research Heidelberg, 1999), <<https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a388340.pdf>> (14 May 2020).

Uphold Democracy in Haiti did not think US involvement in the mission was important.⁴⁴ Such attitudes have implications for overall performance.

All rank-and-file soldiers interviewed demonstrate antipathy towards the mission—the defeat of Boko Haram. The soldiers do not believe in the mission. The discourse espoused by participants about the mission has three interrelated elements. These are (i) suspicions about the sponsors and political god-fathers of Boko Haram, (ii) anger over the patronage system involved in deployment into key positions on the war front, and (iii) the belief that the war is being deliberately prolonged because it is a money-making machinery for the political and military elite. One of the interviewees exemplifies the perspective of participants:

The integrity of the system is no longer there...If you don't belong to their own group, their own caucus, you can never become GOC (General Officer Commanding) of anywhere. So, that's why you see people were dying at that period because the more we die, the more money they make.⁴⁵

The participant describes the process for appointing commanders and the general conduct of the war as 'rubbish'. Several of the soldiers were alarmed by their experiences on the warfront, which shaped their standpoint. One participant argues, 'the fight is government to government. It is not government to individuals'.⁴⁶ This elicited a follow up.

Soldier: I could remember we were in one particular place where helicopter passed in the night around seven o'clock and went and dropped food for insurgents at (location suppressed).

Interviewer: To drop food for soldiers?

Soldier: No, for Boko Haram. So when they now called (name suppressed), he said he doesn't know anything about the helicopter that if we see any helicopter we should fire the helicopter... The following day we had an attack. So, this is the reason why I say government's hand is in it... it is not just ordinary person that does it—supplying food to Boko Haram inside the bush. What happens is government is sponsoring Boko Haram to come and fight soldiers so that money will come out... I mean that for now we don't have missions outside (the country) like before so what they do is if they allow this particular one to end, where will they see money?⁴⁷

44. Ronald Halvelson and Paul Bliese, 'Determinants of soldier support for operation uphold democracy', *Armed Forces and Society* 23, 1 (1996), pp. 81–96.

45. Interviewee S07, male soldier, personal interview, 3 July 2018.

46. Interviewee S04, male soldier, personal interview, 2 July 2018.

47. *Ibid.*

Several participants corroborate the issue of aerial supplies to Boko Haram's camps. The key point is not necessarily to suggest that the claims are incontrovertible.⁴⁸ However, the fact that the consensus among participants is that the war is a huge racket should be a concern to the Nigerian government and its allies.

The concerns of the soldiers intersect with related issues that emerged before and after the interviews were conducted. First, the government is engaged in mass release of 'repentant' Boko Haram members through its 'Operation Safe Corridor'. Over 2000 such persons have been released into communities.⁴⁹ This has generated debates about how 'repentance' is operationalized, the methodology for determining what suspect has repented, the ostensible lack of punishment for terrorist activities, and the legitimacy and reasonableness of releasing terrorist suspects while the war is ongoing.⁵⁰ This has drawn widespread criticism among various interest groups. There are concerns that such premature and unconditional release risks making available to Boko Haram several of its fighters. For example, the National Vice President of Military Widows Association, Edith Opesanmi, argues

They should face justice. You know they are involved in the killing and maiming of soldiers. So, whenever they are arrested, they should be punished like any other criminal. We widows feel bad about it. Our husbands go to fight these terrorists and keep dying. The number of widows is increasing daily.⁵¹

Second, syndicates emerged in prisoner release prior to Operation Safe Corridor. Some politicians, GOCs and regular citizens appear to be part of the multifaceted scheme in the war theatre. While the indefinite detention under inhumane conditions of large numbers of Boko Haram suspects is illegal under national and international law, some senior officers are benefiting from unauthorized release of suspects who have neither been deradicalized nor assessed as constituting no risk to national security. One Army General notes,

48. Some former Boko Haram captives interviewed in 2019 corroborate this claim.

49. Kingsley Omonobi, 'Widows of soldiers protest release of repentant Boko Haram terrorists', *The Vanguard*, 31 January 2020, <<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/01/widows-of-soldiers-protest-release-of-repentant-boko-haram-terrorists/>> (28 February 2020).

50. *Ibid.*

51. These issues speak to the problematic of transitional justice, which appears to be the approach of the government. The sheer volume of (Boko Haram) offenders, the gravity of offences and number of victims arguably necessitate an extra-judicial approach. However, there appears to be no systematic approach to ensure societal mobilization for this approach. For more on transitional justice in Africa, see Thaddeus Metz, 'Ends and means of transitional justice', *Journal of Global Ethics* 14, 2 (2018), pp. 159–168.

these legislators...any time any notable person of their community is seized by the army as a Boko Haram fighter, and is under army detention, the people at home will send a message to them in the National Assembly that they are not going to vote for them unless that boy was released. So, it became a trade between our commanders and the politicians depending on the height of crime of such people. They started collecting millions for their release.⁵²

The amount charged per suspect depends on the seriousness of the crimes they are alleged to have committed. The release of some of the top suspects costs as much as ₦15–20 million (or \$41,550–\$55,400 [US]) per person. The transactions involve politicians at the state and federal levels and top military officers with operational and logistical responsibilities in the war.⁵³ This issue feeds into longstanding concerns since the Jonathan Presidency that there are ‘saboteurs who are more sympathetic to Boko Haram than the Nigerian cause’.⁵⁴

Third, several government agencies, such as the Presidential Initiative for the North East (PINE) and the Presidential Committee on the North-east Initiative (PCNI), had a similar mandate and therefore duplicated efforts. Both organizations were subsumed under the North East Development Commission (NEDC) in 2019. However, the proliferation of organizations continues. A bill to establish the National Agency for Deradicalization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration of Repentant Insurgents was proposed in the Senate in February 2020. The proposed agency is viewed as indication of efforts to create avenues for corrupt enrichment of government officials. One of such schemes involved the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, who was removed from office after a ₦544 million (\$1.5 million [US]) PINE contract scandal.⁵⁵

