

CIVILIAN COUNTERTERRORISM FORCES AND THE FIGHT
AGAINST EXTREMISM:
A REVIEW OF NIGERIA, SOMALIA, AND BURKINA FASO

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COUNTER
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PROJECT

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Introduction

Protracted insurgencies and the growing threat by local affiliates of the global terrorism networks of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) throughout Nigeria, Somalia, and Burkina Faso have transformed on-the-ground responses to violent extremism throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. Somalia continues to grapple with the unrelenting force of the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Shabaab; Burkina Faso contends with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), ISIS in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Ansarul Islam; and Nigeria remains encumbered by Boko Haram's 14-year insurgency and the increasingly violent Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). As serious and sustained militant and terrorist movements continue to kill thousands and displace millions, the three respective governments have altered their responses to violent extremists and terrorism, integrating civilian-led, community-based security strategies into their national counterterrorism programs.

National armies and their international partners have offered some reprieve from enduring violent conflicts, but in many cases have failed to offer comprehensive protections to all civilians. Civilian counterterrorism militias emerged to provide security to vulnerable communities and were quickly recognized as an alternative to state-sponsored counterinsurgency campaigns. However, once these counterterrorism militias were enlisted and absorbed into the national security apparatus, new—albeit long-established—challenges quickly emerged. Localized counterterrorism campaigns have at times devolved into vengeful operations against ethnic rivals as well as opportunities to carry out illicit activities such as extortion, drug trafficking, and looting.

The benefits and drawbacks of civilian counterterrorism militias remain consistent across different regions. The strategy is cost-effective and practical as civilian defense forces are often cheaper than formal security units, such as the national army and the police. There is a ready pool of potential local recruits to safeguard vulnerable communities, and they are knowledgeable about the communities they protect. Most importantly, civilian troops establish a level of community loyalty that can be difficult to achieve with national armies. Significant drawbacks of civilian forces are that troops can become unreliable and difficult to control if not properly managed. Furthermore, without strong and effective oversight mechanisms, civilian troops are capable of undermining government authority, rule of law, and governance. Unfortunately, if not carefully executed, civilian forces could deteriorate into armed criminal networks,¹ transforming from vanguards of safety into long-term sources of instability and insecurity.²

¹ Jonathan Goodhand, Aziz Hakimi, "Counterinsurgency, Local Militias, and State Building in Afghanistan," United States Institute for Peace 2014, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/175273/PW90-Counterinsurgency-Local-Militias-and-Statebuilding-in-Afghanistan.pdf>.

² Patricio Asfura-Heim, Jerry Meyerle, William Rosenau, and Eric Davids, "Risky Business: The Future of Civil Defense Forces and Counterterrorism in an Era of Persistent Conflict: iv," CNA, October 2014, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2014/crm-2014-u-008881%20%281%29.pdf>; Dr Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, "Rethinking the response to jihadist groups across the Sahel," Chatham House, March 2, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/03/rethinking-response-jihadist-groups-across-sahel/05-role-local-militia-groups>.

Engineering substantial responses to violent extremism is becoming more difficult as economic pressures, political instability, and climate change further degrade the livelihoods of struggling communities that are then vulnerable to recruitment into violent extremism networks. The shortcomings of counterterrorism campaigns are not only exacerbated by these exogenous conditions but prove more challenging to overcome when responding simultaneously to decades of ethnic rivalries and interclan disputes. As desperate central governments besieged by the horror of violent extremist and terrorist groups have turned to civilian militias—which are also referred to as civilian forces, community militias, and community defense groups throughout this report—the following three case studies demonstrate that the challenges accompanying those decisions have often exposed, and at times worsened, the underlying issues that have allowed instability and conflict to persevere.

Case Study: Nigeria

Since 2009, Boko Haram and its currently larger and well-established splinter group, Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP), have plagued Nigeria’s northeast. Terrorist attacks have resulted in the displacement of more than 2.2 million Nigerians and created more than 280,000 Nigerian refugees.³ The Nigerian military was not adequately prepared for the frequency and impact of these violent attacks, leading the Nigerian government to turn to supplementary security solutions. Civilian militias, which existed long before violent extremism and terrorism became a persistent threat, offered an auxiliary approach that not only strengthened defense campaigns but also integrated local knowledge and on-the-ground needs. However, this more localized counterinsurgency program has not been without challenges.

Community-Based Defense Groups

Originally, civilian defense groups primarily focused on protecting communities from violent threats, but given their position of authority within their community, they were at times commissioned by the state to collect taxes and even suppress dissent.⁴ Within Borno State—an area afflicted by protracted conflict—the local militias include the kungiyar maharba (hunters), yan baga (vigilantes), and Shuwa vigilante (kesh kesh).⁵ In Kaduna State, retired police officers and soldiers also banded together to respond to crime under the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN). Of the four, the hunters existed long before Boko Haram emerged, whereas the vigilantes and kesh kesh organized in response to increasing levels of violent robberies brought on by economic downturns and changes in climate. According to research conducted by the

³ “‘Those Who Returned Are Suffering’ Impact of Camp Shutdowns on People Displaced By Boko Haram Conflict in Nigeria,” Human Rights Watch, November 2, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/11/02/those-who-returned-are-suffering/impact-camp-shutdowns-people-displaced-boko#_ftn17.

⁴ Chitra Nagarajan, “To Defend or Harm? Community Militias in Borno State, Nigeria,” Center for Civilians in Conflict, June 2020, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CommunityMilitiasFINAL_June2020lowres.pdf.

⁵ Chitra Nagarajan, “Nigerian Community Militias: Toward A Solution,” Center for Civilians in Conflict, November 2019, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Issue-Brief_Africa_Final_Web.pdf.

Center for Civilians in Conflict, there are tens of thousands of community militias in Borno State alone.⁶

Unlike other groups, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF or yan gora) was established in 2013 in Borno State as a direct response to Boko Haram's escalating violence. Founded by local groups of young men in Maiduguri, Borno State's largest city, the CJTF proved beneficial to the national army. The CJTF gathered intelligence, gained loyalty from local communities, and helped to secure checkpoints.⁷ The additional manpower provided much needed relief to the national army which was inadequately prepared to counter high numbers of terrorists.⁸ The CJTF's efforts were a tactical success as Maiduguri, unlike other municipalities in the northeast, did not fall to Boko Haram. The local brigade's success then motivated the military to adopt the community paramilitary model throughout other high-conflict areas in the northeast.⁹

Government Support and Local Endorsement

In terms of government support, the CJTF in Borno receives funds from Borno State's government and is further assisted by Nigeria's armed forces to coordinate specific counterterrorism operations.¹⁰ Other governments in the northeast—such as Kaduna State—also provide their CJTF troops with financial and logistical support.¹¹ Additionally, some of those CJTF troops based in Kaduna State have received police training and have even graduated from the state's police academy.¹² Training and orientation vary widely across the CJTF, but instruction is more often informal and rudimentary. Other than instructions on overcoming religious and ethnic divides, identifying and appropriately responding to suspected jihadi terrorists, and brief discussions on how to conduct and act during military operations, the CJTF does not receive intensive training from the military. Aspects of international humanitarian law

⁶ Chitra Nagarajan, "To Defend or Harm? Community Militias in Borno State, Nigeria," Center for Civilians in Conflict, June 2020, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CommunityMilitiasFINAL_June2020lowres.pdf.

⁷ Jibrin Ibrahim and Saleh Bala, "Civilian-Led Governance and Security in Nigeria After Boko Haram," United States Institute of Peace, December 2018, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/sr_437_civilian_led_governance_and_security_in_nigeria_0.pdf.

⁸ Kevin Sieff, "The Nigerian military is so broken, its soldiers are refusing to fight," *Washington Post*, May 10, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/the-nigerian-military-is-so-broken-its-soldiers-are-refusing-to-fight/2015/05/06/d56fabac-dcae-11e4-b6d7-b9bc8acf16f7_story.html; Nick Robertson, "Nigerian military disorganized, under-equipped in battle against Boko Haram," CNN, January 15, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/01/15/africa/nigeria-military-families-boko-haram/index.html>.

⁹ Chitra Nagarajan, "To Defend or Harm? Community Militias in Borno State, Nigeria: 2," Center for Civilians in Conflict, June 2020, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CommunityMilitiasFINAL_June2020lowres.pdf.

¹⁰ "Nigeria," Stimson, December 7, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/project/child-soldiers/cspa-implementation-tracker/country-profiles/nigeria/>.

¹¹ Happines Okokah, Ibrahim Ignatius Felix Ruwan, Vakpa Iliya, Ogheneovie O Akise, and Chukwu Daniel Chibueze, "Assessing the Impact of Coalition Joint Tasks in Kaduna State, Nigeria," *International Journal of Management, Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies*, March 2021, <https://www.ijmsspcs.com/index.php/IJMSSPCS/article/download/168/169>.

