Assembling a Force to Defeat Boko Haram: How Nigeria Integrated the Market into its Counterinsurgency Strategy

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ABSTRACT
In the context of an increased use of commercial soldiers in high-end conflict, this article investigates how the Nigerian government’s reliance on the global market for force has helped its efforts to counter Boko Haram. The article shows, through a case study of Nigeria’s counterinsurgency campaign against jihadist insurgents, that states in the developing world can augment their ability to provide effective public security by creating security assemblages. Moving beyond the normative debate about Private Military Companies (PMCs), this article highlights that public-private security arrangements can support the state in the developing world to live up to its role as a communal security provider. Nigeria’s employment of the South African PMC Special Tasks, Training, Equipment and Protection Ltd. (STTEP), helped it build an effective public-commercial partnership, thus providing the Nigerian Armed Forces (NAF) with capacity, capability and norms that were essential in their counterinsurgency struggle.

KEYWORDS
Boko Haram; Nigeria; private military companies; Nigerian armed forces

Introduction
In early 2015 images started to circulate on social media in Nigeria and overseas, showing white South African mercenaries mounted on armoured personnel carriers seemingly operating in partnership with local military forces in Nigeria’s north, a region that had long been plagued by the Boko Haram insurgency. Journalists and commentators were quick to jump on a story that promised to produce polarising headlines. The narrative was that white “soldiers of fortune” had intervened in an insurgency, potentially breaching the mercenary norm and convention. Parallels were drawn with previous instances of South African contractors being hired by African governments to achieve objectives their own state militaries could not achieve.

This article looks at the three-month operation conducted by the South African PMC, STTEP, in the conceptual context of global, regional and local security assemblages. Importantly, it takes an exploratory approach, examining the opportunity offered by the market to supplement state military capabilities and to assist in capacity building.

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This article is a first academic look at the STTEP operation, combining unique empirical insights with the novel conceptual idea of security assemblages. Rather than advancing a moral argument for or against the use of contractors in war, this article takes an outcome-oriented approach by viewing Nigeria’s turn to the market in its counterinsurgency operation against Boko Haram, otherwise known as Jama’atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda’Awati Wal Jihad (JAS), as a novel, albeit short-term, security assemblage in the form of a public-private partnership.

Like other countries in the developing world, Nigeria has invested in creating a symbiotic partnership with non-state actors on the global, regional and local level to tackle a threat that is inherently transnational in nature. As such, contrary to other conceptual approaches to the privatisation and commercialisation of security, the assemblage perspective does not approach armed non-state actors as necessarily a risk to the authority of the state, but as a potential opportunity. The lack of capability, capacity and doctrine means that Nigeria’s transnational security assemblage helped to fill a critical gap in its ability to provide public security.

While the article is directed at the academic community, it also holds relevance for policy makers concerned with security in the developing world. It points to an alternative security model to the traditional state-centric security complex of state and statutory security sector. As the article points out, in many parts of the world the state-centric approach does not sit particularly well with weak states where security is provided increasingly via complex assemblages of state and non-state actors. Hence, the security assemblage between state, non-state actors and commercial security providers outlined in this article offers opportunities that developing states might find appealing.

Taking an outcome-oriented approach to security, we argue that the legitimacy of a security assemblage should not be judged purely by the degree of public ownership, but mostly by the degree to which it can provide security inclusively. Analysing Nigeria’s challenges with non-state violence in a federal state where central governance is undermined by large-scale corruption, the article looks at how Nigeria has re-assembled security partnerships amidst the fight against Boko Haram, highlighting the extent to which the market for force helped turn the tide against the jihadists, at least in the security domain. However, it is worth pointing out that other non-military aspects of counterinsurgency, such as addressing local grievances and producing counternarratives in an effort to reach out to alienated parts of society, have so far been unable to complement the positive military effects STTEP and the NAF have had.2

The argument is thereby informed by an open source analysis, complemented by a set of interviews conducted at the UK Defence Academy and elsewhere with serving British military personnel who have been involved in defence engagement operations in Nigeria, and with serving Nigerian military personnel who were part of the STTEP-led operations in 2015 against Boko Haram. Additional interviews were conducted with contractors who had previously worked with this PMC. The interviews were conducted in an exploratory manner without a formal set of questions, thus allowing interviewees to talk freely about their experiences. Whilst former STTEP contractors might have been inclined to overstate the success and effectiveness of this commercially conducted military operation, neither the British nor the Nigerian officers had a reason to do so. On the contrary, some of the military personnel interviewed tended to downplay the contributions made by the PMC. Overall, the data retrieved from the
Interviews were contextualised through extensive triangulation with open source material. The interviews helped to fill some of the gaps in reporting on this relatively short-lived and commercially conducted military operation – reporting that tended to revolve around the normative objection to the private use of military force rather than the operation itself.

