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STUDY

# Exploring the Acquisition and Management of Arms among Volunteer Security Outfits in Nigeria's Borno State

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Cover photograph: Hunters in north-eastern Nigeria. Gombi local government area (LGA), July 2015. Credit: © Jerome Starkey. (Author’s note: Although the photo was taken in Adamawa state, it shows the array of weapons that Borno state-based volunteer security outfits (VSOs) possessed in the early days of the insurgency. As this report documents, VSOs in Borno state now possess more sophisticated weaponry.)

Design and layout by Kathleen Morf.  
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# Abbreviations

<b>BAY</b>	Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (states)
<b>BoSHA</b>	Borno State Hunters Association
<b>BOYES</b>	Borno Youth Empowerment Scheme
<b>BSSTF</b>	Borno State Security Trust Fund
<b>CDF</b>	Civil Defence Forces (Sierra Leone)
<b>CJTF</b>	Civilian Joint Task Force
<b>DPO</b>	Divisional Police Office[r]
<b>DSS</b>	Department of State Services (Nigeria)
<b>ECOWAS</b>	Economic Community of West African States
<b>ISWAP</b>	Islamic State’s West African Province
<b>JAS</b>	People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad (Jama’atu Ahlis Sunnah Lidda’awati w’al Jihad)
<b>JTF</b>	Joint Task Force
<b>LCBC</b>	Lake Chad Basin Commission
<b>LGA</b>	Local government area
<b>MNJTF</b>	Multinational Joint Task Force
<b>NHFSS</b>	Nigerian Hunter and Forest Security Service
<b>NPF</b>	Nigeria Police Force
<b>NSCDC</b>	Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps
<b>NSSAG</b>	Non-state state-armed group
<b>RSF</b>	Rapid Support Forces (Sudan)
<b>SALW</b>	Small arms and light weapons
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>USD</b>	Dollar (United States)
<b>VDP</b>	Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie; Burkina Faso)
<b>VGN</b>	Vigilante Group of Nigeria
<b>VSO</b>	Volunteer security outfit
<b>WAM</b>	Weapons and ammunition management

# Executive Summary

Armed conflict in north-eastern Nigeria and the greater Lake Chad Basin region has raged for more than a decade. The non-state armed group commonly known as Boko Haram, which has perpetrated attacks against both state security forces and civilians, has received considerable coverage. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the numerous non-state groups fighting these insurgents. This report explores four of these groups, known as volunteer security outfits (VSOs), that are active in Borno state – the epicentre of the insurgency. Moreover, whereas the focus on VSOs – especially the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) – has tended to be on their deeds and misdeeds, this report pays special attention to the manner in which VSOs have obtained and managed their weapons. This approach has considerable policy and programming relevance not just for Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin region but for other countries that also face insurgencies and that have or are considering cooperating with armed civilians to supplement state security forces' abilities to uphold law and order and advance peace and security.

The study draws principally on research conducted in Nigeria between July 2023 and March 2024. Among the dozens of key informant interviews undertaken, the researcher particularly benefited from meetings with VSO commanders. They discussed their stockpiles, their sources of materiel, the support they receive from state and federal authorities, and the challenges they face to counter Boko Haram as well as misuse and misallocation of their firearms.

This report first provides an overview of the four Borno-based VSOs: the Borno State Hunters Association (BoSHA), the CJTF, the Kesh Kesh vigilante group and the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN). It then examines the firearms that these entities possess and the means by which they procure them. Finally, the report explores emerging good practice for the oversight and management of VSOs' conventional arms and ammunition.

The paper seeks to shed light on state approaches to the arming of community security entities. It introduces questions to help both policymakers and those involved in programmes that provide weapons to consider how their efforts contribute to community protection and safety, as well as state security. These questions include the following:

- ▶ What challenges have government officials and these VSOs faced when seeking to effectively manage weapons and ammunition?
- ▶ How have they been addressed?
- ▶ How effective were the policies and programmes that were put in place?
- ▶ How can other governments and donors support emerging good practice and address shortcomings?



# Key Findings

- ▶ In Borno state, there are four non-state groups, commonly known as volunteer security outfits (VSOs) and which the state or federal government arms as a matter of long-standing practice: the Borno State Hunters Association (BoSHA); the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF); the Kesh Kesh vigilante group; and the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN). Taken together, these entities comprise 50,000–55,000 members – roughly 10 times the number of federal police officers serving in Borno. They broadly represent the state’s dozens of ethno-linguistic communities and two major religious groups.
- ▶ The four VSOs operating in Borno state possess – or have ready access to – roughly 25,000 firearms. Many – perhaps most – of these weapons are rudimentary domestically made artisanal hunting muskets (known as Dane guns), foreign-manufactured hunting rifles and pump-action shotguns. They also possess or are permitted to use industrially-produced firearms: principally assault rifles.
- ▶ These VSOs acquire their firearms from two principal sources: local gunsmiths and state authorities. The rule that materiel recovered from battlefield capture is to be turned over to government security forces seems to be largely respected. Federal and State governmental authorities are likely to have furnished these VSOs with more than 10,000 firearms, many of which are assault rifles the government’s security forces dispense on a temporary basis, and monitor. Assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers and gun trucks are sometimes provided to the CJTF for “joint operations” that extend beyond specific time-bound reconnaissance and clearance operations. Most of the arms and ammunition that the government provides to VSOs comes from recovered Boko Haram stocks; ammunition is issued sparingly.
- ▶ Borno-based VSOs are held in high esteem both for their achievements in helping counter the insurgency and for the sacrifices they have made. Some observers also express a concern that the largest VSO has become politicized. Hundreds of members of Borno-based VSOs have recently been recruited to be deployed in conflict zones in the north-west of Nigeria. The weapons they receive are procured locally in the states in which they operate. Casualty rates among VSOs have risen steeply since January 2023. VSOs have flagged deficiencies in the benefit packages and medical care that their members currently receive.
- ▶ Safeguards put in place to protect firearms held by VSOs against external threats are difficult to document, but they appear to be either largely effective or not to have yet been seriously tested. To date, losses of arms and ammunition have occurred mostly during attacks on VSOs during clearance operations or escort-protection activities undertaken jointly with state security personnel. In the light of the casualties suffered, the number of firearms in VSO possession that have been lost to enemy forces is likely to be in the hundreds.
- ▶ Mechanisms and practices employed to safekeep arms and ammunition against internal threats include vetting, training, record-keeping and morale-building. Evidence obtained on these matters was scant. Examples shared suggest that governmental authorities devote considerable energy to vetting the VSO members who are to be equipped with assault rifles and other materiel. Training is provided on weapons handling as well as command and control, but it can be cursory. Record-keeping ranges from extensive to, quite possibly, none at all. Payment and benefit packages for VSO members similarly vary greatly, with potential ramifications concerning misuse and misallocation of VSO materiel by those to whom it has been furnished.