Fourth, embezzlement of defence funds by senior military officers also lends credence to the cynical perspective of soldiers regarding the mission. The use of military finances as personal bank accounts by some service chiefs is common knowledge. For instance, former Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshall Mohammed Umar Dikko, withdrew ₦558.2 million (approximately \$1,545,660.00) per month over a two-year period (September 2010–2012).⁵⁶ Air Marshall Dikko is one of several retired senior officers

52. Interviewee 03, retired Army General, personal interview, 15 July 2015.

53. Two rank-and-file soldiers confirmed the existence of such underground transactions but claimed they were unaware of the details of the deals.

54. Interviewee 04, serving Army General, personal interview, 17 July 2015.

55. Sani Tukur, ‘Buhari directs NEDC to take over activities of PINE, PCNI, other North-east initiatives’, *Premium Times*, 9 May 2019, <<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/329123-buhari-directs-nedc-to-take-over-activities-of-pine-pcni-other-north-east-initiatives.html>> (28 February 2020).

56. Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, ‘Finance director reveals how ex-air force chief Dikko, collected ₦558.2m monthly for 2 years’, *Sahara Reporters*,

on trial for siphoning military resources in the war against Boko Haram. These issues have led to negative perceptions and insouciant attitude of troops to the mission.

Participants are unanimous that war deployment and length of deployment against Boko Haram are shaped by non-professional considerations. These include deception, influence peddling, lack of consideration for previous assignments, and indeterminate tour of duty due to bureaucratically whimsical extensions after initial deployment. Several participants believe they were deceived regarding the location of their mission. Some soldiers, for example, were informed they were being deployed on a foreign mission. They were instructed to obtain passports and trained in terrain similar to a specified foreign country but learned at the last minute they were going to the Northeast. The soldiers felt manipulated.⁵⁷

Posting to the Northeast to fight Boko Haram demonstrates bifurcated influence peddling. On one hand, many of the non-commissioned soldiers feel unlucky to be deployed, while senior officers actively lobby to go to the Northeast. Both categories use their contacts to ensure their preferred outcome. One participant called his uncle, a senior officer, when he learned about his posting to Borno state. He notes 'I called him; he said who put my name? Who recommended me and I said one of my retired commanders as he was going for retirement he just wanted to use it as a compensation'.⁵⁸ The soldier claimed his posting was 'diverted'. His attempt at securing a foreign mission backfired. This is a relatively peculiar case—many rank-and-file soldiers posted to fight Boko Haram are unconnected soldiers. Deployments are undertaken often without consideration for previous assignments and put unnecessary burden on 'unconnected' soldiers—those without the familial or social network within the military brass and political elite to influence deployment. While a few soldiers avoided going to war through their contacts, others used their connections to reduce the length of their deployment.⁵⁹ For example, two soldiers were removed promptly from the war theatre when a cabinet minister visited the troops and expressed shock at meeting them there.⁶⁰ However, for rank-and-file soldiers who were not on the personal security detail of senior officers, fighting against Boko Haram is considered a misfortune due to the casualty rate and welfare issues (analysed below).

8 February 2018, <<http://saharareporters.com/2018/02/08/finance-director-reveals-how-ex-air-force-chief-dikko-collected-n5582m-monthly-2-years>> (28 February 2018).

57. Interviewee S01, female soldier, personal interview, 29 June 2018.

58. Interviewee S05, male soldier, personal interview, 2 July 2018.

59. Interviewee S03, male soldier, personal interview, 2 July 2018.

60. Interviewee S07, male soldier, personal interview, 3 July 2018.

On the other hand, some well-connected senior military officers actively lobby to go to war against Boko Haram. This may involve multiple deployments to participate in the illicit economy.⁶¹ The sudden enrichment of some officers who have served in the war threatens military discipline given the ostentatious display in the barracks by some officers returning from the war. One General notes

It was in March this year (2015) that the Chief of Army Staff directed that anybody captain and below must never ride a Jeep⁶² in the army and that if they find any captain and below riding a jeep, that it should be seized when choice cars were becoming what officers were showing off.⁶³

Troop morale

The evidence strongly demonstrates low morale among soldiers. While participants appreciate the army gave them a life-changing opportunity for professional development and travel, the war against Boko Haram has made them question their career choice. A soldier notes, ‘if I had something better to do, I will just quit’.⁶⁴ The soldier argues, ‘I don’t think I can allow my child or my relative to join the army’.⁶⁵ The participant complained that the salary was poor; senior officers deprived troops of their entitlements and families of soldiers derived no benefit from the sacrifices of those who died in battle. The low morale is a function of the poor welfare of troops and their families. These issues include poor salaries and unpaid entitlements. Participants cite maltreatment of the families of dead colleagues as one major factor affecting morale. They realize it could be their own families. One soldier argues

I felt very bad even for those who are dead... They don’t have them in mind... That’s somebody who has sacrificed his life for the country... After two or three months, they stop their salary and your family begin to suffer, begin to beg for food to eat. I saw many things like that. That is for immediate family. Talk about the family you left back at home. What about your mother, if you still have? What about your father? What about your younger ones that you left?⁶⁶

61. This does not suggest that all officers posted to the theatre are seeking to make money—several have in fact died in the course of the operations.