**Re-assembling the security nexus in the developing world**

Traditionally, the concept of security in the social sciences has been defined in reference to socio-political integration, namely a relationship between a community and a communal security provider. In the Westphalian world, dominated by Western political thought, this relationship has been conceptualised as being between citizen, state and statutory security provider. Going back to the idea of the Social Contract as a reciprocal security arrangement between society and state, security was to be provided by the state as a public good for society, as a fiduciary association.3 The very legitimacy of the state was tied to its ability to provide security as a public good inclusively to all members of the community, i.e. the nation.4

The state’s privilege of a monopoly on violence stems from its normative duty in providing security as a public good. Weber’s idea of assigning the state with a monopolist authority to legitimise the use of violence in delegating the provision of security to its statutory means of force5 has often inspired a scholarly insistence that the state and its statutory security sector ought to be the only socio-political entity privileged to use force in providing public security.6

In the context of a globalised world, however, this state-centric approach to security appears to be archaic – not least in the developing world. Socio-political integration no longer exclusively revolves around society and state. Instead, we are witnessing a transnational integration of communities and identities, with states as traditional public security providers finding it difficult to live up to their social contractarian duties. This had been defined in reference to concepts of national territoriality. Yet, despite the fact that the literature has started to look at a post-statist world, as Sassen illustrates, the state continues to play an essential role in this globalised world, setting up new frameworks externally and domestically to be able to continue to fulfil its essential duties.7

In the constructivist conceptualisation of security, the referent object is no longer the state. Human security and the individual’s freedom from threat have replaced state-centric perceptions of security. Security is also no longer just limited to the domain of military security but can involve societal, political and economic security.8

Moreover, the state is no longer the exclusive provider of security – if in fact it has ever been. States are confronted with a top-down and bottom-up privatisation of security that is undermining the normative ideal of a Weberian monopoly over violence. The state often only functions as a patron delegating the burden of security provision to surrogates such as militias, insurgency groups, warlords, organised crime syndicates as well as commercial security providers.9 In particular, states in the developing world have never really conformed to the Western state-centric norms of security as described above.10 They have rarely achieved the same levels of monopolist authority over socio-political order and security as Western states were believed to have done throughout the 19th and twentieth century.11
Whilst a narrowing of state monopoly on violence, namely limiting the state’s privileges in the realm of security to authorising the use of violence, might be regarded by some as an unacceptable threat to the international system’s stability,12 the empirical reality of the early twenty-first century suggests that security provision becomes increasingly a multi-agent exercise.13 Therefore, this article suggests approaching the concept of security and security provision through the idea of assemblage. Assemblage is a relational approach encompassing a variety of actors, formal and informal institutions, and moral propositions.14 As such, the variety of elements that constitute a security assemblage transcend traditional monolithic conceptualizations of the local, the national, the regional or global. It also transcends traditional units of analysis such as society and state, accounting for the increased fluidity of geographic localities and spheres of power and authority on the transnational level.15

In their work on global security assemblages, Abrahamsen and Williams build on assemblage thinking to account for the reconfiguration of security relations beyond the traditional institutions of the state. Both define global security assemblages as

… transnational structures and networks in which a range of different actors and normativities interact, cooperate and compete to produce new institutions, practises and forms of de-territorialized security governance.16

Looking at private non-statutory security provision through the lens of assemblage, Abrahamsen and Williams reject traditional objections to the privatisation of security in favour of a more outcome-oriented approach where assemblages between local actors, state authority and the global market can potentially generate more inclusive security outcomes than more traditional, state-centric approaches. Consequently, the value of security does not derive from the character of the security provider per se, but from the sustainability, inclusiveness and effectiveness with which an assemblage of providers can positively affect communities on the ground. Framing the market for force not as a competitor of the state but as a potential partner of the state, the idea of assemblage allows the state to regain or retain its standing as a public security provider in the transnational security sphere of a globalised world.17 Abrahamsen and Williams argue that amid a process of de-nationalization and re-articulation of security structures and systems in the globalised world, security assemblages that include state institutions can enhance security outcomes in these transnational security spheres, while strengthening the legitimacy of the state as a public security provider.18

In this article we adopt the concept of global security assemblages to look at the partnership between the state and the global market for force in the developing world. Thereby, the value of a security assemblage derives from the outcomes it can generate, assessed in terms of effectiveness, reach and sustainability. Effectiveness refers here to the ability of the various elements within the assemblage to use its resources effectively to achieve overall security objectives within a given geographic space. Reach refers here to the ability of the assemblage to achieve a high degree of inclusiveness of security outcomes, not only benefitting certain groups but benefitting the public in the area at large.19 Sustainability looks at the longevity of security outcomes from the short to the long-term.