# 1. Introduction

In 2013, a group of citizens largely from Borno state in north-eastern Nigeria known as the Yan Gora (“People with Sticks” in the Hausa language) received their first firearms from the government in a bid to help the country’s security forces combat the insurgent group known as Boko Haram. A decade later that group, now known as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF, see Box 1), is equipped with more than 10,000 firearms.

Nigeria is not the only African country whose government has armed or is permitting the arming of its civilians for self-defence purposes. For example, Sierra Leone did so in the late 1990s and Sudan in the early 2000s.<sup>1</sup> The hoped-for short-term gains sometimes are realized, but there are often unintended consequences in the medium and long terms. These effects can be quite deleterious for the government and its citizenry, as seen in both countries.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the inherent challenges in arming civilians, governments persist in doing so. For example, in 2019, in response to an expanded jihadist threat, Burkinabe President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré created a new pro-government militia – Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP, from the French name *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie*) – which now numbers in the tens of thousands. President Kaboré initially envisioned the VDP to number 13,000;<sup>3</sup> his successors<sup>4</sup> raised the ceiling to 50,000. Civilians eager to be trained and armed as part of this effort greatly exceeded that target. The Government of Burkina Faso has subsequently spoken of fielding more than 100,000 volunteers in the VDP. By September 2023, it was believed that 30,000–60,000 had already been trained and deployed.<sup>5</sup>

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1 The Sierra Leonean Government armed the Civil Defence Forces (CDF, principally comprising Kamajor hunters) during the country’s struggle against the Revolutionary United Front. The Sudanese Government armed the Janjaweed to counter the Justice and Equality Movement and the Sudan Liberation Movement.

2 The Special Court for Sierra Leone charged the head of the CDF, Samuel Hinga Norman, with eight counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity. He died in 2007 before the court pronounced its verdicts. The Janjaweed militias formed the backbone of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which the Sudanese Government created in 2013. The RSF, long accused of committing human rights violations against the populace, in a report by Human Rights Watch in 2015, started targeting government troops in April 2023. In the conflict’s first 50 days, the government reported 1,100 people had lost their lives as a direct result of hostilities, which Reuters argued likely substantially minimized the true level of casualties suffered. See N. Tattersall, “S Leone War Crimes Inductee Hinga Norman Dies”, Reuters, 22 February 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-leone-warcrimes-norman/s-leone-war-crimes-indictee-hinga-norman-dies-idUSL2252331020070222>; Human Rights Watch, “‘Men with No Mercy’: Rapid Support Forces attacks against civilians in Darfur, Sudan”, 9 September 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/09/09/men-no-mercy/rapid-support-forces-attacks-against-civilians-darfur-sudan>; and N. Elthahir, “Sudan War’s Death Toll in Khartoum is Double Official Figures: Independent Tallies Show”, Reuters, 28 July 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudan-war-kills-more-than-twice-many-civilians-khartoum-officially-reported-2023-07-28>.

3 A. Tisseron, *Pandora’s Box: Burkina Faso, Self-Defense Militias and VDP Law in Fighting Jihadism* (Berlin; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/fes-pscc/17590.pdf>, p. 23.

4 President Kaboré, who won re-election in 2020, fell in a coup d’état to Lt-Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba in 2022. Capt. Ibahim Traoré succeeded Damiba later that year.

5 International Crisis Group, “Burkina Faso: Arming Civilians at the Cost of Social Cohesion?”, Africa Report no. 313, 15 December 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/313-burkina-faso-social-cohesion-en.pdf>, p. 6.

## Box 1: The Civilian Joint Task Force: A Polysemous Term and How it is Used in this Report

References to “the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF)” in official statements, newspaper articles, academic journals and casual conversations can indicate several different entities in Nigeria. For some, it is an umbrella term to refer to those citizens who picked up sticks to combat Boko Haram insurgents in their midst and coalesced into a like-minded community-security entity that was separate from already existing vigilante or hunter bodies. Others only refer to CJTF as those members of the group who are equipped with firearms. It is also used when referring to members of civilian volunteer security outfits (VSOs) – the CJTF and other groups – who are equipped with firearms and serve alongside uniformed personnel of state security forces. These examples are illustrative and not comprehensive.

This study uses the term “CJTF” to refer to those civilians who banded together to counter the insurgency and who were not part of any existing VSO, regardless of whether – or how – they are armed. It tries to distinguish among various types of VSOs and between those that are equipped with firearms from those that are not. It pays particular attention to the former, which includes a “Rapid Response Squad” and a “Special Force”. However, deconstructing and assessing a strict and ironclad dichotomy within and between these two groups (CJTF versus non-CJTF VSOs, and armed CJTF versus non-armed CJTF) is not always possible.

To complicate matters further, at least two other issues merit mention here. The Nigeria Police Force also has its own Rapid Response Squad, which sometimes deploys with members of CJTF’s Special Force and other VSOs. In addition, the Borno Youth Empowerment Scheme (BOYES) has been used as a synonym for the CJTF. This state government framework provides funds for several thousand VSOs, all of which are CJTF and about half of which are not deployed with firearms.



Examples of uniforms worn by Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) members. Credits: Photo 1: © Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), Photos 2 and 3: © Usman Abba Zanna.

This paper examines in detail the approach that Nigeria has taken to mitigate the risk that arms and ammunition provided to its citizens to help defend their communities are misused and to ensure that they do not foster illicit proliferation. Much has been written over the past decade about Borno-based volunteer security outfits (VSOs), especially the CJTF.<sup>6</sup> The Borno-state government uses the term VSO to refer to four non-state armed groups it supports (see Box 2). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the acquisition and management of their arms.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Burkina Faso is in the early stages of creating oversight mechanisms for the management of lethal materiel provided to the VDP and for the force's performance, the CJTF has been operational for more than 10 years now. Its longer record of experience provides a useful case study of lessons learned and emerging enhanced practice for other countries that are pursuing or considering similar policies to steer clear of or emulate as appropriate. Moreover, within Nigeria, community self-defence groups are prevalent and are likely to grow both in numbers and in overall strength. The dearth of police – there are, for example, fewer than 6,000 Nigeria Police Force (NPF) officers in Borno state<sup>8</sup> for a population that exceeds 6 million people<sup>9</sup> – is a country-wide problem. Good practice in Borno could influence practices adopted in the country's 35 other states and nearly 750 other local government areas (LGAs).<sup>10</sup>