¹² John Owen Nwachukwu, "Kaduna: Police train 312 Civilian Joint Task Force personnel to curtail insecurity," *Daily Post*, September 26, 2021, <https://dailypost.ng/2021/09/26/kaduna-police-train-312-civilian-joint-task-force-personnel-to-curtail-insecurity/>.

are also reportedly discussed to some degree among members.¹³ Unfortunately, even the limited training sessions have not been equally provided to female CJTF members, who have at times felt purposely excluded by CJTF senior leaders from assistance and training programs.¹⁴

Responsibilities of the CJTF include conducting joint patrols with the military, screening applicants at internally displaced people (IDP) camps and providing protections that allow civilians to maintain their economic livelihoods.¹⁵ Civilian counterterrorism forces have several advantages when it comes to gaining the support of local communities, making it possibly easier to effectively carry out their mandate. For example, a shared language and deep communal ties elevate the CJTF as a credible security resource. Additionally, the CJTF can provide insider knowledge on geography, languages, culture, and persistent threats that can otherwise be overlooked in the national military's plan of action.¹⁶

Although incorporating community defense forces cannot guarantee stable, collective security, it can alleviate some of the concerns community members have when national counterterror units are stationed locally. Civilians are more likely to trust the motives of the civilian militias who understand the details of their quotidian fears and struggles. Field based interviews¹⁷ with humanitarian workers have revealed that despite extensive military training, Nigeria's national security forces lack an understanding of humanitarian law and training in effective engagement with local populations. Given the national army's imperfect application of humanitarian conduct, these inconsistent standards would ultimately impact the way in which the CJTF and its members operate, especially if they model their tactics after the national army. The military also reportedly fails to adequately distinguish between civilians and combatants, which can result in larger numbers of civilian casualties.¹⁸ Furthermore, community militias serve as conduits for the national military to solidify communal bonds between municipalities and the state. By reframing the relationship of the state to its civilians, counterterrorism campaigns become multilateral initiatives with stakeholders at every level of society.¹⁹

¹³ Chitra Nagarajan, "To Defend or Harm? Community Militias in Borno State, Nigeria: 15," Center for Civilians in Conflict, June 2020, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CommunityMilitiasFINAL_June2020lowres.pdf.

¹⁴ Chitra Nagarajan, "Nigerian Community Militias: Toward A Solution," Center for Civilians in Conflict, November 2019, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Issue-Brief_Africa_Final_Web.pdf.

¹⁵ Chitra Nagarajan, "To Defend or Harm? Community Militias in Borno State, Nigeria: 2," Center for Civilians in Conflict, June 2020, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CommunityMilitiasFINAL_June2020lowres.pdf.

¹⁶ "Double-edged Sword: Vigilantes in African Counter-insurgencies," International Crisis Group, September 7, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/sierra-leone/251-double-edged-sword-vigilantes-african-counter-insurgencies>.

¹⁷ "U.S. Security Partnerships and the Protection of Civilians," Brown University, Security Assistance Monitor and InterAction, May 2022, <https://watson.brown.edu/chrhs/files/chrhs/imce/partnerships/Civ-Mil/Nigeria-May-2022-Factsheet.pdf>.

¹⁸ "U.S. Security Partnerships and the Protection of Civilians," Brown University, Security Assistance Monitor and InterAction, May 2022, <https://watson.brown.edu/chrhs/files/chrhs/imce/partnerships/Civ-Mil/Nigeria-May-2022-Factsheet.pdf>.

¹⁹ "Double-edged Sword: Vigilantes in African Counter-insurgencies," International Crisis Group, September 7, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/sierra-leone/251-double-edged-sword-vigilantes-african-counter-insurgencies>.

Abuses of Power in the CJTF and Crimes Against Humanity

However, the CJTF has not been entirely free from controversy. Prior instances demonstrate that the CJTF can fulfill security functions, but the longer militias remain in place, the more predatory members can become.²⁰ As previously noted, community militia members likely share the same ethnic or political identity with civilians in the areas they serve, but those same assets can be used to pursue personal agendas, including the accumulation of wealth and power.²¹ Along with allegations of sexual harassment within IDP camps, the CJTF has also been accused of exploitation, abuse, intimidation of civilians, and the extortion and theft of humanitarian aid.²² Although not a justification for carrying out crimes, there have been times when CJTF forces are not based in their home communities, which could potentially weaken accountability and lead to abusive and criminal behavior.²³ Some CJTF members could also further threaten internal security by engaging in illegal arms smuggling across border areas, potentially arming the same groups they are meant to defeat.²⁴

An additional drawback to the presence of the CJTF is that Boko Haram has been known to intensify attacks in areas where the CJTF is present. As the CJTF informs security forces about Boko Haram activity, the terrorist group retaliates by targeting not only CJTF troops but also the communities that they protect. Boko Haram severely retaliates against those who cooperate with the national military, leading to increased ambushes along roads, attacks on schools, and other senseless attacks on innocent civilians for their supposed betrayal of the terror group.²⁵

According to firsthand accounts collected by researchers at the Center for Civilians in Conflict, the Benisheikh municipality deployed a sizable CJTF unit which led to aggressive attacks from Boko Haram and has rendered the community as “almost empty.” The fear of reprisal attacks was so strong that some villages chose not to host CJTF troops. In the case of Ngamdu in Borno State, local leaders negotiated directly with violent extremists. In exchange for not setting up a CJTF unit, Ngamdu was spared from attacks.²⁶

A stronger security presence, including through localized counterinsurgency campaigns, have also contributed to worsening intercommunal relationships. Security forces have sometimes

²⁰ Chitra Nagarajan, “Nigerian Community Militias: Toward A Solution,” Center for Civilians in Conflict, November 2019, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Issue-Brief_Africa_Final_Web.pdf.

²¹ “Double-edged Sword: Vigilantes in African Counter-insurgencies,” International Crisis Group, September 7, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/sierra-leone/251-double-edged-sword-vigilantes-african-counter-insurgencies>.

²² Chitra Nagarajan, “To Defend or Harm? Community Militias in Borno State, Nigeria: 2,” Center for Civilians in Conflict, June 2020, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CommunityMilitiasFINAL_June2020lowres.pdf.

²³ Melissa Dalton, “Conduct Is the Key: Improving Civilian Protection in Nigeria,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 9, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/conduct-key-improving-civilian-protection-nigeria>.

²⁴ Jibrin Ibrahim and Saleh Bala, “Civilian-Led Governance and Security in Nigeria After Boko Haram: 6,” United States Institute of Peace, December 2018, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/sr_437_civilian_led_governance_and_security_in_nigeria_0.pdf.

²⁵ “Civilian vigilante groups increase dangers in northeastern Nigeria,” The New Humanitarian, December 12, 2013, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2013/12/12/civilian-vigilante-groups-increase-dangers-northeastern-nigeria>.

²⁶ “Nigerian Community Militias: Toward A Solution,” Center for Civilians in Conflict, November 2019, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Issue-Brief_Africa_Final_Web.pdf; Chitra Nagarajan, “To Defend Or Harm? Community Militias in Borno State, Nigeria: 2,” Center for Civilians in Conflict, June 2020, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CommunityMilitiasFINAL_June2020lowres.pdf.

acted against communities they arbitrarily deemed supportive of violent extremist and terrorist groups.²⁷ Farmer-herder violence has been a particularly protracted struggle in Nigeria that has resulted in significant casualties. Between 2001 and 2018, about 60,000 people were killed and more than 300,000 displaced across four Nigerian states due to the farmer-herder conflict.²⁸ Unfortunately, violent extremism and terrorism became a resource that further exacerbated the conflict. Boko Haram, and more recently ISWAP, have been known to recruit from within the Fulani herdsman, a mostly Muslim group, further cementing a religious division between the Muslim violent extremists and their victims, the mostly Christian farmers. Additionally, the CJTF could conclude that the Fulani were supporters of Boko Haram and target their communities on unverified hunches.²⁹

Looking Ahead

Reassuring community members of the legitimacy of the CJTF requires the implementation of firm codes of conduct that respect and protect the rights of civilians and the establishment of effective oversight structures for civilian forces. Additionally, there should be retribution mechanisms to hold civilian troops accountable for their misdeeds. Although the CJTF reportedly has adopted the military's disciplinary process, the Nigerian national government has taken few steps to investigate or punish CJTF members accused of human rights abuses. Some CJTF leaders have been removed from their positions, but only after advocacy groups revealed abuses.³⁰ However, the application of standards of conduct are difficult to monitor when there are more than 26,000 CJTF troops in Borno State alone.³¹

In recent years, the CJTF has also faced a growing threat that has proved more challenging than Boko Haram. ISWAP has evolved into the largest ISIS affiliate in Africa and the greatest threat in the Lake Chad Basin.³² In May 2021, ISIS sanctioned an operation resulting in the death of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau. ISWAP then began to quickly claim control over territories formerly occupied by Boko Haram. High-casualty inter-group clashes ultimately contributed to the defection of 20,000 Boko Haram members to Nigerian security forces by the year's end.³³ Granted, locals in the Lake Chad Basin have collectively referred to the two groups as Boko Haram, but the distinction between attacks carried out by the two groups comes down to

²⁷ Leif Brottem, "The Growing Complexity of Farmer-Herder Conflict in West and Central Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, July 12, 2021, <https://africacenter.org/publication/growing-complexity-farmer-herder-conflict-west-central-africa/>.