62. Popular Nigerian term for all SUV brands.

63. Interviewee 03.

64. Interviewee S01.

65. Interviewee S01.

66. Interviewee S07.

It is telling that all the rank-and-file participants claim to have immediate plans to leave the Army. One participant notes, 'I'm no more interested in the job... I have my own plans... Once my plans materialize, I'll leave.'⁶⁷

The low morale is moored on major welfare issues affecting troops. These cover the broad spectrum from initial information about deployment to the Northeast, transportation, food provision, accommodation, allowances, communication of troops with families, uniforms and other supplies, and rehabilitation services after deployment. One soldier captures several of these issues and articulates the challenges encountered by troops.

They will carry you from the bush to Maiduguri town. They will now escort you to enter public transport. I left that camp twice until that year that I was withdrawn. We were sleeping on camp beds. They built tent for us. There was a day that it rained heavily and we removed our things, women O! Our tents were soaked. It was terrible. We held the tents, the iron. We were trying to control it that was how it was till day break. All our clothing and belongings were soaked... No fighting material, no good food. For two years, they only gave two pairs of uniform... I used my money to buy uniform. I used my money to buy boots... The situation was bad.⁶⁸

Several soldiers note the avoidable tragedies suffered by troops due to poor welfare. One of such concerns is transportation while on a two-week pass every three months as directed by the Chief of Army Staff. The journey during the two-week break has led to loss of lives of soldiers. One soldier argues, 'welfare is not only in terms of money that you give... Some soldiers didn't die in the battlefield. They died in road traffic accident. Armed robbers killed some of them on the road because you don't go with your weapon'.⁶⁹

Participants also note the elitism in welfare provision. These include basic commodities like food, water, and access to internet. Several participants were in military camps that had internet service. Non-commissioned soldiers were excluded from such services. Soldiers also note the absence of any systematic mechanism for communicating with their families. Boko Haram had destroyed communication infrastructure in many areas. The military made no provisions for troops to communicate with their families. One participant noted that they climbed telecommunication masts in order to make calls.⁷⁰ This was a common way to reach their families after several months. This endangered their lives and the mission. The situation was an additional emotional burden on the soldiers as they were concerned their

67. Interviewee S04, male soldier, personal interview, 3 July 2018.

68. Interviewee S01.

69. Interviewee S06.

70. Interviewee S05.

families might fear they had died in battle. One soldier noted, ‘When they think of their family, they’ll not concentrate to fight Boko Haram’.⁷¹

Participants are clear about the link between provision of necessities and morale. One soldier argues that the military authorities ‘should increase the level of the feeding for the soldiers especially water and all those things they give the soldiers to boost the morale of the soldiers to continue to fight Boko Haram’.⁷² Soldiers who served with the MNJTF claim to have had poorer welfare than troops from other countries like Cameroon and Chad. Welfare problems appear in tandem with another existential issue—obsolete military equipment.

Military hardware and ammunition

There have been several media reports of soldiers making claims about insufficient arms and ammunition. The reports have generated public criticism of the armed services. Military authorities have generally dispelled such claims as utterly false. The study finds that both sides are neither right nor wrong. The situation depends on (i) the specific units within an arm of the military and (ii) what period is being considered. Some units were well resourced while others lacked basic supplies. One participant who spent three years at the warfront noted

Soldier: In our own battalion, there was no issue of lack of weapon.

Interviewer: I see. Did the issue of weapons supply vary from one battalion to another because it seems there were battalions that didn’t have weapons?

Soldier: That was then. That was around 2014 or 2013 when it was not officially announced as a war. Immediately government declared it as a war, there were so many arms and ammunition.⁷³

The participant was surprised about claims regarding lack of weapons. He added that the ‘Nigerian Army did very well. My battalion made sure they gave us everything we needed to fight and we tried our best the way Nigerian Army wanted us to because weapons were there.’⁷⁴ This is not an isolated view. Another participant argues, ‘since I went there, the issue of lack of ammunition I’ve not experienced it. Since during Jonathan regime up to Buhari administration I didn’t have any issue. I didn’t experience the issue of lack of ammunition’.⁷⁵ Several others had different experiences. As one participant notes, ‘Soldiers are willing to fight but the equipment

71. Interviewee S06, 2 July 2018.

72. Interviewee S02.

73. Interviewee S05.

74. Interviewee S05.

75. Interviewee S03.

is not there to work with. If they can stop all the lies and provide all the equipment, soldiers will fight'.⁷⁶

However, these comments are ethically solipsistic—taking one's personal experience as the only reality out there. Troops' experiences regarding weapons' supply in fact varied remarkably. Both sets of soldiers speak to their realities. Supplies increased from late 2014 and early 2015 following delivery of equipment purchased by President Jonathan's administration⁷⁷ but availability varied from one unit to another. Some units had new equipment. Others had obsolete weapons purchased in the early 1980s.⁷⁸ These weapons were inoperative at critical moments. One soldier narrated how five of the eight 'scorpions' (the FV101 Scorpion, a reconnaissance tank) they received malfunctioned.⁷⁹ The obsolescence of weapons made some soldiers feel they were sent 'to go and die'.⁸⁰ One soldier compared the quality of the weapons they had to Boko Haram's and concluded 'we the military became Boko Haram while they became the military'.⁸¹ Soldiers were shocked at the quality of weapons used by Boko Haram.⁸² Some troops killed fellow soldiers due to poor communication. One such incident happened in November 2016. Soldiers killed colleagues who were bringing supplies partly because 'nobody left with a communication radio'.⁸³ The troops thought the comrades approaching their camp were Boko Haram operatives.

Soldiers died from excessive reliance on 'soft-skin' Hilux vehicles mounted with guns due to inadequate armoured vehicles.⁸⁴ Soft-skin vehicles exposed soldiers to improvised explosive devices (IEDs). One soldier argues, 'most of the casualties among the soldiers is as a result of mines and not physical exchange of fire'.⁸⁵ This assertion is likely inaccurate given troops' numerous gun battles with and miscellaneous ambushes by Boko Haram.⁸⁶ However, the participant's experiential reality does reveal a fundamental concern among troops regarding the effectiveness of material.