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6 For the most part, articles and studies on the CJTF have tended to focus on the group's value-added to the government's efforts to combat the insurgency; and on human rights abuses as well as fears of what may come next. On the first issue, see International Crisis Group, "Watchmen of Lake Chad: Vigilante Groups Fighting Boko Haram", Crisis Group Africa Report no. 244, 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/244-watchmen-of-lake-chad-vigilante-groups-fighting-boko-haram.pdf>; J.T. Omenma and C.M. Hendricks, "Counterterrorism in Africa: An Analysis of the Civilian Joint Task Force and Military Partnership in Nigeria", *Security Journal*, 2018; and S. Bamidele, "'Sweat is Invisible in the Rain': Civilian Joint Task Force and Counter-Insurgency in Borno State, Nigeria", *Security & Defence Quarterly*, no. 4/20, 2020, [https://securityanddefence.pl/pdf-130867-60927?filename=\\_Sweat%20is%20invisible%20in.pdf://securityanddefence.pl/pdf-130867](https://securityanddefence.pl/pdf-130867-60927?filename=_Sweat%20is%20invisible%20in.pdf://securityanddefence.pl/pdf-130867). On the second issue, see I. Abdulsalami Ahovi, "Untrained 30,000 CJTF in Northeast Could Pose Serious Security Threat", *The Guardian*, 2018, <https://www.pressreader.com/nigeria/the-guardian-nigeria/20180729/281552291661788>; Integrated Regional Information Networks, "Civilian Vigilante Groups Increase Dangers in Northeastern Nigeria", UNHCR Refworld, 2013; C. Nagarajan, *To Defend or Harm?: Community Militias in Borno State, Nigeria* (Washington, DC: Center for Civilians in Conflict, 2020); and Ripples Nigeria, "Untold Story: Inside the Civilian JTF's Complicated Journey to Oust Boko Haram", 2020, <https://www.ripplesnigeria.com/untold-story-inside-the-civilian-jtfs-complicated-journey-to-oust-boko-haram>.

7 A notable exception is United Nations, *Weapons and Ammunition Dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin* (New York: United Nations, 2022).

8 Author written correspondence with knowledgeable source, April 2024.

9 See [https://www.citypopulation.de/en/nigeria/admin/NGA008\\_\\_borno](https://www.citypopulation.de/en/nigeria/admin/NGA008__borno).

10 Members of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN), for example, number in the millions. They are active not just in all of Borno's 27 LGAs, but in all of Nigeria's 774 LGAs. They are much more numerous than the NPF, whose strength is fewer than 400,000—with likely more than 25% of the force attached to the Special Protection Unit, which focuses on protecting politicians and VIPs. Author interview with knowledgeable source, Abuja, 19 March 2024. For more on Nigeria's various vigilante groups, see International Crisis Group, "Managing Vigilantism in Nigeria: A Near-term Necessity", Crisis Group Africa Report, No. 308, 21 April 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/308-vigilantism-in-nigeria.pdf>.

## Box 2: Volunteer Security Outfits in Broader Context

In recent years, the acronym “NSAG” for non-state armed group has gained considerable currency. Unfortunately, important nuances and distinctions are too often lost in its use, which has important policy implications. UNIDIR has defined a non-state armed group as an armed group of actors distinct from the armed and security forces of any state, and *without* authorization from the state in which it is based or operates to possess and use conventional arms.<sup>11</sup> S<sup>4</sup> uses the term non-state state-armed group (NSSAG) to refer to groups that are armed with (active or passive) state support. This term is preferred to NSAG or terms such as “pro-government armed group” or “pro-government militia”<sup>12</sup> as the relationship between a government and such non-government armed entities are often fraught and fluid. The term NSSAG is not used by Nigerian Authorities. Rather, volunteer security outfit (VSO) is the name government officials typically apply when referring to armed groups it supports.

The report seeks to shed light on states’ increasing reliance on non-state state-armed groups. It addresses questions to help both policymakers and programmers ensure that the weapons provided actually promote law and order as well as state security, including:

- ▶ What challenges have government officials and these VSOs faced when seeking to effectively manage weapons and ammunition?
- ▶ How have they been addressed?
- ▶ How effective were the policies and programmes that were put in place?
- ▶ How can other governments and donors support emerging good practice and address shortcomings?

This report is primarily based on key informant interviews undertaken in Maiduguri (the capitol of Borno state) over a nine-month period during 2023 and 2024 (see Box 3). It is organized into three main sections. Section 2 gives an overview of armed groups that are not actively fighting the state and that operate in north-eastern Nigeria (see Map 1), with particular attention paid to those in Borno (see Map 2), the epicentre of the insurgency.<sup>13</sup> It includes some historical context on the conflict, the existence of non-jihadist armed groups, the creation of the CJTF and the government’s decision to

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11 A. M. Baldo et al, “Diversion Analysis Framework”, Arms Trade Treaty Issue Brief no. 3, UNIDIR, Conflict Armament Research, Stimson, 2021, [https://unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ATT\\_Issue\\_Brief\\_3-Diversion\\_Analysis\\_Framework.pdf](https://unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ATT_Issue_Brief_3-Diversion_Analysis_Framework.pdf).

12 For example, see S. Carey and N. J. Mitchell, “Progovernment Militias”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2017, <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051915-045433>; J. Hazen, “Force Multiplier: Pro-Government Armed Groups”, *Small Arms Survey 2010: Gangs, Groups, and Guns* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/Small-Arms-Survey-2010-Chapter-10-EN.pdf>; and F. Wilshusen, *Today’s Solution, Tomorrow’s Problem?: An Analysis of West African Practices in the Use of Pro-government Militias*, Security-Armament-Development (Bonn: BICC, 2021), [https://www.bicc.de/Publikationen/SAD-Nexus-Paper\\_2021\\_BICC.pdf](https://www.bicc.de/Publikationen/SAD-Nexus-Paper_2021_BICC.pdf).