²⁸ Alfred Olufemi, "Horrors on the Plateau: Inside Nigeria's farmer-herder conflict," Al Jazeera, November 28, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/11/28/horrors-on-the-plateau-inside-nigerias-farmer-herder-conflict>.

²⁹ "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem," International Crisis Group, May 18, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>.

³⁰ Melissa Dalton, "Conduct Is the Key: Improving Civilian Protection in Nigeria," July 9, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/conduct-key-improving-civilian-protection-nigeria>.

³¹ "Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram," International Crisis Group, February 23, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/244-watchmen-lake-chad-vigilante-groups-fighting-boko-haram>.

³² "Understanding and Managing Vigilante Groups in the Lake Chad Basin Region," United Nations Development Programme, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-03/Understanding%20Vigilante%20Groups.pdf>.

³³ "Conflict Analysis In The Lake Chad Basin 2020-2021," United Nations Development Programme, August 2022, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-08/Conflict%20Analysis%20in%20the%20Lake%20Chad%20Basin.pdf>.

their targets.³⁴ ISWAP attempts to only target military personnel, governmental officials, humanitarian workers, and non-complaint locals, whereas Boko Haram endorses indiscriminate violence against civilians.³⁵ Although ISWAP reportedly implemented community building initiatives with locals, following Shekau’s death, ISWAP was the main perpetrator of civilian casualties.³⁶ In 2021, ISWAP claimed 36 percent of attacks—in comparison to 8 percent claimed by Boko Haram—with an average of three deaths per attack.³⁷ The terror group carried out an almost record high of 44 attacks in February 2022 and has since made moves to expand further south.³⁸ Although eclipsed by ISWAP, Boko Haram does continue to carry out large-scale violence. In March 2023, the terrorist group reportedly intensified attacks along the Nigerian-Cameroonian border, displacing at least 3,000 refugees at Minawao, a camp on Cameroon’s northern border with Nigeria.³⁹

Nigerian authorities have claimed that Boko Haram has further grown weaker due to a government sponsored rehabilitation program for former violent extremists. However, discriminatory attitudes held by the CJTF and local communities pose a barrier to the successful rehabilitation of Boko Haram defectors. As of early 2023, a total of 51,828 Boko Haram fighters and their families have surrendered to Nigerian forces. By late March 2023, around 600 former fighters graduated from the Deradicalization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DRR) camp in northern Gambe state and will be reintegrated into society.⁴⁰ However, the success of rehabilitation camps is also dependent on community perception of former violent extremist offenders. As the CJTF has previously proven discriminatory towards suspected terrorists—particularly the ethnic Fulani who civilian troops have at times unjustly conflated with Boko Haram⁴¹—reintegration for former violent extremists may be a greater challenge than expected. Data compiled from on-the-ground interviews discovered that community members were not readily receptive to reintegrating former Boko Haram combatants, with the most skeptical

³⁴ “Understanding and Managing Vigilante Groups in the Lake Chad Basin Region,” United Nations Development Programme, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-03/Understanding%20Vigilante%20Groups.pdf>.

³⁵ “Conflict Analysis In The Lake Chad Basin 2020-2021,” United Nations Development Programme, August 2022, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-08/Conflict%20Analysis%20in%20the%20Lake%20Chad%20Basin.pdf>; “Understanding and Managing Vigilante Groups in the Lake Chad Basin Region,” United Nations Development Programme, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-03/Understanding%20Vigilante%20Groups.pdf>.

³⁶ “Conflict Analysis In The Lake Chad Basin 2020-2021,” United Nations Development Programme, August 2022, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-08/Conflict%20Analysis%20in%20the%20Lake%20Chad%20Basin.pdf>.

³⁷ “Global Terrorism Index 2022,” Institute for Economics & Peace, March 2022, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/GTI-2022-web-09062022.pdf>.

³⁸ “After Shekau: Confronting Jihadists in Nigeria’s North East,” International Crisis Group, March 29, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/after-shekau-confronting-jihadists-nigerias-north-east>.

³⁹ Moki Edwin Kindzeka, “Fresh Fighting with Boko Haram Displaces Thousands on Cameroon-Nigeria Border,” Voice of America, March 15, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/fresh-fighting-with-boko-haram-displaces-thousands-on-cameroon-nigeria-border-/7006423.html>.

⁴⁰ “Nigeria: 13,360 Boko Haram fighters surrender in 18 months – Army,” Africa News, March 27, 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/03/27/nigeria-13360-boko-haram-fighters-surrender-in-18-months-army/>; Timothy Obiezu, “Nearly 600 Former Boko Haram Militants Graduate From Nigeria Rehab,” Voice of America, March 27, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/nearly-600-former-boko-haram-militants-graduate-from-nigeria-rehab/7024167.html>.

⁴¹ “Violence in Nigeria’s North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem,” International Crisis Group, May 18, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/288-violence-nigerias-north-west-rolling-back-mayhem>.

doubting former militants could be genuinely deradicalized.⁴² Feelings of isolation and stigmatization influence the likelihood of recidivism, and successful rehabilitation requires transparent policies and counternarratives on former violent extremist offenders to build and reinforce continued community support.⁴³

Nigeria's counterterrorism strategy attempts to neutralize the outreach of extremist and terrorist groups but does not mitigate the challenges that are a byproduct of insurgencies—unstable power structures, rampant violence, and civilian displacement. The communal divisions that have been created by the CJTF will not be easily repaired and have further fractured a country grappling with an already unstable security environment.

Case Study: Somalia

Somalia is dominated by six clans who operate within a political system that is based on kinship, tribal law, and traditional authorities. Clan rivalries have been exacerbated in the past by competition over power and resources, often flaring up during times of political and economic uncertainty. Clan fragmentation has been a factor in the ascent of al-Shabaab, as the Islamist terrorist group exploits historical rivalries as a means of recruitment.⁴⁴ Despite the emergence of al-Shabaab in 2007 and the group's ensuing unrelenting violence, Somalia entered a period of political stability following the peaceful transition of presidential power in May 2022. However, the security environment remains embattled by al-Shabaab's attacks and territorial control. In 2023, it is projected that an additional 450,000 civilians will be displaced due to the protracted insurgency propagated by this al-Qaeda affiliate.⁴⁵

Macawisley

In Somalia, the Macawisley or Ma'awisley are civilian militias comprised primarily of farmers who banded together to defeat al-Shabaab. The Macawisley first emerged in 2014 and then again in 2018 but were quickly overcome by al-Shabaab due to limited government support and a disorganized strategy.⁴⁶ The civilian militia regrouped in 2022 when the Somali National Army (SNA) struggled to significantly counter al-Shabaab, effectively forcing civilians to protect

⁴² Tarela Juliet Ike, Danny Singh, Dung Ezekiel Jidong, Sean Murphy, and Evangelyn Ebi Ayobi, "Rethinking reintegration in Nigeria: community perceptions of former Boko Haram combatants," *Third World Quarterly*, 2021, https://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/42245/1/1406317_Jidong2.pdf.

⁴³ Tarela Juliet Ike, Danny Singh, Dung Ezekiel Jidong, Sean Murphy, and Evangelyn Ebi Ayobi, "Rethinking reintegration in Nigeria: community perceptions of former Boko Haram combatants," *Third World Quarterly*, 2021, https://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/42245/1/1406317_Jidong2.pdf.

⁴⁴ Samira Gaid, "The 2022 Somali Offensive Against al-Shabaab: Making Enduring Gains Will Require Learning from Previous Failures," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, November/December 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-2022-somali-offensive-against-al-shabaab-making-enduring-gains-will-require-learning-from-previous-failures/>.

⁴⁵ "Somalia Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023 (February 2023)," U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, February 8, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/somalia-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-february-2023>.