Thus, global security assemblages are multi-stakeholder arrangements potentially consisting of a wide range of private and statutory actors that provide security in various
dimensions to communities beyond the boundaries of individual states and jurisdictions. The degree of state involvement in these assemblages can vary from one locality to another.20

**Challenging state institutions: the rise of Boko Haram**

With a population of 195.87 million21 divided into an excess of 500 different ethnic groups, and a GDP of 397.27 US$ billion,22 Nigeria is, as Holmes calls it, the “Giant of Africa”.23 It is the continent’s most populous and wealthiest country by overall GDP. Nonetheless, this multinational, federal state has been plagued by poverty, socio-economic inequalities, political dissidence and insurgency since its independence in 1960.24 Nigeria has rarely been stable. Riots and violent clashes between the state’s security forces and dissident communities date back to the time before the civil war that started with the Biafra insurgency in 1967. While some might argue that the coups d’état of the 1970s and 1980s provided some humble stability, it did little to advance good governance.25 After returning to democracy in 1999, Nigeria’s most prominent socio-political challenges were the insurgency in the Niger Delta and an insurgency in the north that was later exploited by Boko Haram/JAS.

The root cause of these two ongoing insurgencies is bad governance and the inability of the Nigerian state to provide socio-economic and physical security inclusively to all communities.26 Nigeria displays some of the most fundamental structural problems that are endemic in sub-Saharan Africa. Its socio-politics are dominated by patrimonial networks on the national, regional and local level.27 As a highly centralised post-colonial state, Nigeria has a bloated bureaucracy financed by rents earned almost exclusively through its oil wealth.28 Small patrimonial elites who benefit disproportionately from oil revenues are not incentivized to mobilise resources and capacity to provide public goods for communities on the periphery of the Nigerian heartland. This socio-political system conforms to the typical definition of neo-patrimonialism: an amalgamated system of formal and informal institutions built around patron-client relationships whereby resources and concessions are being distributed by the patron in return for client support.29 The consequence of such neo-patrimonial relationships between state and citizen is an exclusivity and selectiveness with which public goods, most notably security, is distributed. In essence, security in all dimensions becomes a private good sold to the highest bidder. Communities who lack the representation or informal ties to those in power are inevitably worse off than those communities more proximate to the patron.

The consequence of neo-patrimonialism is mismanagement, economic waste and the misappropriation of government funds, which together have a devastating impact on the ability of the Nigerian state to cater for communal interests and needs.30 Among others, the state’s security sector has been compromised in its ability to provide public security as its nepotistic networks are often more concerned with furthering commercial interests than in serving local communities. In some areas, particularly northern provinces, the police and the military are widely perceived by the public as abusive institutions, with the number of extra-judicial killings and detentions of alleged abusive criminals and terrorists on the rise.31
The more the state fails to live up to its fundamental social contractarian duty in providing human security inclusively, the less people trust in its governance. It is in this context that non-state actors have positioned themselves as alternative security providers to a failing state— the rise of Jama’atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda’Awati Wal Jihad (JAS), more commonly known as Boko Haram, might be just the most prominent one. The Boko Haram/JAS insurgency has fallen on fertile ground in Nigeria’s impoverished and disenfranchised north, where Islamist militancy met receptive audiences. Already in the 1980s the northern cities of Kano and Maiduguri had witnessed insurrections advancing ideological narratives that promised more inclusive forms of governance catering for communal needs based on the Islamic Sharia.

In 2002 Boko Haram/JAS was founded by a local radical Muslim cleric Mohammad Yussuf as a Salafist religious complex providing education and charity for impoverished Muslims from north eastern Nigeria and neighbouring countries. Ideologically, the group has never been a monolithic entity as it attracted disenfranchised and alienated locals, some of whom were building on the Mahdist tradition of peaceful reform and others on more radical, militant Wahhabist ideas that had been imported to Nigeria by missionaries and returning students from Saudi Arabia. The appeal of Yussuf’s message was that under the banner “Western education is forbidden”, the literal translation of Boko Haram, resistance to the state was legitimised through religious narratives. The group framed social injustice in Nigeria’s north through an ideological prism and blamed it on secular thinking as well as the country’s post-colonial adoption of a secular Western socio-political system.