13 Nigeria is administratively divided into a Federal Capital Territory and 36 states, organized in six zones. North East zone includes six states: Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe.



furnish lethal materiel to non-state actors. Section 3 examines the arms (see Box 4) that these entities possess and the means by which they procure them. Specifically, it seeks to distinguish between what the government has dispensed and what armed groups have secured separately. Section 4 strives to determine emerging good practice when it comes to checks and balances for the oversight and management of materiel, whether government-provided or otherwise obtained. The final, concluding section presents observations on the current situation in Borno state and provides considerations for Nigerian Federal and State Government authorities to ensure that VSO arms and ammunition are not diverted nor misused, as well as to ensure compliance with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Convention on Small Arms and Lights Weapons, their Ammunition and Other Related Materials. The report concludes by calling for an examination of the phenomenon of permitting communities to be armed for self-defence and counter-terrorism purposes across Africa and beyond. This would aim to identify common challenges and effective measures to address them, as well as to prevent and mitigate the risk of misuse and diversion of arms and ammunition.

### Box 3: Methodology

The research for this report is based predominantly on three visits to Nigeria: in July 2023, January 2024 and March 2024. Each trip included travel to both Abuja (the capital of Nigeria) and Maiduguri (the capital of Borno state). Over the cumulative 30-plus days in Nigeria, the author conducted key informant interviews with more than 50 government officials and representatives of civil society. Vantage points and experiences shared include those of Borno state civil servants, federal security services personnel, volunteer security outfit members, academicians, journalists and community organizers. Follow-up correspondence with many of those interviewed, as well as with additional knowledgeable sources who were possible to engage through introductions made by various interlocutors, further enriched the study.

For various reasons, it was not possible to travel outside Maiduguri for this report. Fortunately, Mohammed Aliyu-Sarki kindly agreed to visit Bama and interview the Kesh Kesh vigilante group commander on the author's behalf (using questions and context prepared by the author).

The author also conducted interviews with policymakers, practitioners and researchers in Boston, Geneva and New York during the period in question.

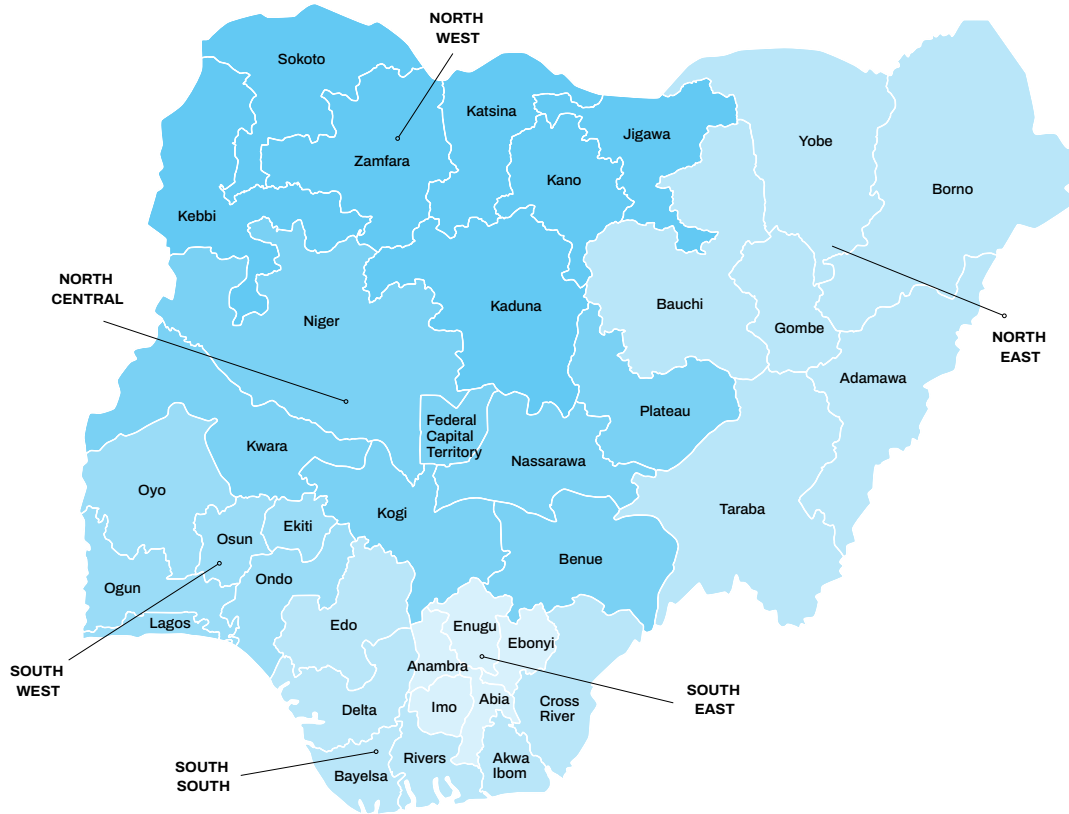
The study also benefits from additional research undertaken for a 2021 publication on conflict dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin,<sup>14</sup> and on continuing development of the Safeguarding Security Sector Stockpiles (S<sup>4</sup>) Data Set.<sup>15</sup>

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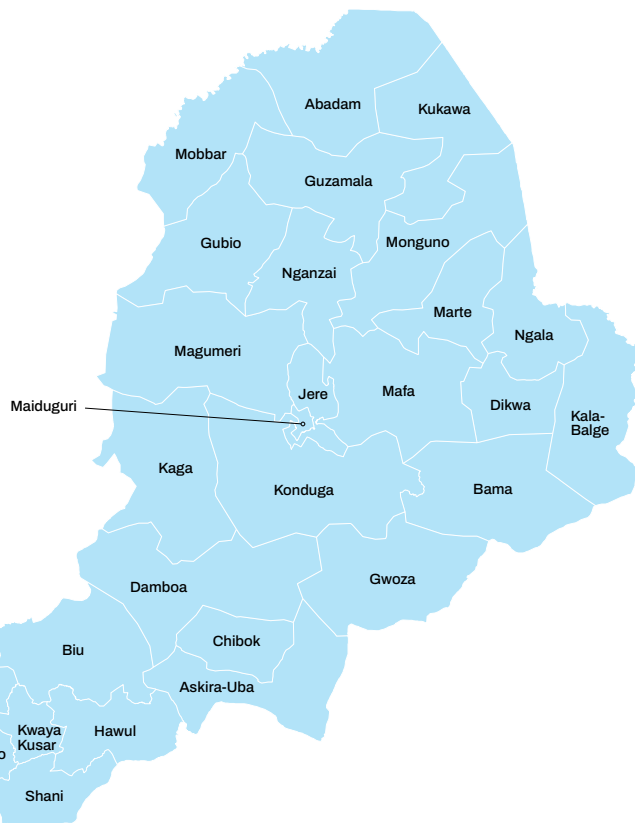
14 E. G. Berman, *The Management of Lethal Material in Conflict Settings: Existing Challenges and Opportunities for the European Peace Facility* (Brussels: International Peace Information Service, 2021), <https://ipisresearch.be/publication/the-management-of-lethal-materiel-in-conflict-settings-existing-challenges-and-opportunities-for-the-european-peace-facility>.