⁴⁶ "Waa kuwama "Macawisleyda" dagaalka kula jirta Al Shabaab?," *BBC News*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/somali/war-48661603>; Stig Jarle Hansen, "Can Somalia's New Offensive Defeat al-Shabaab," *Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point*, January 2023, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/can-somalias-new-offensive-defeat-al-shabaab/>.

themselves.⁴⁷ Given al-Shabaab’s harsh rule, demands for young civilians as recruits, and high taxation in the midst of severe drought conditions, civilians became increasingly frustrated by the government’s lack of progress in tackling al-Shabaab.⁴⁸ The Macawisley began their operations in June 2022, focusing their outreach in the central Hiran and Middle Shabelle regions of Somalia and later expanding to the neighboring regions of Galguduud and Bay.⁴⁹

Government Support

By August 2022, Somalia’s government announced that it was amplifying the offensive against al-Shabaab and allied with the Macawisley—whom they referred to as the Community Defense Forces—as they were able to reclaim areas in Hiran previously under al-Shabaab’s control for years.⁵⁰ Notably, in September 2022, the joint forces were able to retake Buq Aqable, an area that was controlled by al-Shabaab for almost a decade and was regularly featured in propaganda disseminated by the group.⁵¹ Another victory occurred in December 2022 when government forces and the Macawisley recaptured Adan Yabal in Hirshabelle—an area that was used by al-Shabaab as a training base.⁵² The number of Macawisley fighters is unknown, but one village has boasted of a force of 600, which includes both male and female fighters.⁵³

Despite being enlisted to support the national army, the government does not provide the civilian militia with significant support.⁵⁴ Pleas from the Macawisley for material support have been ignored by the state, which only provides rations of food, fuel, and ammunition to the local militia. This minor support was confirmed by Somalia’s National Security Adviser Hussein

⁴⁷ Harun Maruf, “Ma’awisley’ Militias in Central Somalia Mobilizing Against al-Shabab,” Voice of America, October 4, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/ma-awisley-militias-in-central-somalia-mobilizing-against-al-shabab-/6776048.html>.

⁴⁸ Harun Maruf, “Ma’awisley’ Militias in Central Somalia Mobilizing Against al-Shabab,” Voice of America, October 4, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/ma-awisley-militias-in-central-somalia-mobilizing-against-al-shabab-/6776048.html>.

⁴⁹ “In Somalia, Civilians Take Arms to Join Fight Against Al-Shabaab,” Garowe Online, September 19, 2022, <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/in-somalia-civilians-take-arms-to-join-fight-against-al-shabaab/>; Caleb Weiss, “Shabaab continues to lose ground in central Somalia,” Long War Journal, September 27, 2022, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2022/09/shabaab-continues-to-lose-ground-in-central-somalia.php>; Samira Gaid, “The 2022 Somali Offensive Against al-Shabaab: Making Enduring Gains Will Require Learning from Previous Failures,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, November/December 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-2022-somali-offensive-against-al-shabaab-making-enduring-gains-will-require-learning-from-previous-failures/>.

⁵⁰ Stig Jarle Hansen, “Can Somalia’s New Offensive Defeat al-Shabaab,” Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, January 2023, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/can-somalias-new-offensive-defeat-al-shabaab/>.

⁵¹ “Government forces enter Buq Aqable for first time in a decade,” Hiiraan Online, September 27, 2022, <https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2022/Sept/188007/government-forces-enter-buq-aqable-for-first-time-in-a-decade.aspx>; Caleb Weiss, “Shabaab continues to lose ground in central Somalia,” Long War Journal, September 27, 2022, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2022/09/shabaab-continues-to-lose-ground-in-central-somalia.php>.

⁵² “Somalia forces and allies retake key town from al-Shabab,” Al Jazeera, December 7, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/7/somalia-forces-and-allies-retake-key-town-from-al-shabab>.

⁵³ Scott Peterson, “Somalia rallies grassroots to oppose jihadist Al Shabab. Will it work?,” Christian Science Monitor, December 9, 2022, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2022/1209/Somalia-rallies-grassroots-to-oppose-jihadist-Al-Shabab.-Will-it-work>.

⁵⁴ Harun Maruf, “Ma’awisley’ Militias in Central Somalia Mobilizing Against al-Shabab,” Voice of America, October 4, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/ma-awisley-militias-in-central-somalia-mobilizing-against-al-shabab-/6776048.html>.

Sheikh Ali, who stressed that the government is not providing militias with weapons.⁵⁵ According to media sources, the Macawisley rely on rusty weapons bought on the black market.⁵⁶ Given the government’s insufficient level of support, the Macawisley often rely on the generosity of the communities that they service. Community patronage has its limits, however, as operations against al-Shabaab—one of al-Qaeda’s wealthiest and well-resourced affiliates—cannot be sustained in the long-run.⁵⁷ Despite working alongside the military, the community forces do not receive the necessary training to carry out operations consistent with military strategies. According to Stig Jarle Hansen at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, rather than coordinating with the military to carry out larger operations, the civilian militias do best when they receive specific tasks such as securing liberated areas.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Caleb Weiss at the Long War Journal and Stig Jarle Hansen reiterate that without any tactical planning or operative organization, the nascent offensive has the potential to become disjointed and at worst, ineffective.⁵⁹

Controversy Surrounding Former Community Defense Groups: Ahlu Sunna Waljama’a (ASWJ)

The Somali government may be conservative in their sponsorship of the Macawisley as allocating resources to the local militia may inspire other civilian forces and vigilante groups to seek state support. Those groups could then exploit the resources and use them for self-serving agendas that would further compromise the nation’s stability and state-building enterprise. Ahlu Sunna Waljama’a (“People of the Sunna and Community”, ASWJ) is an example of this concern. ASWJ was originally created to protect Sufi Muslim traditions against the growing influence of Salafism, but in 2008, the group sought to counter the draconian edicts imposed by the Sunni-following al-Shabaab. Despite their original intentions, after ASWJ gained external support from international and local forces, it became increasingly predatory towards civilians. Once equipped with weapons and military training, the group became quickly embroiled in controversy, accused of child recruitment, random shootings of civilians, extrajudicial killings, and extortion.⁶⁰ By 2021, media sources reported that a splinter group of ASWJ was ramping up attacks against the Somali government to assert their influence over Guriel, Galmudug State and

⁵⁵ “Will clan militia help Somalia defeat Al-Shabaab?,” Garowe Online, December 14, 2022, <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/featured/will-clan-militia-help-somalia-defeat-al-shabaab/>.

⁵⁶ Yousa Elbagir, “From farmers to fighters - how a new Somali militia has risen against al Shabaab,” Associated Press, October 14, 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/farmers-turned-fighters-in-somalias-grassroots-offensive-against-al-shabaab-12719627#>.

⁵⁷ Mohammed Ibrahim Shire, “Protection or predation? Understanding the behavior of community-created self-defense militias during civil wars,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2021.1937806>.

⁵⁸ Stig Jarle Hansen, “Can Somalia’s New Offensive Defeat al-Shabaab,” Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, January 2023, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/can-somalias-new-offensive-defeat-al-shabaab/>.

⁵⁹ Caleb Weiss, “Shabaab continues to lose ground in central Somalia,” Long War Journal, September 27, 2022, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2022/09/shabaab-continues-to-lose-ground-in-central-somalia.php>; Stig Jarle Hansen, “Can Somalia’s New Offensive Defeat al-Shabaab,” Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, January 2023, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/can-somalias-new-offensive-defeat-al-shabaab/>.

⁶⁰ Mohammed Ibrahim Shire, “Protection or predation? Understanding the behavior of community-created self-defense militias during civil wars,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592318.2021.1937806>.

the semi-autonomous region of Puntland. As government elements battled ASWJ, more than 120 people were killed and 100,000 civilians were forced to flee. The fighting between ASWJ and the government unfortunately provided al-Shabaab greater opportunity for carrying out lethal attacks.⁶¹

The Impact of al-Shabaab on Clan Rivalries

A successful campaign against al-Shabaab must rely not only on the success of operations, but also on prioritizing the stability of interclan cooperation. Although the Macawisley have local knowledge of the land, are trusted by their communities, and provide the government with on-the-ground insights, they are also vulnerable to historical rivalries that could derail any progress. In the past, al-Shabaab has exploited clan rivalries to militarily undermine communities that rejected the terrorist group's de facto governance.⁶² Scholars on the region claim that civilian militias, if not provided with adequate supervision and income, will eventually begin to push their own agendas, particularly against rival clans.⁶³ This scenario is possible, as the SNA is not always privy to the Macawisley's operations. The SNA does not always initiate operations, leaving room for local campaigns motivated by personal vendettas rather than counterterrorism motives.⁶⁴ In some cases, the military has negotiated a ceasefire between clans in order to fight al-Shabaab. However, there are instances when rivalries disastrously prevail. In the town of Adale, for example, 37 people were killed in November 2022 following an interclan battle.⁶⁵ On the other hand, as noted by the International Crisis Group, the Somali government has proved successful in counterterrorism operations when local clans overcame rivalries to assist the Somali military in the unifying goal of defeating al-Shabaab. In the case of some municipalities in central Somalia, Macawisley members have traveled to support neighboring sub-clans as a way to further counteract the reach of al-Shabaab.⁶⁶

The Evolving Strategy of al-Shabaab

Associating with the Macawisley is not without risk and has at times resulted in reprisal attacks against civilian militia members and their families. After being ousted from certain localities, al-Shabaab has reportedly retaliated against the communities through indiscriminate killings,

⁶¹ Andres Schipani, "Somalia conflict escalates: 'We know al-Shabaab will take advantage'," *Financial Times*, December 29, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/9a820013-fa81-4314-9441-0d4f93c2539c>.