Promising a way out of poverty and towards righteous leadership, the message of Boko Haram resonated well with local Muslim communities in the north of the country—communities severely affected by poverty, lack of education, socio-economic injustice and severe underdevelopment. In comparison to Nigeria’s predominately Christian southern states, 72% of Nigerians in the northern states live in poverty compared to 27% in the south and 35% in the Niger Delta. Amid severe human underdevelopment, sentiments of human insecurity and socio-political marginalisation “many Muslims are becoming increasingly sceptical about a system that has brought them little benefit and has served well the interests of the established political elite”.

Amid a climate of perceived abandonment from the state, Mohammad Yussuf appeared as the Mahdi leader, combining ideological indoctrination with the charitable provision of public goods locally. While Yussuf sowed the ideological seeds for resistance and rebellion by offering free access to education for thousands of young men, Boko Haram/JAS was simultaneously building a hospital and setting up successfully functioning micro-finance schemes. The socio-political disenchantment and sentiments of human insecurity felt in the north were effectively exploited by the group as it positioned itself as an alternative local security provider to the state—something that would help Yussuf to quickly establish a considerable popular base.

A heavy-handed approach by Nigeria’s security sector against members of the Boko Haram/JAS group in 2009 exacerbated sentiments of communal insecurity. In an extensive military operation, the Nigeran state destroyed the compound of the group and killed several hundred of its members including Yusuf himself. Disproportionate force and extra-judicial killings by the statutory security sector caused Boko Haram/JAS to respond with revenge attacks against the institutions of the state. The lack of capacity...
and capability in Nigeria’s law enforcement and military coupled with a failure to appreciate the importance of community engagement in counterinsurgency set the state on a collision course with the group and its followers, who moved from peaceful resistance to violent insurgency. Since the death of Yussuf in 2009, the message of Boko Haram/JAS has decidedly moved to one of jihad.

Since 2010 under the new leadership of Shekau, the group trans-nationalized its jihadist brand showing clear socio-political aspirations to overthrow existing government structures. Boko Haram/JAS brought together a transnational network of militants primarily focusing on violently implementing its ideological agenda. Supporting global jihad, the security assemblage increasingly globalised causing the aims of the group to move beyond the local establishment of an Islamic State in Nigeria. Boko Haram launched a violent insurgency campaign using guerrilla and terrorist tactics against the Nigerian state tapping into a transnational network of foreign fighters, arms smugglers and financiers. Linking up with global jihadist groups such as Al Qaeda and later the Islamic State (ISIS) while also maintaining relationships with jihadist insurgents such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, Boko Haram/JAS was able to exploit the increasing trans-nationalization of global jihadism. The group’s initial focus on local security concerns became increasingly intertwined with global ambitions reaching beyond the borders of Nigeria. Foreign fighters from Chad, Niger, Benin and Cameroon were able to exploit the practically ungoverned space of northern Nigeria to pursue their ideological vision of an Islamic state in sub-Saharan Africa. As the Nigerian state withdrew, a complex network of militants filled the void to establish a launching pad for jihadist incursions into Nigeria’s south and neighbouring countries. The emerging split within the organisation since 2018 between Shekau and the ISIS-emir al-Barnawi, might have weakened the organisation internally. Instead, it has caused a “mission-creep” as parts of Boko Haram continue to operate as an insurgency group while others firmly resort to acts of terrorism, thus making it harder to mobilise measures to mitigate the effects of the group’s activity.

The Nigerian state found it ever more difficult to adequately respond to escalating levels of violence. Its statutory security forces acted indiscriminately, extra-judicially and excessively, fuelling a spiral of violence that has left Nigeria in tatters. As Onuoha states, the Nigerian government’s forces were resorting to jungle justice: civilians were displaced, detained indefinitely or even killed under suspicion of supporting Boko Haram/JAS. As a result, even Christian communities felt increasingly insecure at the ineptitude of formal government institutions to maintain public security. Parallel security architectures such as neighbourhood watches, vigilante groups and ethnic militias started to emerge, providing security locally and often in competition with the Nigerian state. The legitimacy of the state and its statutory security sector was severely undermined by the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency.

**Commercialising the fight against Boko Haram**

Amid a fierce election campaign in 2014, former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan feared that his government’s inability to effectively deal with the Boko Haram threat in the north might undermine his chances of being re-elected. The Nigerian Armed Forces (NAF), corroded by corruption and plagued by insufficient doctrine, a lack of training
and poor equipment, had proven incapable of implementing a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy in the north against the hybrid threat posed by a highly agile enemy with ties to the local population. The incumbent president was eager to find a quick fix for a protracted problem – one that required a joint political-military solution.