15 For background on the S<sup>4</sup> Data Set and summaries of incidents of attacks on security forces and volunteer security outfits in Borno State, as well as across the Lake Chad Basin region, see <https://www.s-4.org>.





Map 1. Nigeria's 36 States, 1 Federal Capital Territory, and 6 Geopolitical Zones

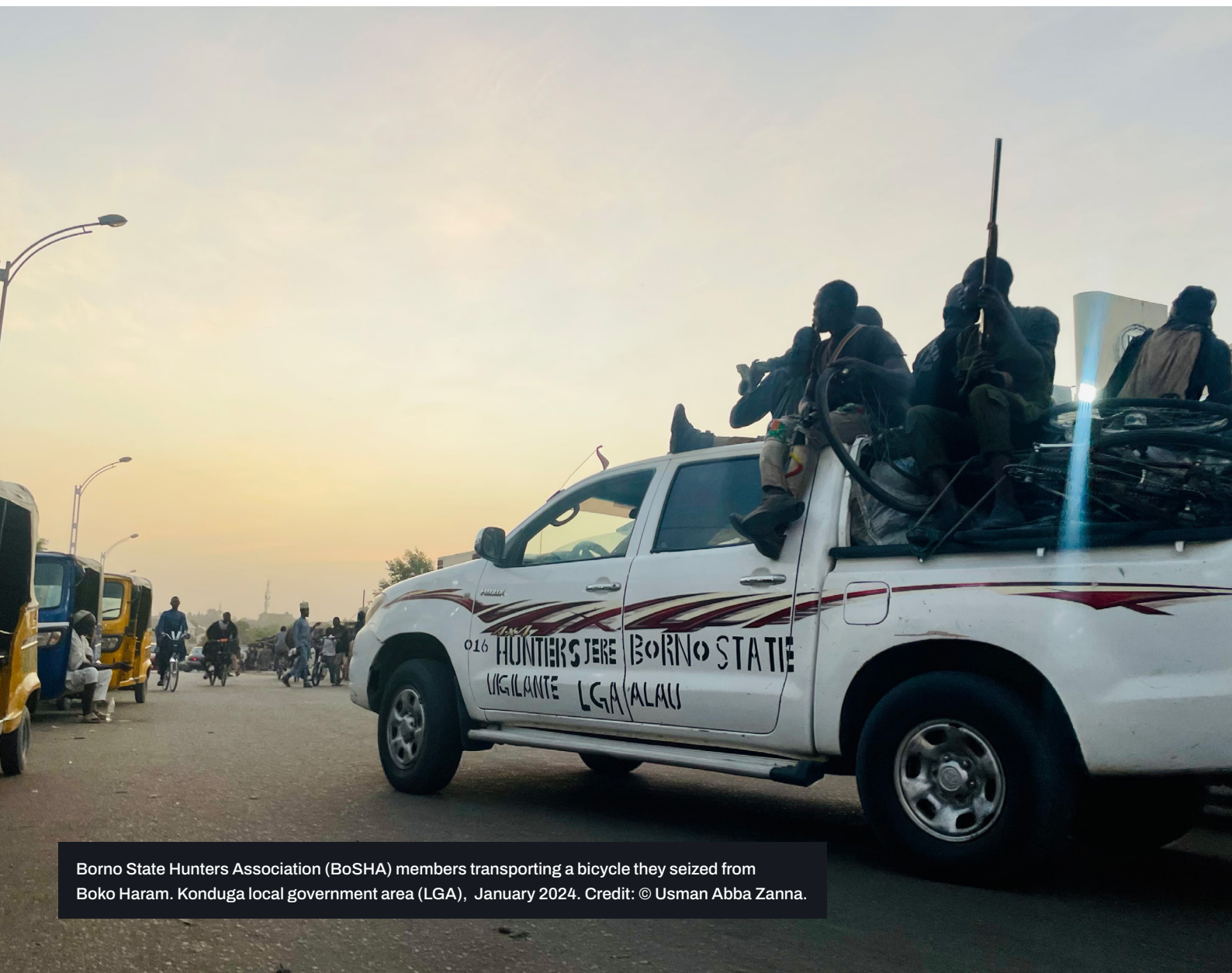


Map 2. Borno State's 27 Local Government Areas

## Box 4: “Arms” and “Armed” as Used in this Report

For this study, the term “arms” is synonymous with “firearms”, as defined in the United Nations Firearms Protocol, and small arms and light weapons (SALW) as described in the International Tracing Instrument.

“Armed” refers to those possessing a variety of weapons that may or may not include firearms. Some VSO members in Borno state possess axes, cutlasses, knives, machetes and sticks, but not firearms. Whenever possible, an effort is made to distinguish between the types of fire arms provided or used (e.g. hunting rifles, shotguns and assault rifles) and to distinguish artisanal or “craft-produced” firearms from those that are produced industrially.



Borno State Hunters Association (BoSHA) members transporting a bicycle they seized from Boko Haram. Konduga local government area (LGA), January 2024. Credit: © Usman Abba Zanna.

## 2. Armed Groups and Volunteer Security Outfits in North-Eastern Nigeria

This section introduces several non-state groups that receive – or have received – arms from the state as a matter of government practice. The focus is on those that have been the beneficiary of such weapons and are active in Borno state. To provide useful context, some other groups in North-Eastern Nigeria in addition to the previously mentioned four Borno state-based VSO are introduced. These include entities that might be described as “pro-governor”, which are engaged primarily during election cycles and are armed with a variety of weapons, usually other than firearms, such as bladed weapons and clubs.<sup>16</sup> This section also examines the emergence of Boko Haram and the creation of the CJTF. It does not, however, explore the so-called hybrid forces, that is civilian former combatants who were affiliated with Boko Haram and now serve alongside state security forces (see Box 6).

### 2.1. Groups of Armed Civilians Active in North-Eastern Nigeria before the Advent of the Current Crisis

#### 2.1.1 Kalare Boys, Sara-Suka and ECOMOG

The North East zone hosts, or has hosted, several prominent examples of “pro-governor” armed groups, including ECOMOG<sup>17</sup> in Borno, Kalare Boys in Gombe and Sara-Suka in Bauchi. These groups often operate in more than one state.<sup>18</sup> While some are associated with a particular politician or political party, allegiances and alliances are not ironclad. ECOMOG, for example, was widely associated with a 2003 gubernatorial candidate who defeated the incumbent governor. Four years later, different ECOMOG factions supported politicians from additional parties.<sup>19</sup>

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16 There have been reports that weapons distributed or procured with funds provided for such purposes have not collected after the election is held. See Human Rights Watch, “Criminal Politics: Violence, ‘Godfathers’ and Corruption in Nigeria”, 2007, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/10/11/criminal-politics/violence-godfathers-and-corruption-nigeria>, p. 82.