Commanders varied in the manner in which they exercised their agency or used their influence to demand weapons and equipment. Some commanders developed a reputation as officers who would refuse to go to battle

76. Interviewee S01.

77. Multiple senior military and media sources.

78. Interviewee S06.

79. Interviewee S04.

80. Interviewee S06.

81. Interviewee S01.

82. Interviewee S06, 4 July 2018.

83. Interviewee S10.

84. Interviewee S06.

85. Interviewee S02.

86. Abdulkareem Haruna, '37 soldiers died in Boko Haram attack – Sources', *Premium Times*, 9 July 2020, <<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/402015-37-soldiers-died-in-boko-haram-attack-sources.html>> (18 September 2020).

without having all their demands met by superiors. Therefore, such recalcitrant or influential commanders received the weapons and equipment required for their operations. The factors above influence participants' experiences in the execution of the war by the Jonathan and Buhari administrations. Those who claimed to have been part of well-resourced battalions note that they received many weapons and ammunition at the twilight of the Jonathan administration but the overall 'approach' of the Buhari administration 'is more tactical'.⁸⁷ However, interviews with soldiers were conducted in summer 2018. In July 2019, the military adopted a 'super camp' strategy, which the Chief of Army Staff, General Tukur Buratai, describes as 'the concentration of formidable fighting forces in strongholds that have the capacity for swift mobility'.⁸⁸ There are concerns in the intelligence community that the super camp strategy makes the troops 'less nimble' and 'slower to respond to threats'.⁸⁹ The strategy initially led to reduction in military casualties. However, by June 2020, the security situation had worsened.⁹⁰

Suicide and murder–suicide among troops

The Nigerian Army announced on 26 February 2020 that a corporal at the theatre command in the Northeast went 'berserk', murdered four of his colleagues, injured two others and killed himself.⁹¹ This was one in a series of suicides and murder–suicides among soldiers fighting against Boko Haram. A similar incident in 2018 was described in a media report as part of 'a disturbing pattern of such tragic incidents across military formations—one which military authorities are reluctant to publicly acknowledge'.⁹² There have been limited systematic efforts to unpack the conditions surrounding these incidents in the war against Boko Haram.

The evidence from participants indicates that six critical factors contribute to murders and murder–suicides. These are length of deployment, traumatic experiences, poor physical and mental welfare of troops, concerns about welfare of family members, poor rehabilitation services, and

87. Interviewee S06.

88. Timileyin Omilana, 'Super camps make Nigerian army "less nimble" against terrorists—Reports', *The Guardian*, 7 October 2019, <<https://guardian.ng/news/super-camps-make-nigerian-army-less-nimble-against-terrorists-report/>> (30 December 2020).

89. *Ibid.*

90. Michael Horton, 'Is Nigeria losing the war against terrorists in Borno State?', *Terrorism Monitor* 18, 12 (2020), pp. 6–8.

91. Abdulkareem Haruna, 'Boko Haram: Nigeria soldier goes berserk, shoots four officers dead, kills self', *Premium Times*, 26 February 2020, <<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/379283-boko-haram-nigeria-soldier-goes-berserk-shoots-four-officers-dead-kills-self.html>> (2 March 2020).

92. Samuel Ogundipe, 'Nigerian soldier kills colleague, self in another suicide rage', *Premium Times*, 24 September 2018, <<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/286061-nigerian-soldier-kills-colleague-self-in-another-suicide-rage.html>> (2 March 2020).

personal tragedies. Some soldiers have been at the war theatre for four years. This enhances the chances of mental collapse. One participant argues, 'How can a soldier go to war for good four years and return... he would go mad'.⁹³ The length of deployment increases the chances of traumatic experiences. These issues are rarely addressed because of poor psychosocial support. Some participants witnessed their colleagues blown up or cut in half when their vehicles stepped on IEDs or while trying to defuse bombs. One soldier explains a traumatic recovery effort following an attack on troops

Boko Haram poured acid on them. Some bodies were black and some of them started decaying. So, we were packing our colleagues' corpse with blankets. We will now wrap a blanket on somebody so that we would be able to pack him. There were maggots everywhere. That was how we packed them. They were doing mass burial. There was no need of keeping them in the morgue because some of them had decayed. Some had some of their parts missing due to exhaustion. Some were not even killed by bullets but due to hunger and the tiredness in the terrain... (We) met a soldier just sitting under a tree dead with his hands folded on his rifle.⁹⁴

She explains that 'some people got mad there because of the things they saw. Some went blind maybe because of the fire; and some because of the noise of the guns they became deaf'. The soldiers knew many of those killed or maimed in battle and comrades who had been missing for years.⁹⁵ These experiences traumatized survivors. The military has sustained many casualties although reliable estimates are difficult to find. Reuters, for example, reports that between June 2018 and September 2019, security professionals estimated military casualties 'at anywhere from hundreds of soldiers to in excess of 1,000. The military has not released casualty figures but denies that many soldiers have been killed'.⁹⁶ Participants believe military authorities have been understating casualty figures. This undermines the credibility of the military leadership. One soldier noted that about 136 soldiers died in an attack in which Boko Haram fired multiple anti-aircraft missiles on ground troops but military authorities announced that only eight soldiers died.⁹⁷ Witnessing massive losses made troops develop a

93. Interviewee S07.

94. Interviewee S01.

95. Interviewee S02.

96. Paul Carsten, 'Islamic State fills the void in Nigeria as soldiers retreat to "super camps"', *Reuters*, 16 September 2019, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-security-insurgency-idUSKBN1W10FU>> (5 October 2020).