For years, Western partners had come to Nigeria to help in capacity building. The United States and the UK, in particular, had invested heavily in defence engagement with Nigeria by setting up training courses for regular and Special Forces to help its fight against terrorism. However, these training courses in counterinsurgency doctrine, bomb disposal and mine clearing were sporadic and not integrated into a wider strategy. As a British Army Major involved in several training missions in Nigeria observes, “while the training courses were effective, they were not followed up by trainers in the field … the British government was too risk averse to allow trainers anywhere near the contested areas in the north”.52 The absence of effective direction and assistance with operational planning in anti-Boko Haram operations in northern Nigeria widely undermined the effectiveness of Western defence engagement. In the critical application phase of converting doctrine and theory into military practise, most regular Nigerian army platoons were left on their own – Western Special Forces teams would only embed sporadically with Nigerian Special Forces.53 As STTEP’s former CEO Eeben Barlow observes, “much of this training is focused on window-dressing, but when you look through the window, the room is empty”.54 In addition to ineffective training and direction, the Nigerian Armed Forces were also in dire need of procuring military hardware and vehicles specifically designed for this type of COIN operation. Requests by the Nigerian military for more extensive arms support were ignored by the USA, the UK and South Africa due to fears that any procurement deal would fuel Jonathan’s extensive patrimonial system of corruption.55

Simultaneously to Nigeria’s outreach to Western partners, Abuja also tried to utilise the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) created in 1994 in partnership with neighbouring countries. As Boko Haram increasingly developed into a transnational organisation operating across borders, the MNJTF was supposed to be a joint vehicle to coordinate the fight against the jihadist group. When the initial joint headquarters in Baga, Nigeria was overrun by the group in January 2015, the MNJTF had to re-organize, moving its headquarters to N’Djamena in Chad and developing a new coordinated strategy against Boko Haram that would comprise a greater and more capable force.56

Nigeria’s engagement with both international and regional partners was unable to deliver the necessary operational successes against Boko Haram. Consequently, the Jonathan administration was looking for a security lever that would not only complement the existing capacity and capability of the Nigerian Armed Forces, but that could fill the void between international and regional cooperation on one side, and the national security sector response on the other.57 Turning to the global market for force promised to provide capacity, capability and doctrine that the Nigerian security sector was lacking in its COIN struggle with Boko Haram.

In late 2014, Nigeria’s National Security Advisor Sambo Dasuki got in contact with Cobus Claassens, the owner of Conella Services Ltd., asking him to reach out in turn to Eeben Barlow with the aim of setting up a commercial force to battle Boko Haram. Conella Services Ltd, already based in Nigeria, would subcontract STTEP to assist the government in restoring law and order in the northern states of the country.58 STTEP
was marketing itself as an “African company” drawing on experienced military contractors from the elite units of the pre-1994 South African Defence Forces, as well as from other African militaries.59 As Barlow, the company’s chairman, highlighted in 2018, STTEP had a competitive advantage entering the Nigerian environment as an African company on par with the local African forces the contractors intended to train, direct and embed with.60 It used contractors who had previous experience in commercial warfighting with the former South African-based PMC, Executive Outcomes (EO). It also understood the military culture of African armies and how to work with them in their own operating environments.61 EO had already demonstrated in the mid-1990s that combat support operations could be effectively outsourced to the market in an African COIN environment.62 Like EO did two decades earlier in Angola and Sierra Leone, STTEP would function as a force multiplier by providing training, planning, direction, close air support and fire support to local forces.63

A few weeks after signing a contract with the Nigerian government, STTEP arrived in-theatre in December 2014. After initial reconnaissance, training and planning, STTEP commenced its support to operations against Boko Haram in January 2015. While Western donors refused to equip the Nigerian Armed Forces with additional firepower due to concerns over their human rights record, STTEP was able to procure two dozen Armoured Personnel Carriers, several helicopters and helicopter gunships through backchannels, bypassing arms export restrictions to Nigeria put in place by South Africa and other countries.64

