

Original Paper

Terrorism in Northern Nigeria and the Proliferation of Small and Light Weapons

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Received: May 10, 2024

Accepted: May 22, 2024

Online Published: June 3, 2024

doi:10.22158/wjssr.v11n2p150

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjssr.v11n2p150>

Abstract

The advent of technology has acted as a catalyst to the propensity and intensity of acts of terrorism across the globe owing to the production of Small and Light Weapons (SALW), which are easy to handle and deploy in conflict situations. This paper aims at examining the influence of the proliferation of SALW on terrorism in Northern Nigeria, which is largely perpetrated by the Boko Haram terrorist group and the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP). The paper revealed that the proliferation of SALWs have significantly contributed to the recurrence and ferociousness of terrorism in Northern Nigeria. The paper also revealed that despite the copious legal framework regulating the use of arms and light weapons, arms have become a free-for-all particularly, in the hands of non-state actors in Nigeria. The resultant effects of this proliferation are loss of lives; wanton damage and destruction of properties and means of livelihood; displacements; economic downturn etc. The paper concludes that the ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons (Convention) should be operational in Nigeria. However, reliance cannot be placed on legislation alone as a means of controlling the proliferation of arms but it is imperative for other measures to be in place such as an institutional framework involving the re-jig of the Nigerian security apparatus and community involvement in the control of SALW.

Keywords

terrorism, small arms and light weapons, proliferation, convention, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Terrorism is being aided by the proliferation of SALW, which has continued to pose a threat to human existence and the life of nations due to their easy deployment by terrorist groups.

Terrorism threatens the peace and security of States and it is evident that it hampers economic development. No State can have any meaningful progress while entangled in terrorism. Most of the arms being proliferated in Nigeria and found in the hands of non-state actors were hitherto considered legal and in possession of state security operatives. During conflict situations in other West African States such Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone, the law was relaxed to allow civilians to bear arms in order to effectively tackle rebel groups. However, when the conflicts ended, the arms were not collected from the hands of civilians, which led to cross-border infiltration of such arms. Active participants such as government officials, organized groups, insurgents and criminals are complicit in the proliferation of SALW. The SALW may be sold, re-sold, diverted and sometimes, stolen and made to circulate in response to both legal and illegal transaction (Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, 2001) Research conducted in 2016 indicate that about 10,000,000 SALW are in West Africa and 70% of it are in Nigeria (Gun Policy, 2016). An illegal armory was also uncovered in Kano, North West zone of Northern Nigeria, where rifles, factor—made grenades, bombs and missiles were found (Dinshak, 2018).

According to the Security Council of the United Nations, the proliferation and the misuse of SALWs are major factors that threaten the national, regional and global peace and security. It was further said that the use of SALWs can render arms embargoes ineffective, propel conflicts, endanger peace keepers, aid workers and civilian population and further undermine peace accord (United Nations, 2021).

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Terrorism

It has been said that terrorism does not have an exact definition (Young, 2006). Scholars, organizations and States have attempted to define terrorism according to their own perspective. However, despite the absence of an exact definition, the common elements in all these definitions may form a consensual definition of terrorism. Thus, terrorism may be defined as acts of violence against innocent people or the threat of such acts. These acts of violence also include assaults on innocent people and their possessions. Terrorism is aimed at achieving particular goals, which could be religious, political or ideological. According to non-State actors, these goals allegedly cannot be achieved by following due process (Turk, 2004).

2.2 Small Arms

Small arms are defined as any human - portable lethal weapon that launches or is constructed to launch and easily designed to lunch a shot or bullet through the action of an explosive. Examples of small

arms are rifles, revolvers, self—loading pistols and machine guns (Jemlak *et al.*, 2023). Small arms have also been defined as weapons that can be carried by an individual. These include everything from revolvers and pistols to machine guns, light anti-tank weapons and shoulder fired surface –to-air missiles (Michael, 1994).

2.3 Light Weapons

Light weapons have been defined as portable weapons that are produced to be used by two to ten people that work together as a team. However, it is possible for some light weapons to be borne by one person. (ECOWAS Convention on Small and Light Weapons, 2006). Examples of light weapons are heavy machine guns, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns and portable launchers.

Thus, SALW can be broadly defined according to the common elements in different definitions. These common elements include lethal weapons excluding weapons such as knives and hunting rifles, portable weapons that are easily transportable, weapons that are easy to maintain and frequently used (Chilaka, 2010).