97. Interviewee S04. Such numbers are subject to memory issues. Nonetheless, the participant was in a medical unit responsible for treating injured soldiers and retrieving dead bodies from the site of the attack.

strong sense of fatalism—their experiences made them feel ‘at that point you are just there waiting to die.’⁹⁸

Participants spent between six months and four years fighting Boko Haram. One participant’s experience captures the perspectives of soldiers and suggests what may be influencing suicidal behaviours: ‘The major problem we are having is treatment and insincerity... As somebody who has been in the frontline for four years. I returned like a rejected person. You know, without encouragement, life is no longer interesting’.⁹⁹ Soldiers also returned from war to a generally poor rehabilitation regimen. They were often taken to a military facility in Jaji for psychological treatment. Participants note that the facility was insecure and unfit for human habitation, the staff largely ignored their duties, the food was terrible, and no transportation arrangements were made for troops to return home. One soldier expresses disappointment at the rehabilitation facilities in Jaji

After spending three years plus at the front line... (t)hey took me to a place that was not conducive. There was no light, no water, nothing... They took me there and left me for almost two weeks... The only time they talked to me was on one or two occasions. They brought a resource person and what he was just telling you was outside rehabilitation. That rehabilitation is not even worth it for me. If you say you want to reintegrate us into society I think you should make us feel comfortable, relaxed... Throughout my days there, I hardly slept at night... Is that a country that appreciates the people that have laid down their lives?¹⁰⁰

The soldiers feel betrayed and abandoned by their country. Personal tragedies, such as deaths of relatives and breakdown of their marriages, exacerbated these issues. The spouses of two of the participants died while they were at the warfront. Others narrated how some spouses had moved on. One female soldier noted, ‘Some homes have been scattered... What has become of their wives? Other men have taken over their wives. A period of two years, four years and coming back their wives are pregnant for other men’.¹⁰¹ Soldiers vary in their ability to handle the mix of structural, organizational, and personal issues. Some have chosen suicide or murder–suicide as a way out or avenue to vent their frustrations.

Intelligence leaks and sabotage

Media reports suggest the war against Boko Haram is being hampered by intelligence leaks but there has been little empirical support in the

98. Interviewee S07.

99. Interviewee 06.

100. Interviewee S07.

101. Interviewee S01.

scholarly literature for such claims. This study finds strong evidence among senior officers and non-commissioned soldiers to support the claim. Non-commissioned soldiers claim intelligence leaks are from some senior commissioned officers who are in charge of strategy and troop movement. One soldier argues ‘Sometimes they seize all our phones. In that bush, there is no network but they used to connect wifi for the officers. So, if information used to leak, it is from them not the other ranks’.¹⁰²

President Goodluck Jonathan (2010–2015) signposted in January 2012 the leaks and sabotage in the politico-military system. President Jonathan stated

some of them (Boko Haram members) are in the executive arm of government. Some of them are in the parliamentary/legislative arm of government, while some of them are even in the judiciary... Some are also in the armed forces, the police and other security agencies... During the civil war, we knew and we could even predict where the enemy was coming from... But the challenge we have today is more complicated.¹⁰³

The comment reverberated globally although presidency officials tried to modify the statement. Some serving and retired Generals interviewed for this study strongly corroborate President Jonathan’s statement on the infiltration of the armed forces by Boko Haram sympathizers.¹⁰⁴ One General notes that prior to the Buhari administration, several colleagues were non-cooperative at the highest level of decision-making in the Defence Headquarters. Such officers refused to contribute to discussions on strategy and seemed unenthusiastic about the mission. Such officers would often say they ‘concurred’ or had ‘no comment’ when called upon to share their thoughts and ideas. Officers who were committed to the cause or had combat-related responsibilities were concerned. They began to worry that many of the losses incurred by the military were due to intelligence leaks, sabotage, and disloyalty.

A pattern began to emerge in mid- to late 2014—military bases were attacked shortly before pre-planned operations against Boko Haram or after supply of arms and ammunitions. The routing of troops at Baga, the headquarters of the MNJTF in January 2015, was particularly troubling for the think-tank at the Defence Headquarters. One General notes that it was an ‘insider job’—someone privy to high-level deliberations provided intelligence to Boko Haram.¹⁰⁵ The claim appears plausible given that 10 Generals and 5 other officers were found guilty in June 2014 of selling

102. *Ibid.*

103. *BBC News*, ‘Nigeria’s Goodluck Jonathan: Officials back Boko Haram’, 8 January 2012, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-16462891>> (30 November 2016).

104. Interviewees 03 and 04.

105. Interviewee 04.

arms and providing intelligence to Boko Haram.¹⁰⁶ There were political, religious, and ethnic dimensions to sabotage and intelligence leaks. The level of distrust in the military increased prior to the 2015 presidential election. Some senior officers began to suspect that some of their colleagues from northern Nigeria did not want the mission to succeed because failure would be politically favourable to then opposition candidate, General Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim, who was contesting against the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the south.¹⁰⁷

Contrary to the comments by interviewee S01 about the non-involvement of non-commissioned soldiers in intelligence leaks and sabotage, there were rank-and-file soldiers who received monetary inducement to switch sides. Tank drivers were particularly highly prized. One General commented

The way these people ride our tanks that they captured, the way they drove them against us to massacre us shows that they are being driven by expert drivers, Nigerian Army trained drivers... (T)here was a time when we surprised their camp, and one of the people we killed in their camp happened to be a warrant officer, who was training our tank drivers....¹⁰⁸

The said warrant officer was killed by troops in 2014 while fighting for Boko Haram. A prominent journalist in Nigeria also reported that ‘the SSS (State Security Service) members who were sent to spy on the sect members soon became more Boko Haram than the sect members they were detailed to spy on’.¹⁰⁹ The combination of intelligence leaks, sabotage, and disloyalty led to hiring mercenaries. A retired General, who held a prominent position during the Jonathan administration, notes that ‘if we were to

106. Danielle Wiener-Bronner, ‘Nigerian military officers court-martialed for giving Boko Haram weapons’, *The Atlantic*, 3 June 2014, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/nigerian-generals-arrested-for-giving-boko-haram-weapons/372052/>> (30 December 2020).