This practice and dynamic remain a concern. Author interviews with knowledgeable sources, Maiduguri, March 2024.

17 This group is not to be confused with the two ECOWAS peace operations of the same name: the ECOWAS Cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) deployed in Liberia and in Sierra Leone in the 1990s and early 2000s.

18 The Kalare Boys and Sara-Suka have been active in both Bauchi and Gombe, and ECOMOG did not limit its activities to Borno, but was also engaged in Yobe. Author interview with Abdulkareem Haruna, journalist, Maiduguri, 16 January 2024.

19 Najjainfoman, “Who are the Boko Harams? Part II”, 2012, <https://najjainfoman.wordpress.com/2012/06/25/who-are-the-boko-harams-part-ii>.

The possible short-term gains of such engagement may be clear – winning an election – but unintended consequences are varied and can be very grave. In Gombe, in between election cycles armed Kalare Boys have engaged in various criminal activities, either in an individual capacity or in concert with others. In a 20-year span, they have killed hundreds of people and injured many others. One of their victims was a former supporter, Gombe’s governor from 1999 to 2011, Muhammad Danjuma Goje.<sup>20</sup> In Borno and Yobe, the group that came to be popularly known as Boko Haram (see below) recruited ECOMOG members,<sup>21</sup> although allegations that this occurred on a meaningful scale seem to be based more on political agendas and people’s fears than on fact.<sup>22</sup>

## 2.1.2 Kesh Kesh

In many communities of the Shuwa ethnic group, which is indigenous to parts of Borno and environs,<sup>23</sup> there are long-established vigilante corps known as Kesh Kesh.<sup>24</sup> Kesh Kesh have been active since the 1980s.<sup>25</sup>

Some members were originally involved in criminality (including rustling cattle and robbery), but under community pressure pledged on the Koran to desist from such activities and, instead, work to uphold law and order.<sup>26</sup> A number in the range of 500–1,000 seems plausible for this Borno-based group’s current strength.<sup>27</sup> Many former Kesh Kesh members have joined other Borno-based VSOs in recent years.<sup>28</sup>

Kesh Kesh in Borno are based in Bama LGA, but operate across Borno, as well as in parts of Cameroon and Chad. They possess an estimated 300 firearms, many of which are manufactured locally.<sup>29</sup> Sometimes Kesh Kesh from another country in the region will supplement the Bama-based vigilante group and operate within Nigeria.<sup>30</sup>

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20 Goje survived an attempted carjacking in 2021. See M. A. Ibrahim, “The Gangs of Gombe”, African Arguments, 2023, <https://africanarguments.org/2023/02/the-gangs-of-gombe>.

21 International Crisis Group, “Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency”, Crisis Group Africa Report, 2014, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/curbing-violence-nigeria-ii-boko-haram-insurgency>, p. 38.

22 Author interviews with knowledgeable sources, Maiduguri, January 2024 and March 2024.

23 The Shuwa community, also known as the Baggara community, are nomadic herders who live in Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria and Sudan. See Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Militias (and Militancy) in Nigeria’s North-East: Not Going Away”, in *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace: How Militias and Paramilitary Groups Shape Post-Conflict Transitions*, in ed. Adam Day, (Tokyo: UNU, 2020), <https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/post/3895/HybridConflictNigeriaWeb.pdf>, p. 79.

24 Kesh Kesh (or Kes Kes) means “Volunteered Group Against Terrorists” in the Shuwa Arabic dialect. See A. Eribake, “Council, Rep Deny Death of JAMB Candidates”, *Vanguard*, 15 April 2014, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/04/council-rep-deny-death-jamb-candidates>.

25 C. Nagarajan and S. Ugho, “Nigerian Community Militias: Toward a Solution”, CIVIC Policy Brief, November 2019, [https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Issue-Brief\\_Africa\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Issue-Brief_Africa_Final_Web.pdf).

26 C. Nagarajan, “To Defend or Harm?: Community Militias in Borno State, Nigeria”, CIVIC, 2020, <https://civiliansinconflict.org/publications/research/to-defend-or-harm>, p. 14.

27 This figure is based on an extrapolation from the VSO’s reported firearms holdings based on what is known of other VSOs’ holdings and strengths, and an author interview with a knowledgeable source, by Zoom, May 2024.

28 Author interview with knowledgeable source by Zoom, May 2024.

29 Interview by Mohammed Aliyu-Sarki of Commander Bulama Harun Biya, Commandant, Borno State Chapter, Kesh Kesh Vigilante Group, Bama, 28 March 2024.

30 For example, 150 Kesh Kesh from Cameroon, in cooperation with the CJTF and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), conducted joint operations in Bama and Gwoza, and as far away as Mobbar. See F. Mac-Leva, U. Abubakar and I. Sawab, “How Cameroonian Vigilantes are Aiding Military to Liberate Border Communities”, *Daily Trust*, 2019, <https://dailytrust.com/how-cameroonian-vigilantes-are-aiding-military-to-liberate-border-communities>.

### 2.1.3 Vigilante Group of Nigeria

The Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) has also long been active in Nigeria's North East zone. The VGN was established in 1983 in Borno.<sup>31</sup>

To become a member of the VGN, one must be endorsed by the head of the local police as well as by a recognized community leader. The VGN Chairman in Abuja has the final say when it comes to recruitment. In December 2023, the VGN's strength in Borno state alone stood at about 13,000, of which about 4,000 were armed with firearms, including Dane guns, single- and double-barrelled rifles, and pump-action shotguns.<sup>32</sup>

### 2.1.4 Professional Hunters Association of Nigeria

Like the VGN, hunters have long been active in north-eastern Nigeria. Frequently referred to as the Professional Hunters Association of Nigeria (PHAN), in 2023 they became known at the federal level as the Nigerian Hunter and Forest Security Service (NHFSS).<sup>33</sup>

They have different appellations at state and sometimes LGA levels.<sup>34</sup> The Borno State Hunters Association (BoSHA), for example, registered with authorities in the early 2000s.<sup>35</sup> BoSHA's strength increased markedly in the second half of 2023, from around 12,000 to 16,000. They are deployed and active in all of Borno's 27 LGAs and are armed with locally and foreign-made single- and double-barrelled rifles – and, when serving alongside state security forces, assault rifles as well.<sup>36</sup> About 10,000 of their members are equipped with firearms.<sup>37</sup>

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31 Author interview with Commander Mohammad Tar, Commandant, Borno State Chapter, VGN, Maiduguri, 24 July 2023.