2.4 Proliferation

Proliferation is defined as a surge in the number or amount of a commodity. In this context, it connotes a swift increase, plenitude or spread of SALW from an individual or group to another, within or outside the borders of a country (Chilaka, 2010).

3. Historical Overview of Terrorism in Northern Nigeria

3.1 Boko Haram

Boko Haram is another name for *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad*. An Islamist terrorist organization called Boko Haram is centered in Northern Nigeria. The organization is to blame for the majority of terrorism-related fatalities in the area.

The group is orchestrating a serious period of unrest and tension in Nigeria, a country with a relatively equal population of Christians and Muslims (United Nations, 2021). Since the Civil war, which was catastrophic, the nation has had numerous incidents of violence, sometimes between Muslims and Christians and frequently motivated by politics. The terrorist group has killed several Nigerians, primarily in the North, through bombing attacks and it is believed to have recorded more deaths than during the civil war (Akinfala *et al.*, 2014). The Islamic militant sect, Boko Haram is principally based in Northern Nigeria, where it originated. It could also be found in Northern Cameroon and Niger. It has aversion for westernization and its ideology is to islamise Nigeria (Omale, 2013). The group's official name in Arabic is *Jamā'atahl as-sunnah lid-da'wawa-l-jihād*, which is translated to English—the Congregation of the People of Tradition for Proselytism and Jihad (Egbegi *et al.*, 2018).

It is commonly called Boko Haram because of the group's resentment for western education. Boko Haram literally means *Book is a taboo*. Thus, the name could be loosely translated from Hausa to

English to mean *western education is forbidden and sinful*. Due to their conservative nature, members of the group were not allowed to mingle with other muslims and had previously assassinated anyone who criticizes them, including Islamic clerics. Boko Haram's ideology and practices closely resemble that of the Taliban. The group considered western education as an anomaly. The youths that joined the group or got convinced by their ideology dropped out of school, many of the youths also abandoned their families; working class people abandoned their jobs to follow them. Some others even sold their belongings and contributed the money to the upliftment of the organization in furtherance of the Islamic ideology (Okemi, 2013).

At inception, the group was described by the leader as non-rebellious but just a group who wanted to uphold Allah's tenets. Thus, they started their activities in Borno, Yobe, Katsina, Kaduna, Bauchi, Gombe, and Kano states but is now visible in all the Northern states (Njadvara, 2011).

Boko Haram is of the opinion that western education has failed the nation. It is the reason for the pervading poverty and corruption and should not be embraced by anybody. Yusuf, the leader began the movement quietly, preaching and trying to convince people. He gained followership mostly among the youths who bought into his ideology. However, the report that the group was becoming dangerous and intended to launch attack on the Nigerian State drew the attention of the police to the group. Yusuf was arrested and detained a number of times by the police but he was also released in due course.

In 2009, the feud between the group and the Police heightened because of the law compelling motor cyclists to wear helmets. The members of the group defied this law and the police clamped down on them. Violence erupted in the northern part of Nigeria and many public buildings were destroyed; criminals were also freed from prison in Maiduguri by the sect. The police arrested Mallam Yusuf and was killed extra-judicially while in police custody (Akinfala *et al.*, 2014). It was reported by the BBC that Yusuf had visible signs of injuries, when he was paraded by the police after his arrest and his body was left outside the police headquarters for days after his death (BBC, 2009).

Being a devoted organisation, it was expected that it would launch its first attack in Borno in January 2011 following the death of Mohammed Yusuf. Expectedly it did and four persons were killed as a result of the attack. Since then, the attacks on the populace by the organization has increased in frequency, intensity, and sophistication as well as the number of casualties. After Mohammed Yusuf's death in 2009, Abubakar Shekau, a former subordinate of Yusuf, announced his takeover of leadership of the group on social media in January 2012.

The group swore allegiance to the head of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in March 2015, and remained loyal to him until their differences in 2016 led to the formation of the Boko Haram offshoot group, ISWAP. Nonetheless, ISIS and Boko Haram were allies until 2021, when they turned against each other and ISIS fighters attempted to kill Abubakar Shekau, the head of Boko Haram (This Day, 2021). Shekau has reportedly passed away a few occasions, only for videos of him to later surface online. The

most recent of these rumors is that he passed away on May 20, 2021, after coming into contact with ISWAP, a rival terrorist organization. It was alleged that Shekau used explosives inside his home to prevent being captured by ISWAP, and as a result, he was murdered or seriously hurt.