107. While the notion of a northern conspiracy is highly contentious, the effectiveness of commanders and their regions of origin have been subject of debate. For example, the governor of northeastern Borno state, Boko Haram’s main theatre of operations, noted in 2018 ‘Some of our greatest accomplishments in the current counterinsurgency efforts were recorded under army generals who are not from Borno and northern Nigeria’. He argued that commanders from southern Nigeria ‘did much better’ than their northern colleagues. See Abdulkareem Haruna, ‘Borno governor reveals Army’s “best” generals against Boko Haram’, *Premium Times*, 5 February 2018, <<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/257597-borno-governor-reveals-armys-best-generals-against-boko-haram.html>> (8 February 2021).

108. Interviewee 03.

109. Dele Agekameh, ‘Boko Haram insurgency: How Nigeria’s intelligence agencies have failed’, *Premium Times*, 23 April 2014, <<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/159197-boko-haram-insurgency-how-nigerias-intelligence-agencies-have-failed-by-dele-agekameh.html>> (30 December 2020).

reverse the situation...the degree of sabotage, the degree of disloyalty we were getting...we could not depend on the army of that period'.¹¹⁰

These issues have continued under the Buhari administration. Sixteen officers were court-martialed for selling arms to Boko Haram in 2016.¹¹¹ Cases of missing equipment remain a persistent problem. Claims by the military and the government regarding territorial gains of troops are debatable. For instance, Abdulkareem Lawan, the speaker of the Borno State House of Assembly, noted in September 2020 that there was 'no single human being in at least three local government councils of Borno state because of the deteriorating security situation in the areas'.¹¹² Lawan's claim does not appear to be indicative of the usual opposition politics in Nigeria as he is a member of the ruling All Progressives Congress and campaigned for President Buhari's reelection in 2019.

Relationship of troops with the CJTF

The CJTF evolved from a grassroots movement of 'frustrated youth' (or *yan gora*) in Maiduguri who were aggrieved by Boko Haram's atrocities and the failure of state forces to protect civilians.¹¹³ The CJTF has been complementing the efforts of the military through intelligence gathering and identification of Boko Haram members in the community.¹¹⁴ The CJTF, as a form of community policing initiative, has earned commendation for its contributions to the war effort.¹¹⁵ However, little is known about the perspectives and nuances of the experiences of troops with CJTF. The evidence from this study indicates that experiences with CJTF vary with specific units, locations, and individual CJTF members. Some troops found members of CJTF invaluable to their operations particularly on intelligence gathering, knowledge of the terrain, language translation, and relationship with communities. Some participants emphasized the sacrifices and contributions of CJTF members. One participant notes;

110. Interviewee 04.

111. Michelle Faul, 'Nigerian military: Some officers selling arms to Boko Haram', *Associated Press*, 4 September 2016, <<https://apnews.com/article/5f0cd12343154ec9bb4a4dafae7dc879>> (30 December 2020).

112. Misbahu Bashir, Tunji Omirin, Ibrahim Sawab, Ronald Mutum, Idowu Isamotu, and Romoke W. Ahmad, 'Soldiers, insurgents killed, Borno councils deserted', *Daily Trust*, 4 September 2020, <<https://dailytrust.com/soldiers-insurgents-killed-borno-councils-deserted>> (17 September 2020).

113. Daniel Agbiboa, 'Resistance to Boko Haram: Civilian Joint Task Forces in North-Eastern Nigeria', *Conflict Studies Quarterly* (2015), pp. 3–22.

114. *Ibid.*

115. Tochukwu Omenma and Cheryl Hendricks, 'Counterterrorism in Africa: An analysis of the civilian joint task force and military partnership in Nigeria', *Security Journal* 31, 3 (2018), pp. 764–794.

The civilian JTF have tried because they are the people that know the terrain and they lead us... The civilian JTF know the terrain... They know where we can harbor, where we can get them, where we can see them... They should try to compensate those people. They have suffered in the fight against Boko Haram.¹¹⁶

Some soldiers developed friendships with CJTF members and were delighted to have several of such persons join the army.¹¹⁷

This perspective is however not universal. Some units found CJTF members confused, unreliable, and corruptible. One soldier notes how ‘sometimes they’ll withdraw and leave you alone’ during operations.¹¹⁸ Another narrates how a CJTF member was discovered to have millions of Naira in his account. The troops found that he was selling intelligence to Boko Haram.¹¹⁹ Some units had deathly experiences with CJTF members who began as useful informants but soon became double agents. Such CJTF members caused casualties among state forces. One commander called a meeting of his battalion to find out why they were getting attacked each time they embarked on operations. The commander realized there were leaks and decided they did not need CJTF anymore as ‘we suspected that they were giving out information’.¹²⁰ This led to suspicions regarding troops’ relationship with and approach to the CJTF.

Some CJTF members created problems for troops because of their attitude towards Northeast communities. Participants argue that some CJTF members became power drunk and maltreated civilians. A soldier explains, ‘because they are from that same community and as they joined the civilian JTF they think that they have power than others.’¹²¹ Therefore, Commanders made decisions about the utility of CJTF members on a case-by-case basis.