32 Author interview with Commander Mohammad Tar, Commandant, Borno State Chapter, VGN, Maiduguri, 19 January 2024.

33 In 2022, the National Assembly passed a bill to officially recognize and fund the NHFSS. See K. Akintola, "National Assembly Passes Forest Security Bill", *Nigerian Tribune*, 2022, <https://tribuneonline.ng.com/national-assembly-passes-forest-security-security-bill>. But President Buhari did not sign the legislation into law.

34 For example, in Geidam LGA in Yobe state, hunters are known as the Kandira Group. See Yagana Bukar, "Non-State Armed Groups in Yobe State", in *Non-State Armed Groups in North East Nigeria*, p. 70.

35 Author interview with Commander Bakar Mustafa Bunu, Borno State Secretary, BoSHA, NHFSS, Maiduguri, 24 July 2023.

36 Author interview with Commander Bakar Mustafa Bunu, Borno State Secretary, BoSHA, NHFSS, Maiduguri, 18 January 2024.

37 Author interview with Commander Bakar Mustafa Bunu, Borno State Secretary, BoSHA, NHFSS, Maiduguri, 27 March 2024.





The burnt remains of a Nigerian army truck destroyed in the fight against Boko Haram. Adamawa state, April 2015. Credit: © Jerome Starkey.

## 2.2. The rise of Boko Haram and the Growing Security Threat

The security situation in north-eastern Nigeria took a turn for the worse in the wake of the death of Mohamed Yusuf in police custody in 2009.<sup>38</sup> Yusuf, a charismatic Islamic preacher, had been the leader of the group that came to call itself “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad” (JAS, from the Arabic name Jama’atu Ahlis Sunnah Lidda’awati w’al Jihad).<sup>39</sup> He promoted a radical type of Salafism, which championed traditional Islamic practices and eschewed adopting Western values and customs. Outsiders took to calling the group Boko Haram, which many commentators have loosely translated into English as “Western education is forbidden”. JAS, however, does not call itself by this name. This paper uses Boko Haram as a catch-all term when referring to both JAS and Islamic State’s West African Province (ISWAP, see below) or when the identity of a perpetrator or target of an armed confrontation is in doubt but seems clearly to be either JAS or ISWAP.<sup>40</sup>

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38 The upholding of law and order had already deteriorated significantly prior to Yusuf’s detention. For an overview of Yusuf’s rise and relationship with the state as well as the uprising that preceded his killing, see International Crisis Group, “Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II)”, 2014.

39 It was only after September 2010 that Yusuf’s followers began to be known as belonging to JAS. See D.A. Barnabas and N.A. Nasidi, “A Micro Analysis of the Activities of Boko-Haram in North-Eastern Nigeria: A Case Study of Adamawa State, 2009–2015”, *KIU Journal of Humanities*, 2022, <https://www.ijhumas.com/ojs/index.php/kiuhums/article/view/1400>, p. 182. In the early days of the group’s activities, locals referred to it as the Nigerian Taliban. See A. Walker, “What is Boko Haram?”, Special Report no. 308, United States Institute of Peace, 2012, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR308.pdf>, p. 3. Members of the group were also known as the Yusufiya (followers of [Mohamed] Yusuf) or the Yusufiya Islamic Movement by some analysts.

40 In 2015 Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group and JAS became known as ISWAP. The following year, Shekau left ISWAP and returned to lead JAS. Abu Musab al-Barnawi – a son of Mohamed Yusuf – succeeded Shekau as head of ISWAP.



Islamist non-state armed groups active in northern Nigeria and with links to what would become JAS initially concentrated their attacks on state security actors. In 2004, for example, such a group ambushed a police convoy in Borno and abducted – and presumably killed – a dozen officers. Such groups largely refrained from undertaking armed actions during the period 2005–2008.<sup>41</sup> JAS became more active in 2009, which led to a violent government crackdown in July that year, culminating in Yusuf’s death as noted above.

Under Yusuf’s successor Abubakar Shekau, JAS posed a considerably greater threat. In 2011, JAS detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device targeting the main United Nations building in Abuja, which resulted in over 100 dead and wounded people.<sup>42</sup> In 2012, JAS stormed police stations and shot at passersby in Kano in North West Nigeria, causing more than 200 casualties, most of whom were killed.<sup>43</sup> Between January 2012 and August 2013, JAS attacked 50 churches, murdering over 300 parishioners.<sup>44</sup> In 2014, it abducted more than 250 girls from a secondary school in Chibok, Borno.<sup>45</sup> Later that year, JAS assailed a mosque in Kano, killing in excess of 100 worshippers and wounding twice as many.<sup>46</sup> By the start of 2015, JAS was reported to control territory in the states of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe (frequently referred to as the “BAY states”) that was the approximate size of Belgium.<sup>47</sup>

Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan responded energetically and militarily to the insurgency. In 2011, he established a robust interdisciplinary Joint Task Force (JTF) to counter JAS advances.<sup>48</sup> In 2013, he declared a state of emergency in the BAY states<sup>49</sup> and replaced the JTF with the newly created 7th Division of the armed forces. In 2014 he purchased substantial materiel and secured

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41 United Nations, “‘Abuja, 26 August 2011’, Remember the Fallen’. See also BBC, “Abuja Attack: Car Bomb Hits Nigeria UN Building”, 27 August 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14677957>.

42 N. Elbagir and J. Hassan, “Scores Dead as Assailants Target Northern Nigerian City”, CNN, 21 January 2012, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/01/21/world/africa/nigeria-explosions/index.html>.

43 Elbagir and J. Hassan, “Scores Dead as Assailants Target Northern Nigerian City”, CNN, 21 January 2012, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/01/21/world/africa/nigeria-explosions/index.html>.

44 USCIRF, “Nigeria: Boko Haram’s Religiously-Motivated Attacks”, USCIRF Factsheet on Nigeria, August 2013, [https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/Final Nigeria Factsheet August 19,2013.pdf](https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/resources/Final%20Nigeria%20Factsheet%20August%2019%202013.pdf).

45 BBC, “Nigeria Chibok Abductions: What We Know”, 8 May 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32299943>.

45 A. Abubakar, “Nigeria Mosque Attack Death Toll Climbs Over 100, Scores More Hurt”, CNN, 28 November 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/11/28/world/africa/nigeria-violence/index.html>.