⁶² Stig Jarle Hansen, "Can Somalia's New Offensive Defeat al-Shabaab," Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, January 2023, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/can-somalias-new-offensive-defeat-al-shabaab/>.

⁶³ Katharine Houreld, "Uprising by Somali clans puts al-Qaeda-linked militants on the defensive," *Washington Post*, December 14, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/14/somalia-clans-shabab-president-mohamud/>; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Hot and troubled: Somalia's militias and state-building," Brookings Institute, April 16, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/16/hot-and-troubled-somalias-militias-and-state-building/>.

⁶⁴ "Will clan militia help Somalia defeat Al-Shabaab?," Garowe Online, December 14, 2022, <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/featured/will-clan-militia-help-somalia-defeat-al-shabaab>.

⁶⁵ Katharine Houreld, "Uprising by Somali clans puts al-Qaeda-linked militants on the defensive," *Washington Post*, December 14, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/12/14/somalia-clans-shabab-president-mohamud/>.

⁶⁶ "Sustaining Gains in Somalia's Offensive against Al-Shabaab," International Crisis Group, March 21, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somalia/b187-sustaining-gains-somalias-offensive-against-al-shabaab>.

kidnappings, the poisoning of wells, and the torching of homes and vehicles transporting humanitarian aid.⁶⁷ Given that al-Shabaab also tends to reemerge in areas that were inadequately secured after being liberated, freedom from al-Shabaab’s rule can be brief.⁶⁸ Operations absent the institutional and structural changes needed to secure a vulnerable area compromises long-term safety and can lead to a cycle of clearance operations that briefly push al-Shabaab out of the area before they ultimately return. As a highly strategic group, al-Shabaab has recognized ways in which infrastructural challenges can derail the progress of counterinsurgencies. The terrorist group reportedly began hitting government recruiting centers and barracks, as well as bridges and telecommunications infrastructure, making it harder to move supplies.⁶⁹

Despite Somalia’s president vowing a “total war” against al-Shabaab and National Security Adviser Hussein Sheikh Moalim’s prediction in December 2022 that al-Shabaab will be defeated within 18 months, al-Shabaab remains a resilient entity.⁷⁰ Although there are challenges associated with paramilitary forces, civilians are more likely to consider civilian forces as legitimate, whereas foreign forces—such as the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS)—have become increasingly unpopular due to slow and inadequate responses to terrorist activity.⁷¹ As ATMIS forces are expected to withdraw from Somalia by December 2023, the gap in security will require better coordination between the national army and local militias to ensure sustainable security gains.⁷²

Looking Ahead

To further legitimize all facets of Somalia’s security apparatus, the national military should institute a system—one that potentially includes clan elders—that holds civilian militias accountable should they go beyond their specific duties in a counterterrorism campaign. Beyond al-Shabaab, interclan rivalries have a history of destabilizing Somalia, which further entrenches

⁶⁷ Stig Jarle Hansen, “Can Somalia’s New Offensive Defeat al-Shabaab,” Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, January 2023, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/can-somalias-new-offensive-defeat-al-shabaab/>; Harun Maruf, “Somali Government Says al-Shabab Is Deliberately Displacing Civilians,” Voice of America, December 15, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/somali-government-says-al-shabab-is-deliberately-displacing-civilians/6878887.html>; “Al-Shabaab abducts the families of Macawisley fighters that are part of the ongoing operations against AS.,” Mustaqbal Media, December 17, 2022, <https://mustaqbalmedia.net/en/al-shabaab-abducts-the-families-of-macawisley-fighters-that-are-part-of-the-ongoing-operations-against-as/>.

⁶⁸ Samira Gaid, “The 2022 Somali Offensive Against al-Shabaab: Making Enduring Gains Will Require Learning from Previous Failures,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, November/December 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-2022-somali-offensive-against-al-shabaab-making-enduring-gains-will-require-learning-from-previous-failures/>.

⁶⁹ Scott Peterson, “Somalia rallies grassroots to oppose jihadist Al Shabab. Will it work?,” Christian Science Monitor, December 9, 2022, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2022/1209/Somalia-rallies-grassroots-to-oppose-jihadist-Al-Shabab.-Will-it-work>.

⁷⁰ Mohamed Dhaysane, “Somalia’s President Vows ‘Total War’ Against al-Shabab,” Voice of America, August 24, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/somalia-s-president-vows-total-war-against-al-shabab/6714508.html>; Scott Peterson, “Somalia rallies grassroots to oppose jihadist Al Shabab. Will it work?,” Christian Science Monitor, December 9, 2022, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2022/1209/Somalia-rallies-grassroots-to-oppose-jihadist-Al-Shabab.-Will-it-work>.

⁷¹ Stig Jarle Hansen, “Can Somalia’s New Offensive Defeat al-Shabaab,” Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, January 2023, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/can-somalias-new-offensive-defeat-al-shabaab/>.

⁷² “UN Chief Recommends AU Maintain Somalia Troop Levels Until 2023,” Defense Post, March 9, 2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/03/09/un-au-somalia-troops/>.

the influence of extremist groups. While a state-building project seems outside the breadth of Somalia's current counterterrorism campaign, there must be some consideration given to strengthening the institutional and security shortcomings that allowed al-Shabaab to flourish in the first place. Al-Shabaab is calculated and cunning, and while the Macawisley and the SNA have had military success since June 2022, those gains will only become permanent if local rivalries are neutralized or temporarily overcome for the sake of successful counterterrorism operations, militias are held to greater professional standards, and cyclically vulnerable communities are provided with the support and strategy to ensure long-term stabilization.

Case Study: Burkina Faso

Since 2015, Burkina Faso has grappled with the impacts of a multi-pronged jihadist insurgency. Ansarul Islam, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State all maintain strongholds throughout Burkina Faso, which has led to the deaths of thousands of people and the displacement of about two million others.⁷³ Given its proximity to Mali, Burkina Faso also faces the same terrorist threats destabilizing its neighbor. The main extremist groups that are active in Burkina Faso are the homegrown Ansarul Islam, the al-Qaeda-linked and Mali-based Jama'at Nasrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). The al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates are embroiled in ongoing competition for control over the region between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. France's withdrawal from Mali in 2020 also meant the discontinuation of French air support for armies in the region, leading ISGS to take advantage of the security gap and increase lethal attacks along Mali's border with Burkina Faso.⁷⁴ Further complicating matters, Burkina Faso experienced two military coups in 2022, carried out by army officers angered by the inability of elected officials to contain the threat of violent extremism.⁷⁵

Community-Based Defense Groups

After Burkina Faso's second coup, the new leaders demanded the complete withdrawal of French troops in January 2023. Since then, the Burkinabe counterterrorism strategy has shifted towards boosting national and community defense troops as well as potentially partnering with the Russia-backed, private mercenary company, the Wagner Group.⁷⁶ Needing additional support to counter the protracted insurgencies, in early 2020, Burkina Faso's parliament passed a law that

⁷³ "Burkina Faso: Perpetrators of Nouna killings must face justice," Amnesty International, January 10, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/01/burkina-faso-perpetrators-of-nouna-killings-must-face-justice/>; Moussa Bougma, "Sahel internal displacement tops 2 million as violence surges," UNHCR, January 22, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2021/1/600a85bd4/sahel-internal-displacement-tops-2-million-violence-surges.html>.

⁷⁴ Silvia D'Amato and Edoardo Baldaro, "Counter-Terrorism in the Sahel: Increased Instability and Political Tensions," International Centre for Counterterrorism, July 7, 2022, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/counter-terrorism-sahel-increased-instability-and-political-tensions>.

⁷⁵ "Burkina Faso to Raise 150M Euros for War Fund," Defense Post, December 12, 2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/12/12/burkina-faso-war-fund/>.