Importance of perspectives of rank-and-file soldiers

The voices of non-commissioned soldiers sent to war are often marginalized.¹²² The military generally fosters an atmosphere of silence even in extreme cases of abuse because of the strictures, discipline, and the internalized sense that speaking out erodes camaraderie. Rank-and-file troops in particular self-censor because of their relatively powerless position and fear

116. Interviewee S02.

117. Interviewee S04.

118. Interviewee S06.

119. Interviewee S04.

120. Interviewee S06.

121. Interviewee S03.

122. Carl Mirra, ‘Insurgents, accidental guerrillas and valley-ism: An oral history of oppositional US soldiers “attitudes toward the enemy in Afghanistan”’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, 2 (2013), pp. 453–468.

of retaliation. Therefore, instances where they speak out without official approval or surveillance are instructive. Participants in this study demonstrate antipathy towards the mission to defeat Boko Haram. Antipathy towards a mission is not unusual among troops.¹²³ Much of the antipathy, however, often centres on soldiers' attitudes towards the location (e.g. a foreign country) and their population. Troops often hold perspectives about the significance of their country's involvement in a mission, the importance of their presence in a location, and the value of the operation.¹²⁴ Where national unity or survival is concerned, soldiers may have favourable disposition towards such a mission. Consequently, in an intra-state war involving a terrorist organization engaged in kidnapping, rape, and killing of civilians and security forces, the antipathy of participants towards the mission is intriguing. Rather than shaped by the enemy, location or the value of the cause, it is influenced by organizational factors within the military and soldiers' apprehension of the dynamics of the political process.

Participants question the integrity of Nigeria's politico-military system, particularly in relation to the sponsors of Boko Haram and length of the war. They adopt a conspiracist perspective on the origins and sponsors of Boko Haram. Their views are informed by kinetic engagement with Boko Haram. They had an opportunity to evaluate Boko Haram's relative strength and weakness. Given the soldiers' experiences in other missions particularly outside Nigeria, they were surprised at the persistence of the war. The participants were unanimous in the belief—rightly or wrongly—that the war against Boko Haram was being prolonged for the pecuniary benefit of political and military elites. This view is reinforced by incessant news reports about defence procurement scandals and huge sums of money recovered from senior military officers.

Corruption, arms obsolescence, and shortages experienced by some of the participants, and cronyism which shapes considerations for postings, have led to negative attitudes towards the mission. The widely recognized patronage system in Nigeria¹²⁵ thus plays a role in participants' perspectives. This finding aligns with existing studies on political interference in military decisions and operations.¹²⁶ It also supports Luckham's assertion that problems in the military in Africa often speak to broader societal issues. The role of political elites in the ascendance of Boko Haram has been noted in previous studies.¹²⁷ This study provides evidence of widespread

123. *Ibid.*

124. Ronald Halvelson and Paul Bliese, 'Determinants of soldier support for operation uphold democracy', *Armed Forces and Society* 23, 1 (1996), pp. 81–96.

125. Adigun Agbaje, Adeolu Akande, and Jide Ojo, 'Nigeria's ruling party: A complex web of power and money', *South African Journal of International Affairs* 14, 1 (2007), pp. 79–97.

126. *Ibid.*

127. Wisdom Iyекеkpоlо, 'Political elites and the rise of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, 4 (2018), pp. 749–767.

perceptions of soldiers that political and military elites have contributed to prolonging the war against Boko Haram through interference in routine military activities, politicization of defence resources, poor welfare, and demoralization of troops.

Organizational problems within the military have led to radically conflicting perspectives regarding quality and availability of military hardware and weapons. Human agency is a crucial element in any organization. However, providing resources in war based on the agency of commanders—their reputation and intransigence against superiors—is counterproductive. It is capable of creating divisions among military leaders who ought to work collaboratively. It also feeds into concerns about patronage and cronyism in the politico-military system.

While there is no readily available and reliable data on military suicides and murder-suicides in operations against Boko Haram, news reports suggest a grim picture. This study finds that six factors underlie such incidents. They include (i) the length of deployment, (ii) traumatic experiences, (iii) poor physical and mental welfare, (iv) troops' concerns about welfare of their families, (v) poor rehabilitation services, and (vi) personal tragedies. These issues interconnect and influence the morale, effectiveness and overall commitment of troops. While the military command cannot determine whether a soldier's spouse abandons them, they can lessen the likelihood of such marital and other personal tragedies through regular rotation policy. Soldiers, like other humans, are relational beings. As a participant argues, a soldier kept at the warfront for four uninterrupted years is likely to go mad. They may react violently because of frustration as evident in reports of murder-suicides in the theatre of war. Significant psychosocial support before, during, and after combat experience is necessary to reduce mental breakdown.

Intelligence leaks and sabotage by security agencies often speak to broader macro-sociological issues beyond greed. For instance, a death squad emerged at the twilight of apartheid in South Africa. Ostensibly random deadly attacks on Black people began as Nelson Mandela's African National Congress engaged in negotiations with the government. In September 1990, Mandela noted that the attacks were by a 'Third Force'¹²⁸—pro-apartheid sympathizers and amalgam of some current and former members of the security forces. There were widespread suspicions that the goal of the third force was to derail negotiations. President F.W. de Klerk denied a third force existed. However, de Klerk did not have full

128. Stephen Ellis, 'The historical significance of South Africa's third force', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, 2 (1998), p. 261.

control of the security forces and was initially unaware of their activities.¹²⁹ A third force actually existed.¹³⁰ The saboteurs disagreed with the direction South Africa was headed—the creation of a rainbow nation-state with one of the most liberal constitutions in the world. The South African example is didactic as it points to the link between the political process and sabotage or intelligence leaks by security officials.