The group's core arguments and convictions include the notion that the nation's banking, taxation and legal systems are wholly unreligious. They contend that accepting all these voids the entirety of a real Muslim's religion and that western education is un-Islamic. For instance, the sun in the sky is static, as is mixing boys and girls in the same shade and spreading the idea that men descended from monkeys. They contend that all of these contradict Allah's explicit teachings.

Most information about the Boko Haram men came from Jadamana Mada, where they have their Jummat mosque and are close to the Maiduguri airport. Due to the sources of their food, they avoid eating either commercial food or dishes made by non-members (Haram). They do not actually eat much; some of them are rumored to survive solely on fruits and dairy products. The acceptable pieces of clothing to be worn according to them are long sleeve robes, short pants, a turban, a long beard, a little coat over the long robe's sleeves and a chewing stick. It is widely reported that members of the group disowned their families; discarded their certificates including higher degrees like masters and PhD degrees certificates. Their major enemy was the government and the educated elites (Human Rights watch, 2014). In 2011, Boko Haram launched suicide bombings attacks, which were unprecedented in Nigeria and the government responded by dealing with the sect as a terrorist organization. The three North Eastern States of Bornu, Yobe, and Adamawa were placed under a state of emergency as a result of the insurgency's escalation between 2012 and 2013. The actions of Boko Haram have typically remained uninterrupted notwithstanding this change. Their actions have resulted in unprecedented humanitarian crises for the nation, which have had a catastrophic impact on human security and public safety (Aljazeera, 2020).

The Boko Haram sect has been in the business of terror against the government and the general populace of the nation for over ten years. The organization has planned attacks on the police department, banks, churches, and recreation centers, among other targets. It has also attacked public and international buildings like the United Nations Building in Abuja on August 26, 2011, Nigeria Police Force Headquarters bombing in Abuja on June 16, 2011; Police headquarters and other government buildings in Damaturu, Yobe State on September 25, 2012; Christmas day bombing at St Theresa Catholic Church in Madalla near Abuja on 25th December 2011; the motor park bomb blast at Nyanya on April 14, 2014; The terrorist gang assaulted the town of Rann in Bornu State on January 28, 2019, in what was called their worst strike in more than a decade of terrorism. Unexpectedly, IDP camps are not exempt from this problem, as demonstrated by the suicide bombing that took place at an IDP camp in Dalori, Bornu State, on July 26, 2019 (Premium Times, 2019).

Abduction has become a regular occurrence with the sect, the abduction of about 294 secondary school

girls in Chibok, Borno State on April 14, 2014 has gained international recognition with the bringbackourgirls group at the front burner of the campaign for the release of the girls. Over the years, 107 girls have been released by Boko haram in a deal broker between the sect and the Federal Government while over a hundred girls are still missing (Aljazeera, 2019). On February 19, 2018, Boko haram kidnapped 110 girls in their school at Dapchi, Yobe State. Following negotiations between the sect and the federal government, the majority of the girls were released. However, one girl, Leah Sharibu, was kept back, and Leah has remained in captivity for the past six years since the abduction. More recently, the kidnap and eventually beheading of Lawan Andimi, the President of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in Adamawa State on January 21 2020; the abduction and killing of a doctor's wife and a seminarian in Kaduna on February 1, 2020; the Kankara school boys kidnap of December 11, 2020; the Kagara school kidnap of 17th February 2021; the Zamfara school girls kidnap of 27th February 2021, the Kaduna train attack of 28 March 2022 and the Kuje prison break of 5th July 2022. Very recently, on December 3, 2023, the Nigerian Army accidentally bombed the Tudun Biri village of Kaduna State in an attempt to clamp down on terrorists. Scores of villagers were killed and several others were injured. On March 7, 2024, about 300 school children were kidnapped from the Kuriga village of Kaduna State but later released upon government intervention. The Military Forces of the ex-President Buhari and Tinubu -led Federal Government have launched an offensive against Boko Haram and the Nigerian Army reclaimed previously Boko Haram-controlled towns like Barga and Gworza after releasing some hostages, particularly women. Nonetheless, because suicide bombings continue to happen in Northern Nigeria, citizens still live in fear and only hope that someday, there would be an end to terrorism in Nigeria. However, Nigeria, which was hitherto one of the top five most terrorism ravaged Countries from 2015 to 2019 has fared better in global terrorism ranking in the last few years and particularly in 2023 (Global Terrorism Index, 2023).