⁷⁶ Joseph Ataman, "France recalls ambassador and will withdraw military forces from Burkina Faso," CNN, January 26, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/26/africa/france-withdraw-burkina-faso-intl/index.html>; Sam Mednick, "After Burkina Faso ousts French, Russia's Wagner may arrive," Associated Press, April 7, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/burkina-faso-russia-wagner-jihadi-02d9235279f0991cdb6ad3ebb4d3e546>.

formalized civilian militias—the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDPs)—as another pillar within the Burkinabe counterterrorism scheme.⁷⁷

Civilian militia groups formed in 2014 to counter the emerging militant jihadist threat, mobilizing effectively to protect their communities from attacks.⁷⁸ Aside from the VDP, Burkina Faso has three other community defense groups—the Koglweogo, Gourmantché, and Dozo. The Koglweogo operate in the eastern, central, and northern provinces and are known for doling out harsh punishment for crimes. The Gourmantché also operate in the eastern regions, and the Dozo are a traditional hunter group that is active in western Burkina Faso. Controversy surrounds the Koglweogo and Dozo, as their long-standing prejudice against the nomadic Fulani ethnic group—who they believe cooperate with violent extremists and terrorists or have joined the militants—has led to massacres. The ongoing stigmatization of the Fulani led to the 2012 formation of the Rouga, a Fulani-headed union of herder representatives who counter the activities of the Koglweogo and Dozo.⁷⁹ The three regional civilian militias have provided protections to their communities, but they were not specifically created in the name of counterterrorism.

Government Support

Following the unanimous backing of the Burkinabe government in early 2020, the VDP was established in the north central region of Burkina Faso and became a lifeline for the national army. Civilian militias took up arms against the violent extremists and ultimately expanded the geographic boundaries of counterterrorism operations.⁸⁰ As a counterinsurgency authority, the VDP train and equip communities lacking adequate security to counter terrorists. The VDP also serve as a way for the government to maintain more control over various community defense groups that emerge throughout the country.⁸¹ The VDPs were first deployed mainly in the north central Kaya, the northern Ouahigouya, and the eastern Fada N'gourma regions.⁸² As the insurgency continued into October 2022, the Burkinabe government launched a recruitment campaign seeking an additional 50,000 local troops. More than 90,000 applications were received during the recruitment drive. Of the selected applicants, 35,000 troops are planned to be

⁷⁷ Fergus Kelly, “Burkina Faso to recruit and arm volunteers to protect communities from militants,” Defense Post, January 22, 2020, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/01/22/burkina-faso-volunteers-defence-fatherland-vdp/>.

⁷⁸ Loïc Bisson, Ine Cottyn Kars de Bruijne, and Fransje Molenaar, “Between hope and despair Pastoralist adaptation in Burkina Faso,” Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, February 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/between-hope-and-despair.pdf>.

⁷⁹ Loïc Bisson, Ine Cottyn Kars de Bruijne, and Fransje Molenaar, “Between hope and despair Pastoralist adaptation in Burkina Faso,” Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, February 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/between-hope-and-despair.pdf>.

⁸⁰ Fergus Kelly, “Burkina Faso to recruit and arm volunteers to protect communities from militants,” Defense Post, January 22, 2020, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/01/22/burkina-faso-volunteers-defence-fatherland-vdp/>.

⁸¹ Antonin Tisseron, “Pandora’s box. Burkina Faso, self-defense militias and VDP Law in fighting jihadism,” Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes-pscc/17590.pdf>; Anna Schmauder and Annabelle Willeme, “The Volunteers For The Defense Of The Homeland,” Clingendael Institute, March 9, 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/volunteers-defence-homeland>.

⁸² Hassane Koné and Fahiraman Rodrigue Koné, “Risks of Burkina Faso’s new military approach to terrorism,” Institute for Security Studies, January 9, 2023, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/risks-of-burkina-fasos-new-military-approach-to-terrorism>.

deployed in their residential communities and an additional 15,000 will assist Burkina Faso's Security and Defense Force's national campaigns.⁸³ In February 2023, Burkina Faso's coup leader announced an additional recruitment of 5,000 VDP who would serve the army "at least five years" to be distributed throughout the area of Boucle du Mouhoun in the west, the Sahel in the north, and the eastern region.⁸⁴

The VDP is governed by the Patriotic Watch Brigade (BVDP) under the Ministry of National defense. The BVDP reportedly oversees the coordination of operations in a territory and also conducts intelligence gathering.⁸⁵ The VDP are reportedly trained in surveillance, information-gathering, or escort duties. At the end of the two-week training, the VDP reportedly receive an AK-47 and communications equipment.⁸⁶ Following training, the new recruits become the first line of defense in their local communities. National security forces can ultimately be deployed if an attack is outside of the competencies of the VDP. The VDP's power is not exhaustive, as volunteers will be prohibited from carrying out police investigations or other missions under the guise of maintaining law and order.⁸⁷

Compared to other civilian militias throughout West Africa, the Burkinabe government provides adequate financial subsidies and equipment to the VDP. Members receive an operation bonus, food, and health care coverage. Under a yearly renewable contract, each volunteer receives 60,000 CFA francs (around 90 euros) per month as well as fuel and a vehicle maintenance stipend. If a VDP member is injured or disabled, they also receive the appropriate care, and in the event of death, the state will also cover funeral expenses and provide compensation to the volunteer's family.⁸⁸

Abuses of Power in the VDP and other Non-State Groups

As the VDP provides stable compensation and protection, it is not surprising tens of thousands apply for a spot within the civilian militia's ranks. However, according to researchers on Burkinabe civilian militias at the Clingendael Institute, the VDP's recruitment process is flawed as it prioritizes former government and military employees as well as already established community defense groups. These individuals are often from the Koglweogo and Dozo

⁸³ Hassane Koné and Fahiraman Rodrigue Koné, "Risks of Burkina Faso's new military approach to terrorism," Institute for Security Studies, January 9, 2023, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/risks-of-burkina-fasos-new-military-approach-to-terrorism>.

⁸⁴ "Burkina Faso to recruit 5,000 soldiers to fight Jihadists," Africa News and AFP, February 24, 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/02/24/burkina-faso-to-recruit-5000-soldiers-to-fight-jihadists/>.

⁸⁵ "Burkina Faso: the government reveals a series of advantages for VDPs," Radio France International, January 29, 2023, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230129-burkina-faso-le-gouvernement-r%C3%A9v%C3%A8le-une-s%C3%A9rie-d-avantages-pour-les-udp>; "Burkina Faso: Creation of a watch brigade and two zones of military interest in the Sahel and the East," Morning Express, June 20, 2022, <https://morningexpress.in/burkina-faso-creation-of-a-watch-brigade-and-two-zones-of-military-interest-in-the-sahel-and-the-east/>.

⁸⁶ Joseph Hammond, "In Burkina Faso, Local Militias Take Lead in Anti-Terror Fight," Newsweek, June 7, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/burkina-faso-local-militias-take-lead-anti-terror-fight-1713580>.

⁸⁷ Fergus Kelly, "Burkina Faso to recruit and arm volunteers to protect communities from militants," Defense Post, January 22, 2020, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/01/22/burkina-faso-volunteers-defence-fatherland-udp/>.

⁸⁸ "Burkina Faso: the government reveals a series of advantages for VDPs," Radio France International, January 29, 2023, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230129-burkina-faso-le-gouvernement-r%C3%A9v%C3%A8le-une-s%C3%A9rie-d-avantages-pour-les-udp>.

communities as the nomadic Fulani are less likely to forge relationships with local and regional authorities. The Fulani represent a small number of the VDP as their roaming habits make them seemingly less knowledgeable about the lands they would need to protect.⁸⁹ Given the lack of Fulani representation throughout the VDP, the already stigmatized ethnic group will likely be further abused by prejudiced militia who conflate the Fulani with militant jihadi terrorists. According to analysts on Burkina Faso, the VDP are nothing more than “koglweogo with the blessing of the state.”⁹⁰ Without proper controls, the VDP can intensify standing ethnic rivalries while providing little protections against the ongoing insurgencies.

Despite being under the purview of Burkina Faso’s government, the VDP has at times been noted for inadequate preparation, corruption, and human rights abuses throughout their ranks. The Burkinabe government may consider the VDP as an economical option when it comes to expanding security services, but outstanding instability throughout the country prevents the competent training of these civilian militias. According to media sources and scholars on the region, the training provided to the VDP is insufficient as hundreds of VDP members have been easy targets for violent extremists and terrorists or have died in explosions caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) along roadsides.⁹¹ Inadequate preparation could further exacerbate conflicts as civilian militias could exploit their positions for self-serving purposes, making it difficult to demobilize the groups in the future.⁹²

The nascent counterterrorism force has also been accused of extrajudicial killings. In the first 18 months following state sponsorship, VDP troops committed at least 19 abuses. The crimes involved abducting individuals, executing Fulani members, injuring civilians who did not comply with curfews, and arson.⁹³ In late December 2022, 28 bodies were found in northwest Burkina Faso. Rights activists on the ground blamed the VDP for launching a retaliatory attack against suspected JNIM members.⁹⁴

Ironically, the coup government has called the VDP “our first Wagners”—a reference to the controversial Russia-backed private military company that has inserted itself across a half dozen

⁸⁹ Anna Schmauder and Annabelle Willeme, “The Volunteers For The Defense Of The Homeland,” Clingendael Institute, March 9, 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/volunteers-defense-homeland>.