Consequently, attempts to prevent intelligence leaks and sabotage must go beyond a legalistic approach, such as punishing offenders. Leaks and sabotage under the Jonathan administration were largely connected to the ethno-religiously charged presidential politics in 2015. The military was interpellated in the politics of regime change. This suggests that plugging leaks requires active efforts by the military echelon and the political elites. This entails minimizing nepotism and political interference in basic administrative functions of the military. There is an ideational component to such efforts on the part of the military command—reemphasizing the ethos of professionalism and service to the country rather than to political, ethnic, or religious collectivities.

Conclusion

This study complements works on macro-sociological variables responsible for the inability to defeat Boko Haram. It explores perspectives from below and contributes to the literature by interrogating state soldiers engaged in the war against Boko Haram. The perspectives of the soldiers provide nuanced and textured micro-sociological insight on why Nigeria has been struggling to win the war against Boko Haram. The study demonstrates how at an interactional level soldiers make sense of their experiences on the frontlines vis-à-vis issues in the political process and impact on the military bureaucracy. The military, particularly the army, is a major site of contestation in developing countries where the government is the main avenue for enrichment. Therefore, control over the military is crucial to maintain power. Most of the rank-and-file soldiers have little trust in the military bureaucracy and believe senior officers are responsible for poor working conditions and intelligence leaks that have contributed to prolonging the war. These issues affect the welfare of troops and dampen morale. Soldiers apprehend the status of the war by cross-articulating their experiences with broader issues over which they have no control. This approach is subjective but when aggregated provides narratives that cannot be dismissed if defeating terrorism is a priority.

129. Robert D'A. Henderson, 'South African intelligence under de Klerk', *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 8, 1 (1995), pp. 51–89.

130. *Ibid.*

The grievances of soldiers interviewed in this study are directed at senior officers, the military bureaucracy, and political leadership. Although several soldiers from the south complained about the terrain and illiteracy in the Northeast, it is instructive that the criticisms of the mission are not anchored on ethnic or religious differences. Camaraderie among the rank-and-file troops does not seem fractured by Nigeria's toxic sociopolitical environment. Participants narrated their experiences as 'soldiers' rather than members of any particular ethnic or religious group. This is a surprising narrative coherence. Nonetheless, the persistence of the war threatens the fabric of the Nigerian army. Troops' experiences in this theatre have left them demoralized. Desertions have increased. The Nigerian army has suspended voluntary retirements due to the unusual numbers of personnel seeking to leave.¹³¹

The paper contributes to scholarship on why one of the largest armies in Africa has been unable to defeat Boko Haram. Beyond the specific case study, it contributes to the literature on the dynamics of the African military:¹³² its organization, politics, and problems. In an age of major concerns over the spread of terrorism in sub-Saharan Africa, this paper provides insight into internal issues within the politico-military system that are hampering efforts to defeat terrorism despite significant capital outlay and international support. This paper focuses attention on internal, actor-level, and organizational variables. It supports scholarly evidence that organizational problems within the military contribute to the elongation of intra-state armed conflict in Africa. The findings should alarm the federal government of Nigeria, its regional allies, and other international partners. Nigeria is an important player in the West African region. Security in West Africa depends partly on winning the war against Boko Haram and other violent non-state actors. Islamists in particular are exacerbating political violence and instability. There are concerns that ISIL (The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) has relocated to Africa after being routed in Iraq and Syria.¹³³ Nigeria and other countries in the Lake Chad Basin must recognize the importance of a motivated military in the fight against terrorism. This necessitates several internal bureaucratic measures such as troop welfare, including allowances and mental health support, troop rotation, and

131. Samuel Ogundipe, 'EXCLUSIVE: Boko Haram war: Nigerian Army suspends voluntary retirement of soldiers', *Premium Times*, 5 April 2020, <<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/386123-exclusive-boko-haram-war-nigerian-army-suspends-voluntary-retirement-of-soldiers.html>> (14 May 2020).

132. Mazrui, 'The lumpen proletariat and the lumpen militariat'.

133. J. Peter Pham, 'Boko Haram: The strategic evolution of the Islamic State's West Africa Province', *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 7, 1 (2016), pp. 1–18. Stig Jarle Hansen, 'Unity under Allah? Cohesion mechanisms in jihadist organizations in Africa', *Armed Forces & Society* 44, 4 (2018), pp. 587–605.

minimizing influence peddling in filling command positions and accessing material.

Armed conflict challenges the integrity of a state's military apparatus. Evidence from government and media reports support perceptions of rank-and-file troops that the Boko Haram war has led to criminal enrichment of a handful of senior officers. This is contrary to the bureaucratic-organization model, the prevailing perspective on protracted small wars. This model presupposes that small wars are prolonged because of the military's desire to maximize its influence, resources, and relative autonomy from civilian leadership.¹³⁴ The approach fails to put into consideration the interplay of the political context, the character of the state and the identities, and actions of the military echelon in a weak institutional environment. Finally, this article speaks to the 'revalorization'¹³⁵ of non-state security actors in Africa.¹³⁶ It spotlights the double-edged sword represented by extra-legal security organizations, state-sanctioned militias, or vigilantes. The findings of this study suggest that the contributions of such entities are complex at best and unpredictable at worst. This reinforces the need to consider the interactions between state agents and local extra-state security collectivities at the actor level vis-à-vis results. States that resort to using extra-legal militias in maintaining order may experience diminishing returns in their relationships with such entities. They may encumber the mission after producing a level of result.

134. Morton Halperin, 'War termination as a problem in civil military relations', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 392, 1 (1970), pp. 86–95.

135. Kate Meagher, 'The strength of weak states? Non-state security forces and hybrid governance in Africa', *Development and Change* 43, 5 (2012), pp. 1073–1101.

136. Peter Albrecht and Louise Wiuff Moe, 'The simultaneity of authority in hybrid orders', *Peacebuilding* 3, 1 (2015), pp. 1–16.