3.2 Islamic State of West Africa Province

Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) is a break-away faction of Boko Haram. In March 2015, Boko Haram was renamed ISWAP, having pledged its allegiance to ISIS (IN FOCUS, 2018). However, in 2016, following an internal rancor about the treatment of other Muslims, some ISWAP leaders split from the group to form a new faction with Mamman Nur and Abu Musab al-Barnawi as the new leaders. This new faction was ably recognized by ISIS, which was not pleased with Shekau's style of leadership. After the split, ISWAP target shifted from civilians to military personnel (Al Jazeera, 2016). Boko Haram therefore, reverted to its initial name and formation.

Abu Abdallah al-Barnawi, (Ba Idrissa) has assumed leadership of ISWAP since 2019 and the group is waxing stronger. It has a large army and is situated in some parts of Northern Nigeria. It had owned up to being responsible for some terrorist attacks in Sokoto state.

ISWAP mandates people to accept the Islamic fate while prohibiting them from practicing other religions or beliefs. The group penalizes offenders by meting out harsh treatments including amputations and murder. ISWAP also abduct citizens and refuses their release because of their religion or belief. In some instances, people have been reportedly executed. Leah Sharibu, an abducted 17-year-old is still held hostage because of her Christian faith (USCIRF, 2020). The group is alleged to be the mastermind of the brutal terrorist attack on a Catholic Church, in Owo, Ondo State, South West, Nigeria in June 2022.

4. Legislation Governing Small and Light Weapons in Nigeria

4.1 Firearms Act, 1959 (As Amended)

The Firearms Act 1959 is the principal legislation regulating the production and utilization of firearms in Nigeria. The Act specifically prohibits the manufacture, assemblage and repair of firearms except in armories recognized by law. Further, the law also forbids individuals who are not licensed to deal in firearms, which includes the importation and exportation of firearms. The Amendment Act of 1966 changed the penalty for culpability from four hundred (400.00) Naira fine or twelve (12) months imprisonment to a minimum of ten (10) years imprisonment. However, given the severity of the consequence of proliferation of SALW, the law is obsolete and the penalty is too lenient. However, a new bill was considered by the 9th Senate in Nigeria tagged the Firearms Control 2022, which sought to repeal the Firearms Act 1959. But was not eventually passed into law.

4.2 ECOWAS Convention on Small and Light Weapons 2006

The proliferation of SALW has been a major challenge especially in developing countries. Thus, Kofi Anan noted that the SALW proliferation threatens legitimate, but weak governments but benefits terrorists as well as the perpetrators of organized crime (Annan, 2006). This menace spurred the UN and other regional and sub-regional organizations to curb the proliferation of SALW via enactment of laws. However, a major impediment to the effectiveness of these Conventions, treaties, Protocols etc., is the non-domestication into national laws. The UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons, encouraged regions to establish measures to contain the SALW in circulation in the various nations. This conference gingered the ECOWAS as a sub-regional group to birth a law on SALW. The precursor of the Convention was the Moratorium on small and light weapons. (ECOWAS Moratorium). The voluntary nature of the moratorium accounts for the non-compliance with her tenets by States. There were no provisions for sanctions or penalties for non-compliance.

The ECOWAS Convention consists of a Preamble, seven (7) Chapters and thirty-two (32) Articles. The Preamble affirms the sovereignty of states, their rights to defend themselves. The Preamble also expresses concern on the effects of the rapid increase in SALW which is a direct danger to human security. Chapter one of the ECOWAS Convention defines a number of key terms and highlights the Convention's objectives. Chapter two of the Convention is on transfers of SALW. It specifically

provides for the prohibition of transfer of SALW to any parties aside state actors without the authority of the State. States are charged to be strict on non-transfer of SALW. Chapter three is on manufacture of SALW, control of activities of local manufacturers, including monitoring and regulation of arms. Chapter four emphasizes transparency and exchange of information accordingly; means of promoting transparency and building confidence; institutionalizing databases and arms registries; verbally engaging SALW dealers; and effectively waging war against corruption. The chapter further provides for the compulsory registration of arms for peacekeeping missions and other weapons bought within its jurisdiction for such purpose. This provision will curb the proliferation of left-over weapons after every peacekeeping operation. This is aimed at preventing ammunition and arms from getting into wrong hands after operations. The Chapter further stipulates the role of the Executive Secretariat, as important in relation to arms documentation and monitoring. Chapter five is based on the operations of the treaty. It sets out the requisite measures for effective war against the proliferation of SALW. To this end, civilians are prohibited from possessing light weapons. The chapter further requires the correct labelling of all SALW and their accessories, and also prescribe tracking devices in accordance with compulsory sharing of necessary information. The Chapter further aim at regulating brokering activities and criminalizes illicit broking of SALW. Chapter six of the ECOWAS Convention focuses on institutions with the aim of implementing the provisions of the Convention. It sets out procedural structures and required methods of assessment and enforcement. The implementation and enforcement mechanisms involve the establishment of States' commissions and States' action plans; solid law enforcement agencies; fostering of joint actions within and without the states and region. The ECOWAS Executive Secretariat is the major body saddled with the supervisory and administrative responsibilities in relation to the implementation of the ECOWAS Convention. Chapter seven is deals with the final provisions. It provides for objections and penalties. Thus, complaints are filed with the Executive Secretary. The Executive Secretary will notify the ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council. The Executive Secretary is the depository of the instrument and also stipulates the procedure for amendment and withdrawal.