⁹⁰ Delina Goxho, “Protecting Civilians From Those Who Should Protect Them,” Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations, April 2022, https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2022/04/Delina-Goxho_PolicyBrief274.pdf?type=pdf.

⁹¹ “Burkina Faso to Raise 150M Euros for War Fund,” Defense Post, December 12, 2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/12/12/burkina-faso-war-fund/>.

⁹² Viljar Haavik “Self-Defence Militias and State Sponsorship In Burkina Faso,” ACCORD, March 15, 2022, <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/self-defence-militias-and-state-sponsorship-in-burkina-faso/>.

⁹³ Méryl Demuynck, “Civilians on the Front Lines of (Counter-) Terrorism: Lessons from the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland in Burkina Faso,” International Centre for Counterterrorism, November 2021, <https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-01/Civilians-on-the-Front-Lines-of-Counter-Terrorism-1.pdf>.

⁹⁴ “Investigation into 28 killed in Burkina Faso must be transparent: UN rights chief,” United Nations, January 7, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/01/1132257>; “Rights Group Blames Volunteer Militia in New Burkina Bloodshed,” Agence France Presse, January 3, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/rights-group-blames-volunteer-militia-in-new-burkina-bloodshed/6902990.html>.

conflicts in Africa and participated in mass crimes against humanity.⁹⁵ In early 2023, amidst rumors of alleged cooperation with the Wagner Group, Burkina Faso demanded the swift departure of French forces. Wagner—which was designated by the U.S. as a significant transnational criminal organization in 2023—has already intensified conflicts in Mali and Central Africa Republic. The private mercenary company claims to provide security services in exchange for access to natural resources but has regularly been accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity.⁹⁶ In Mali, where French troops were also forced to withdraw in 2022, the presence of Russian contractors led to a significant increase in civilian casualties. In March 2022, mere months after Wagner’s deployment began in December 2021, an operation in a central Mali town resulted in the massacre of more than 300 civilians. The siege was the deadliest attack in over a decade.⁹⁷ Given Burkina Faso’s weak government, the spotty record of the VDP, and the unchecked, violent history of Wagner, Burkina Faso faces an increasingly unstable and problematic road to recovery.

Looking Ahead

In the subsequent investigation into the December 2022 attack, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights urged the Burkinabe government to strengthen its vetting procedures for the VDP, invest in comprehensive training on international human rights and humanitarian law, and ensure that security and defense forces appropriately supervised the activities of its civilian forces.⁹⁸ Additionally, scholars on the region have lamented Burkina Faso’s closer ties to Russia, which many have suggested will be destabilizing for the region.⁹⁹ As made evident in Mali and the Central African Republic, Wagner mercenaries increase the risk of human rights abuses and war crimes and cooperation with Russia places countries at risk of losing peacekeeping support from the United Nations and Western governments.¹⁰⁰

Although civilian militia groups have been bolstered by and integrated into state armed forces, there are not sufficient mechanisms to ensure that every VDP member, and especially the Wagner Group, will respect the rule of law and basic human rights. The discriminatory practices rampant throughout the VDP, from the recruitment process to their targeted activities, has

⁹⁵ Sam Mednick, “After Burkina Faso ousts French, Russia’s Wagner may arrive,” Associated Press, April 7, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/burkina-faso-russia-wagner-jihadi-02d9235279f0991cdb6ad3ebb4d3e546>.

⁹⁶ Sam Mednick, “After Burkina Faso ousts French, Russia’s Wagner may arrive,” Associated Press, April 7, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/burkina-faso-russia-wagner-jihadi-02d9235279f0991cdb6ad3ebb4d3e546>.

⁹⁷ Catrina Doxsee and Jared Thompson, “Massacres, Executions, and Falsified Graves: The Wagner Group’s Mounting Humanitarian Cost in Mali,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 11, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali>.

⁹⁸ “Investigation into 28 killed in Burkina Faso must be transparent: UN rights chief,” United Nations, January 7, 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/01/1132257>.

⁹⁹ Sam Mednick, “After Burkina Faso ousts French, Russia’s Wagner may arrive,” Associated Press, April 7, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/burkina-faso-russia-wagner-jihadi-02d9235279f0991cdb6ad3ebb4d3e546>.

¹⁰⁰ Frederica Saini Fasanotti, “Russia’s Wagner Group in Africa: Influence, commercial concessions, rights violations, and counterinsurgency failure,” Brookings, February 8, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/08/russias-wagner-group-in-africa-influence-commercial-concessions-rights-violations-and-counterinsurgency-failure/>.

nullified the benefits of counterterrorism protections.¹⁰¹ Burkina Faso is already faced with a challenging matrix of intercommunal rivalries, and the VDP has only offered the guise of increased stability. The civilian force is bursting at its seams to adequately contain those who favor self-interests over genuine counterinsurgency, and those who attempt to carry out their duties are crippled by inadequate preparation.¹⁰² Furthermore, outsourcing defense support to Russian contractors will unlikely guarantee greater protections for Burkina Faso's civilians. Rather, the Wagner Group is more likely to aggravate localized tensions and perpetuate indiscriminate violence, opening the way for violent extremists and terrorists to reestablish themselves among faltering communities. Two coups caused by dissatisfaction over the lack of progress in combating extremists demonstrates that Burkina Faso requires the training of competent security forces, not just large scale VDP recruitment drives of untrained troops and controversial military contractors to battle an established threat.

Conclusion

There are benefits in enlisting civilian militias in the fight against extremism and terrorism. Civilian militia members possess knowledge of the land, the state of relations between different clans, and a general understanding of what the community would most like to receive from the state. In the most ideal circumstances, civilian involvement can serve as a form of long-term nation building, as the local population becomes stakeholders in ensuring the stability of their country. However, as seen in the previous case studies, civilian militias have the potential to exacerbate conflicts and compound the challenges of extremist violence. Rather than being protective, civilian troops can become predatory and abusive when not properly monitored. As made evident throughout the case studies, predation is more likely if strong codes of conduct that respect the rule of law and basic human rights are not implemented and effective oversight mechanisms are not established. However, the inclusion of monitoring mechanisms for the activities of civilian militias is seemingly beyond most defense budgets.

Civilian militias have so far promised a short-term solution that too often contributes to long-term challenges. As the vulnerable public within Nigeria, Somalia, and Burkina Faso contend with ongoing instability, more community members are becoming susceptible to joining extremist and terrorist groups. According to a 2023 U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) report, since 2017, the number of recruits motivated by religious reasons has decreased by 57 percent across eight sub-Saharan countries. Included among the sample size were Nigeria, Somalia, and Burkina Faso.¹⁰³ Instead, the pathway to radicalization further hinges on concerns of tangible safety in both the communal and national levels as well as economic security. Additionally, 71 percent of those who joined extremist and terrorist groups were reportedly

¹⁰¹ Anna Schmauder and Annabelle Willeme, "The Volunteers For The Defense Of The Homeland," Clingendael Institute, March 9, 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/volunteers-defense-homeland>.

¹⁰² "Burkina Faso to Raise 150M Euros for War Fund," Defense Post, December 12, 2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/12/12/burkina-faso-war-fund/>; Antonin Tisseron, "Pandora's box. Burkina Faso, self-defense militias and VDP Law in fighting jihadism: 28," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes-pscc/17590.pdf>

¹⁰³ "Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement," United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), February 7, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/prevent-violent-extremism/publications/journey-extremism-africa-pathways-recruitment-and-disengagement>.

influenced by human rights abuses by security forces who were later not adequately held responsible for their actions.¹⁰⁴ The most productive components of counterterrorism efforts are sacrificed when campaigns diverge from their intended mission. When security forces and civilian militias commit illicit crimes, they lose the trust of their dependents, making it difficult to redeem themselves as credible enforcers of safety.

Recommendations

Currently, there are limited examples of successful long-term civilian militia groups. Although these groups operate within or in proximity to the framework of the government, the crux of the matter remains how to appropriately monitor these militias as well as ensure they comply with their campaign mandate, the rule of law, and basic human rights.