STTEP’s primary function was to train Nigerian forces in mounted and dismounted manoeuvre in what Barlow already defines a strategy of “relentless pursuit” of enemy forces using the application of direct and indirect fire.65 Operating in hostile terrain against small platoons of insurgents who had local knowledge and support meant that the Nigerian forces had to learn how to apply force proportionately and effectively, from positions of operational advantage achieved through manoeuvre. Unlike Western trainers, STTEP personnel would prepare Nigerian forces in-theatre and then embed with them during combat operations to ensure that lessons were applied successfully in practice. STTEP contractors were effectively integrated into the Nigerian Armed Forces, sharing their hardships, whilst STTEP’s chairman, Barlow, was appointed to the rank of major general in charge of the so-called 72nd Mobile Strike Force.66 As discussed below, this relationship was also important with the local civil society, as STTEP needed to implement social responsibility programmes as part of its wider strategy to win the confidence of the local population. These programmes, however, had to first be cleared by the government.67

The 250 STTEP contractors were in charge of command and control, communications and planning. They jointly embedded with Nigerian forces in combat and directed local forces to target areas. Simultaneously, contractors were flying helicopters and helicopter gunships at high speed and low altitude, engaging Boko Haram relentlessly by day and night.68 Boko Haram fighters had no means to defend themselves against rapidly advancing Nigerian army platoons headed by South African contractors and supported from the air.69 STTEP’s control of the air generated superior situational awareness for the assemblage of uniformed and commercial soldiers, leaving the jihadists with little room to hide or manoeuvre. The company was not only helping the Nigerian Armed Forces to augment their capacity and capability, but equally presented an integrated
role model for how to engage an enemy that had been widely misunderstood. After years of Nigerian authorities surrendering territory to Boko Haram, STTEP contractors demonstrated that the insurgents could be defeated by ensuring everyone worked together to achieve unity of effort. As a Nigerian Army Major argues:

The South Africans managed to show that Boko Haram could be defeated and that one did not have to run away. The Nigerian military was lacking morale and stamina. The PMSC provided the NAF with a force-multiplying capability that transformed the Nigerian military amid adversary. Something that could not be trained. Something that had to be shown on the battlefield.70

Barlow (2018) makes the case that PMCs can only be effective when directly embedding with local forces:

You need to deploy with them as you are sending the message to the local forces that you trust them to work alongside them. You trust them that your training is good enough; that builds confidence. This integration is crucial for civil–military relations… We live with them and share their hardships… That builds trust and loyalty71

At the same time STTEP made an effort to conduct population-centric warfare, teaching and applying basic ethics in an effort to bond with the local population.72 Although not for altruistic reasons as Barlow (2018) suggests, social responsibility programmes:

involved medical clinics operated by our doctors. We fly in medication from South African donations. We engage in water purification to ensure that people do not have to drink polluted water and get sick from water-borne diseases. We provide employment to local people to assist us as chefs, washing vehicles etc. We are not just there to give, we want people to contribute73

Following the maxim of “winning hearts and minds”,74 contractors merged together uniformed personnel with the local vigilante groups of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), a people’s militia with primitive weapons that had been formalised by Borno State in 2013. Since then the CJTF had grown in numbers, comprising thousands of volunteer vigilantes who, armed with knives and machetes, moved against Boko Haram/JAS sympathisers in their communities.75 While the Nigerian security forces had identified the CJTF as a potent force multiplier prior to the STTEP engagement, repeated brutality by police and military against the vigilantes caused alienation among the CJTF men.76 STTEP realised the full potential of the CJTF as the eyes and ears of the operation against the jihadists by them providing contractors with local knowledge and intelligence that was vital in outmanoeuvring Boko Haram.77 Contractors made sure that uniformed personnel and vigilantes would cooperate without previously experienced tensions in a unity of effort against a common enemy – Boko Haram/JAS.78 The integration of the CJTF into the anti-Boko Haram assemblage controlled by the Nigerian state remains an ongoing process that is often undermined by the lack of trust between statutory security providers and local communities.79

Measuring STTEP’s impact

In April 2015 after just three months, the Jonathan government in Nigeria prematurely cancelled the contract with STTEP. According to Barlow, Western donors, most importantly the United States, had put pressure on Abuja to comply with the anti-mercenary
norm and terminate the arrangement with the PMC or lose foreign aid. At the same time, South Africa had directly raised the issue of STTEP with the Jonathan government over illicit transfers of cash to pay for the contractors. Other sources in the NAF point towards an internal rift within the South African assemblage between Claassens, whose company had subcontracted STTEP, and Barlow, the director of STTEP.