It is the aim of the Convention to ban the transportation of SALWs and their accessories within and across their jurisdictions. However, despite these laudable provisions of the Convention geared towards control of arms, the Convention creates a loophole to be exploited by arms dealers by permitting member States to allow civilians to keep arms, albeit, by a strict control regime. An absolute prohibition of keeping arms by civilians would have been more effective to curb the proliferation of arms. Also, member States undertake to impose penalties to sanction illicit arms brokering. This action is commendable however, member states should be cautious in order not to violate other international arm treaties and conventions. Another criticism of the Convention is that it is not in tandem with the model established by UN as it indirectly encourages theft or corrupt acquisition of weapons. This is

made possible by not having a provision in the Convention stipulating the destruction of arms and ammunition that are confiscated from non-State actors after a peace-keeping mission. The weapons however inadvertently end up in the black market and goes into circulation among civilians thereby thwarting the spirit and the intendment of the Convention.

4.3 Implementation of the ECOWAS Convention on Small and Light Weapons (2006) in Nigeria

Nigeria was one of the first Countries among its peers in West Africa to ratify the Convention. It was expected that Nigeria would act in compliance with the provisions of the Convention by establishing a Commission for its implementation. The Olusegun Obasanjo led government had established a National Committee for the implementation of the ECOWAS moratorium, the precursor to the Convention (NatCom). NatCom was still in existence when the convention came into force in 2009 but later went into oblivion. In 2013, the Goodluck Jonathan administration however inaugurated the Presidential Committee on Small Arms and Light Weapons (PRESCOM), with a view to combating violence and curtailing the SALW in circulation within the country. Some scholars and stakeholders hold the view that the non-establishment of a commission for the full implementation of the Convention instead of having ad hoc committees like NatCom and PRESCOM contributed to the proliferation of SALW and impacted negatively on security of lives in Northern Nigeria (Jemlak, *et al.*, 2023). In 2002, the Nigerian Senate passed into law, a bill for the establishment of a National Commission for the Coordination and Control of SALW in Nigeria. However, since the enactment, not much has been heard about the activities of the Commission in the control of SALW. The use of SALW is still rife in Northern Nigeria, where acts of terrorism abound. The recurrence of terrorism in Northern Nigeria and the types of weapons deployed give credence to this assertion.

5. Conclusion

The study revealed that terrorism in Nigeria is being fueled by the deployment of SALW, which has wreaked havoc on the Northern part and a collateral damage to the whole of the country. The Boko Haram and ISWAP terrorist organizations are largely responsible for the terrorist activities being carried out in Northern Nigeria. The study further revealed that the major legislation in Nigeria for the control of firearms, the Firearms Act 1959 is obsolete and should be amended. The Convention is a more robust piece of legislation for the control of SALW in West African States. However, Nigeria has not leveraged on this opportunity presented by ECOWAS to control SALW as it took about twelve years after coming into force of the convention for the legislature to pass a law to establish a Commission to oversee its domestication and implementation in Nigeria. Having enacted a law for its establishment, the presence of the commission is not felt as its activities are not known. This study recommends an immediate operation of the Convention. The study further recommends a re-jig of the security apparatus such as the Nigeria Police to be able to discharge its duties in combating terrorism

effectively. Furthermore, the Federal Government should also take a proactive step in controlling the SALW in circulation by providing stringent conditions for the ownership of guns in legal possession and ordering a surrender of arms in illegal possession as was done during the Presidents Olusegun Obasanjo and Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's tenures.

Acknowledgment

The authors acknowledge the efforts of Dr. Stanley Ehiane of the Department of Political Science and Administrative Studies, University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana in providing resource materials for quality research for this paper.

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