Policy recommendations remain consistent across the three countries: better vetting polices in the recruitment process;¹⁰⁵ standardized monitoring of troops and obligation to comply with the rule of law¹⁰⁶ and basic human rights standards; the establishment of proper disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) protocols when relieving troops of their duties; and ensuring government support for the program exists and is sustainable.¹⁰⁷

Fundamentally speaking, civilian militias should not be considered substitutes for national forces but auxiliaries in the national scheme for security and recovery. As a supplementary defense force, Adam Day and Vanda Felbab-Brown at United Nations University have suggested that local defense forces be subject to conditional recognition by the state. Put simply, to increase accountability among civilian militias, the state should only provide benefits—such as salary, equipment, logistical support, and official mandates—if the civilian militias comply with state supported procedures. By not complying with regular chain of command, international humanitarian law, and legal processes, then the community militia will lose its recognition and sponsorship from the state.¹⁰⁸ This should also include effective civilian oversight mechanisms, which include actors from both the local and national levels, ideally established within parliamentary structures. Civilian oversight is crucial in transparently documenting troop deficiencies and areas for improvement.

Administering specific responsibilities and location mandates could mitigate troops from overstepping their authority. While it may be difficult to reign in civilian troops once they are

¹⁰⁴ Evelyne Musambi, “Sub-Saharan Africa is ‘new epicenter’ of extremism, says UN,” Associated Press, February 7, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-group-politics-organized-crime-africa-098f5a2cf237f92d3d1217fade5caf0b>.

¹⁰⁵ Anna Schmauder and Annabelle Willeme, “The Volunteers For The Defense Of The Homeland,” Clingendael Institute, March 9, 2021, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/volunteers-defense-homeland>.

¹⁰⁶ Adam Day and Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace: How militias and paramilitary groups shape post-conflict transitions,” United Nations University, 2020, <https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:7631/HybridConflictFullReport.pdf>.

¹⁰⁷ Chitra Nagarajan, “To Defend Or Harm? Community Militias in Borno State, Nigeria,” Center for Civilians in Conflict, June 2020, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CommunityMilitiasFINAL_June2020lowres.pdf;

¹⁰⁸ Adam Day and Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace: How militias and paramilitary groups shape post-conflict transitions,” United Nations University, 2020, <https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:7631/HybridConflictFullReport.pdf>.

established, precise instruction and communal loyalty can offset alternative agendas. Scholars at the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) report that as consistent training across civilian units cannot be guaranteed, civilian militias are more effective when they carry out tactical and procedural activities. Accordingly, CNA scholars tout the sustainability of specific missions including: “standing checkpoints, gathering intelligence, providing indications and warning of impending insurgent attacks, and serving as emissaries to local populations.”¹⁰⁹ Additionally, as previously mentioned when discussing the CJTF, deploying local troops within their communities is more likely to lead to protection than predation.¹¹⁰

To avoid predation, campaigns must be short, and troops must be given explicit instructions and guidelines on how to achieve the goals of the mandate. Historically, civilian troops are effective in achieving short-term security. In a CNA review of 12 countries that employed civilian militias, all but one were successful in achieving short-term security goals.¹¹¹ The longer a campaign the more likely civilian defense forces will be prone to infighting and splintering. Policies that prevent the break off and creation of other militias are critical in maintaining the focus of community defense campaigns, especially when the timeline of a counterterrorism deployment is expected to last much longer than projected.¹¹² Unfortunately, the resources available to and motivations behind established militant jihadi groups ensures long, drawn-out conflicts, which would necessitate better training for security forces on troop cooperation, and if splintering is inevitable, mandatory training on civilian harm mitigation.

Civilian militias also require additional training throughout their mandate to adequately counter constantly evolving violent extremist groups. Civilian militia groups deployed for counterinsurgency purposes face substantial risks. Training in military preparedness must be consistent and sustainable to significantly eclipse violent extremists and terrorists. The counterinsurgent outfits are up against violent actors belonging to the global networks of al-Qaeda and ISIS who have their sights set on exercising control over as much territory as possible¹¹³ and who also entrench themselves within local communities to build a social support base. Assaults from established violent extremist and terrorist groups will transform as counterterrorism strategies evolve, and the pace at which local militias can develop new methods to resist attacks requires supplementary training in operations and strategies. As made evident

¹⁰⁹ Patricio Asfura-Heim, Jerry Meyerle, William Rosenau, and Eric Davids, “Risky Business: The Future of Civil Defense Forces and Counterterrorism in an Era of Persistent Conflict: 58,” CNA, October 2014, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2014/crm-2014-u-008881%20%281%29.pdf>.

¹¹⁰ Patricio Asfura-Heim, Jerry Meyerle, William Rosenau, and Eric Davids, “Risky Business: The Future of Civil Defense Forces and Counterterrorism in an Era of Persistent Conflict: 56,” CNA, October 2014, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2014/crm-2014-u-008881%20%281%29.pdf>.

¹¹¹ Patricio Asfura-Heim, Jerry Meyerle, William Rosenau, and Eric Davids, “Risky Business: The Future of Civil Defense Forces and Counterterrorism in an Era of Persistent Conflict: 56,” CNA, October 2014, <https://www.cna.org/reports/2014/crm-2014-u-008881%20%281%29.pdf>.

¹¹² Vanda Felbab-Brown, “The Problem with Militias in Somalia: Almost Everyone Wants Them Despite Their Dangers,” United Nations University, 2020, <https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:7631/HybridConflictFullReport.pdf>.

¹¹³ “Similarities and differences between organized crime and other forms of crime,” UNODC, <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/zh/organized-crime/module-1/key-issues/similarities-and-differences.htm>.

throughout the three case studies, additional training, and advanced training at that, is often inaccessible to most local militias.

Furthermore, DDR programs are essential to preventing an overcrowded and ineffective defense environment. When a troop has completed their mandate, DDR programs ensure safe reintegration of former civilian militia into their home communities. In particular, the government should provide some level of support that would incentivize former local militia to return to civilian life. According to Chitra Nagarajan, a researcher at Civilians in Conflict, governmental support should not be solely provided to state sanctioned local militia, but also the other civilian militia groups that assisted in counterterrorism efforts.¹¹⁴ Inclusive provision of support prevents potential intercommunal conflict as one group would not resent the other for preferential treatment in receiving subsidies. Successful DDR programs also have the potential to inhibit the formation of splinter groups seeking goals outside of counterterrorism. Providing job opportunities, vocational training, or education benefits once local militias revert to civilian status can impact how committed individuals are to DDR processes. The true success of DDR programs relies on how willing participants are in honoring the DDR agreement, and having clear cut standards for provisions and support post-deployment encourages longer-term compliance and prospects for sustainable security.

Priority Improvements for Civilian Militias in Nigeria, Somalia, and Burkina Faso

Of the benefits and drawbacks of civilian paramilitary groups outlined throughout this report, certain recommendations would fare better in the specific contexts of Nigeria, Somalia, and Burkina Faso.

There must be accountability mechanisms in place to hold the CJTF in Nigeria responsible for their crimes. At first glance, the CJTF seems the most organized and operationalized of the paramilitary groups. However, they have been accused of targeted killings on top of countless other crimes and human rights abuses. A first step in rehabilitating the CJTF would be to hold troops accountable for their crimes. Clear punishment for violence and human rights abuses would reinstate trust and support on the ground and help prevent illicit activity from snowballing into a persistent and uncontrollable issue. These accountability mechanisms could further assuage community skepticism and ensure the success of DDR programs that are critical in preventing recidivism.

The Macawisley in Somalia are the least resourced of the paramilitary groups and would benefit from more governmental support, but only if they successfully complete human rights training. An infusion of resources including armament and ammunition would provide greater kinetic success against groups such as al-Shabaab that are known for their advanced weaponry and artillery. However, the Somali government should only provide this support after civilian troops have successfully completed human rights and civics training to limit abuse. If the Somali government continues to refuse additional resources, the Macawisley should be tasked

¹¹⁴ Chitra Nagarajan, “To Defend Or Harm? Community Militias in Borno State, Nigeria,” Center for Civilians in Conflict, June 2020, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CommunityMilitiasFINAL_June2020lowres.pdf.

with tactical responsibilities that do not require weapons as it is unlikely that they are being adequately trained in the use of weaponry.

In terms of Burkina Faso, the government is pushing its back against the wall as it will face the eventual large-scale operation of demobilizing the constantly growing VDP. The Burkinabe government must have a working plan to oversee the eventual and successful reintegration of almost 100,000 VDP troops back into society. Usurping power from demographics that were at the mercy of violent extremists and terrorists will not be an easy feat and the government must have specific deliverables to compensate for “demoting” civilian troops back to civilian status. DDR programs are not a solution but rather a mitigating factor to the challenges that arise following a civilian paramilitary troop’s active deployment.

The bespoke defense capacities of civilian militias allow for better adaptation in the wake of renewed extremist operations, but there must be clear expectations and standards set by the government to avoid potential wildcards in threats to stability. The counterterrorism dynamic between civilian led militias and national security forces is meant to be symbiotic, but often the relationship devolves into competition for status and authority in an environment that continues to be defined by instability and disorder.