Measuring the effectiveness of STTEP for the very limited period of three months remains difficult in the long-run and subject to the metrics applied. Using data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) it does appear that STTEPs may have had an impact on Boko Haram’s ability to carry out terrorist attacks in Nigeria. But the numbers below need to be treated with caution. Using the following search criteria (Years 2014–2016; All incidents regardless of doubt; Perpetrators, Boko Haram: Country, Nigeria) the number of incidents dropped dramatically in 2016 from the previous two years (2014–2015). In 2014 the number of incidents was 436, with 73 unsure. In 2015 the number of incidents was 402, with 35 unsure. In 2016 the number of incidents was 178, with 8 unsure. While it would be wrong to attribute the drop in incidents in 2016 to STTEPs, it is feasible to suggest that the training they provided in improving the military’s operational efficiency could have been one of a number of contributing factors responsible for this drop. Indeed, since counterinsurgency requires a whole-of-government approach, STTEP’s impact on that effort can only be measured in reference to the military component – not the social and political component, which appears to remain a concern in defeating both the terrorist and insurgency element of Boko Haram. Hence, STTEP’s contribution to the COIN effort was made primarily on the operational level and translated into strategic success for a limited period of time but required the political level to plug into the military achievements of STTEP to create a more sustainable COIN policy. It is important to highlight here that a change of government in Abuja in 2015, seeing Goodluck Jonathan being replaced with Buhari, a Muslim from Nigeria’s north, set the context for a more effective implementation of a whole-of-government approach to counterinsurgency in the north. At least for the months following STTEP’s short-term deployment, the considerate approach to government investments and positive engagement with dissident forces in the north, strategically complemented the operational achievements of STTEP.

Looking at Boko Haram in 2015 as an insurgency group, territory seized from the group and held by the assemblage of national and commercial forces is an important metric. Within three months STTEP and the NAF had seized a territory of the size of Belgium, using an integrated operational approach Barlow describes as “relentless pursuit”. NAF commanders involved in the operation unanimously agree that STTEP’s training, equipment, force integration and direction made swift operational successes possible, adding to capacity, capability and norms of the Nigerian military. The assemblage of state, market and community-based vigilantes was able to merge South African COIN doctrine, Western donor-promoted notions of population-centric warfare and Nigerian capacity with local knowledge to restore a sense of physical security in their area of operations. STTEP helped build a joint strike force within a short amount of time that was able to first, identify and remove Boko Haram/JAS sympathisers from within the community, and second, to push insurgents out of populated areas into the bush and Sambisa forest. The armed element of the insurgency, consequently “become fragmented and increasingly factionalised, its leaders unable to communicate
Applying force more proportionately and with less collateral damage, the assemblage has contributed to an improvement of relations between the security sector and the community. The externalisation of the kinetic burden of COIN warfare to the market meant that the Nigerian state was able to contract-in a degree of risk acceptance that had been absent with other donor countries. The outcome-oriented approach taken by STTEP ensured that contractors were accepting reasonable operational risks in embedding with local forces, thus giving Nigerian uniformed personnel the confidence and morale boost that was required to apply training to operations involving high levels of combat stress.

Within three months the PMC was able to build an effective public-commercial partnership providing the Nigerian state with access to capacity, capability and norms that could not have been nurtured domestically within such a short timeframe. The assemblage of commercial contractors, local vigilante forces and the public security sector in many ways complemented the already existing transnational infrastructure to militarily engage Boko Haram through the Multinational Joint Task Force. Bringing together the local, the national, the international and global, the public-private security partnership provided a transnational solution to a transnational problem.

STTEP’s training and direction of the NAF complemented the professional military education provided by Western donors, highlighting the importance of population-centric operations, whilst drawing upon the local population as an important force multiplier in pursuit of insurgent and terrorist forces. The population-centric approach, which had been already an integral part of Executive Outcomes operations in the 1990s, ensured that public security was provided not at the expense of local communities, but by inclusively benefitting locals. A doctrinal rethink about COIN on the operational level, reinforced by STTEP’s training and direction, was accompanied by a strategic rethink of the new Nigerian government about how to engage the Boko Haram/JAS problem in 2015. On the strategic level, the Buhari administration highlighted the importance of trust building measures by the security sector through effective community engagement; the recognition of religious pluralism; and the overall realisation that local northerners are partners in the fight against Boko Haram/JAS, not adversaries. The integration of the CJTF into the statutory security sector and a more effective coordination of military, law enforcement and community-based vigilantes had a lasting positive impact on the counterinsurgency effort.

This being said, the Boko Haram/JAS insurgency is far from over. Although the franchise controls far less territory than in 2014, terrorist attacks linked to Boko Haram/JAS still occur across Nigeria’s north-east – albeit less frequently and with less casualties than before the STTEP intervention. Nonetheless, as caveated above, it would be difficult to attribute this development solely to STTEP’s intervention. Thus, in reference to sustainability, the impact of STTEP and the wider assemblage of state, market and vigilante groups results are mixed. Considering that STTEP’s operations were prematurely cancelled, the legacy of the PMC’s contribution to Nigeria’s counterinsurgency against Boko Haram, five years later is difficult to measure. While some NAF officers involved in the STTEP operation assert that NAF’s partnering with STTEP has changed their operational thinking and provided enduring lessons for an integrated approach of “relentless pursuit”, in some parts the NAF appear to have fallen back into old patterns of behaviour. Although the population-centric approach has been widely internalised by NAF
commanders, the de-centralised approach to dispersing troops evenly across regained territory, has apparently been abandoned more recently in favour of force concentration in urban centres.\textsuperscript{97} As a result, Boko Haram/JAS has been able to occasionally seize territory for a limited period of time.

Overall, looking at the period right after the short-lived 2015 STTEP intervention, the assemblage between state, market and vigilante groups was able to gain legitimacy by collectively turning the tide against Boko Haram/JAS – a momentum the NAF had been unable to create during the previous decade. The arrival of commercial soldiers operating jointly with local forces did not undermine the state’s authority in an area where the Nigerian state had been already absent for almost a decade. On the contrary, the assemblage of commercial, national and local forces had allowed the Nigerian state to return to formerly abandoned territories in an effort to provide security for local communities. Arguably, this could have been achieved more sustainably, had the Nigerian state managed the relationship with these surrogates more effectively in encouraging them to share the burden of fighting Boko Haram/JAS in the long run.

**Conclusion**

In the twenty-first century as non-state actors arguably play an ever-growing role in shaping and even determining the outcomes of violent conflicts, states in the developing world have taken an unconventional approach to providing security domestically as a public good. By partnering with private actors both commercial and non-commercial, the state is potentially able to extend its reach and quality in security provision. In that way, we have argued in this article, private security actors are not necessarily undermining the authority of the state, but rather in assisting the state in providing an essential state function: security for its people. Particularly, in remote or contested areas, partnerships with local, regional and global non-state actors can augment the capacity and capability of the state’s security sector by increasing its legitimacy as an inclusive security provider. Global security assemblages, in bringing together the state, local and global security actors with their expertise, norms and experience, can in fact prepare the state for the arguably increasingly complex transnational environment it operates in.

In Nigeria, where the central government’s authority has long been undermined by its inability to provide security inclusively to communities across the country, STTEP has been able to support a weak government that found itself in a desperate situation in late 2014. On the periphery, communities had long lost faith in a corrupt administration unable or unwilling to deliver public goods, thus fuelling local dissidence and insurgency. Boko Haram/JAS in many ways has been a symptom of both sentiments of disenfranchisement among Muslims in the northern states of the country, and also the repressive means employed by the Nigerian security sector in engaging dissidents and insurgents. Contracting-in a commercial counterinsurgency as a force multiplier helped the country fundamentally change its approach to engaging the insurgents. Locals were seen as an asset; force was applied proportionately and considerately; and liberated areas were stabilised sustainably. Although the partnership with the commercial actor STTEP was short-lived and stabilisation was helped by a change of direction in the holistic government approach to the region after the election of Buhari in 2015, the security assemblage that grew out of this public-commercial partnership coincided with a more
engaged counterinsurgency approach taken by Abuja in the north. Today, Boko Haram is contained by joint operations between the Nigerian military, the local civilian task force and the Multinational Joint Task Force across the border.

Thus, the campaign against Boko Haram/JAS can serve as a model for setting up global assemblages in other contested areas of the country where the government has lost control, an idea that might be relevant to both academics and practitioners. An important caveat in this context is that security assemblages are only effective in boosting state capacity and capability if the state retains effective control over the non-state actors it partners with. At a time where authoritarian states such as Russia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) increasingly outsource warfighting to commercial surrogates, the inability of patrons to maintain or enforce surrogate behaviour creates a ticking time-bomb. The UAE’s loss of control over its surrogates in Yemen, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), is partially due to Abu Dhabi’s large-scale reliance on contractors to exercise command and control over local militia groups.98 In Nigeria, without the contractual means to maintain or enforce behaviour, the CJTF has developed into a rogue actor in some areas despite receiving a state stipend, drawing-in criticism for human rights abuses.99 Apart from commercial surrogates, vigilante groups and militias can also become a liability rather than an asset within a global security assemblage when their motives deviate from delivering public security towards delivering private security. The state’s role as an authority controlling the use of force is not necessarily challenged by the fact that force is provided by a private actor, but it is challenged when this private actor cannot be effectively controlled.

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