46 In Borno alone, JAS at its peak maintained and controlled 14 of Borno’s 27 LGAs. See K. Adebajo, “Chased by Terrorists, Caught by the Military: Two Sides of an Ugly War”, HumAngle, 11 January 2023, <https://humanglemedia.com/chased-by-terrorists-caught-by-the-military-two-sides-of-an-ugly-war>; and F. Onuah, “Nigeria Says Has Pushed Boko Haram Out of All But Three Areas”, Reuters, 17 March 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-violence/nigeria-says-has-pushed-boko-haram-out-of-all-but-three-areas-idUSKBN0MD26020150317>.

47 In Borno alone, JAS at its peak maintained and controlled 14 of Borno’s 27 LGAs. See K. Adebajo, “Chased by Terrorists, Caught by the Military: Two Sides of an Ugly War”, HumAngle, 11 January 2023, <https://humanglemedia.com/chased-by-terrorists-caught-by-the-military-two-sides-of-an-ugly-war>; and F. Onuah, “Nigeria Says Has Pushed Boko Haram Out of All But Three Areas”, Reuters, 17 March 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-violence/nigeria-says-has-pushed-boko-haram-out-of-all-but-three-areas-idUSKBN0MD26020150317>.

48 The JTF was composed of the Nigerian Armed Forces, the NPF, the DSS, the Nigerian Customs Service, the Nigeria Immigration Service and the Defence Intelligence Agency. It was also known as JTF Operation Restore Order (or JTF ORO). See S. Musa, “Nigeria: Understanding JTFs Operation Restore Order in Borno State”, *Daily Trust*, 2 April 2012, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201204020163.html>.

49 Previously, in 2011, Jonathan had declared a state of emergency only in parts of Borno and Yobe, as well as parts of Niger and Plateau. See BBC, “Boko Haram Attacks Prompt Nigeria State of Emergency”, 1 January 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-16373531>.

enhanced training for Nigerian men and women in uniform.<sup>50</sup> The following year, to augment the 7th Division's efforts, he contracted mercenaries to supplement the Nigerian armed forces in the fight, and a South African private security company to provide training and tactical recommendations to the government.<sup>51</sup> Simultaneously, he worked with other heads of state in the framework of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) to resurrect a dormant regional security body that led to the creation and deployment of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF, see Box 5).

## Box 5: The Lake Chad Basin Commission's Multinational Joint Task Force

The Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) decided in 1994 to establish a joint security body with headquarters in Borno, but only Nigeria contributed personnel to it. LCBC members revisited the utility of the joint force in 1998, which resulted in the creation of a Multinational Joint Security Force (MNJSF). The MNJSF remained largely aspirational until member states met in 2012 to address the threat that JAS posed, at which time the political and military underpinnings of the joint force began to be fleshed out as part of a Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF).<sup>52</sup>

The MNJTF comprises roughly 10,000 personnel from four of the six LCBC member states: Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. (LCBC member states Central African Republic and Libya do not participate.) Benin – a non-LCBC member – also contributes troops to the multinational force, but not in a combat role. The MNJTF became operational in July 2015 after Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari had assumed office in May. However, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria were already conducting joint operations against JAS well before then.

Under President Jonathan, there was a significant increase in Nigeria's military spending, from less than 3 per cent of government expenditure during 2000–2008 to more than 7 per cent in 2009–2014.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, the government's campaign against the insurgency made little impact on the scale of JAS operations. By the time of the delayed 2015 elections, JAS had attacked security forces in more than half of the 65 LGAs<sup>54</sup> across the BAY states. Furthermore, the security forces failed to win "hearts and minds" as their operations insufficiently distinguished between combatants and peaceful civilians.

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50 O. Nkala, "Russian Army Starts Training 1,200 Nigerian Personnel in Counter-Insurgency Warfare", Defense Web, 23 October 2014, <https://www.defenceweb.co.za/security/national-security/russian-army-starts-training-1-200-nigerian-personnel-in-counter-insurgency-warfare>.

51 Jonathan hired the South African company Specialized Tasks, Training, Equipment and Protection (STTEP) for three months. See A. McGregor, "Conflict at a Crossroads: Can Nigeria Sustain its Military Campaign against Boko Haram", *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 13, no. 13 (26 June 2015). [https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/TerrorismMonitorVol13Issue13\\_01.pdf](https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/TerrorismMonitorVol13Issue13_01.pdf), p. 8.

52 I.M. Abada et al., "National Interests and Regional Security in the Lake Chad: Assessing the Multinational Joint Task Force", *Journal of Social Science Research*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2020). <https://ideas.repec.org/a/arp/tjsr/2020p40-49.html>.

53 International Crisis Group, "Nigeria: The Challenge of Military Reform", Crisis Group Africa Report no. 237, 6 June 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/nigeria-challenge-military-reform>.

54 Adamawa state has 21 LGAs, Borno has 27 and Yobe has 17. S4 Data Set, n.d.

In 2015 it was noted that “Nigerian military forces have extrajudicially executed more than 1,200 people; they have arbitrarily arrested at least 20,000 people, mostly young men and boys; and have committed countless acts of torture”.<sup>55</sup> On the eve of the 2015 presidency elections, the JAS leader Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group. This raised the prospect of increased funding and advice for the activities for what was now known as Islamic State’s West Africa Province.<sup>56</sup>

## Box 6: The Hybrid Forces: Not a Borno-based Volunteer Security Outfit

In the wake of Abubakar Shekau’s death in May 2021, thousands of combatants formerly associated with Boko Haram surrendered to Nigerian authorities.<sup>57</sup> Given these former combatants’ intimate knowledge of the terrain and their familiarity with many jihadists who remain in the bush, the Nigerian army has undertaken joint clearance operations with some of them – whom they call “hybrid forces” – to recover caches of Boko Haram lethal materiel, to free hostages and to combat enemy fighters.<sup>58</sup>

The strength, composition and leadership of these former fighters is a sensitive and controversial matter, and facts and figures are tightly guarded. Individuals can be called upon to deploy in small groups through a loose hierarchical informal network that helps disseminate information and generate desired volunteers for specific objectives. They are believed to operate in several LGAs in Borno and to have served in Yobe as well. Other VSO members may also undertake missions with the army and these former combatants.

As with VSOs, the army provides members of the hybrid forces with assault rifles and ammunition for joint operations and recovers the materiel when the operation is completed. This can last for many hours or many days. Army oversight of this material is said to be stringent and effective.<sup>59</sup>

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55 Amnesty International, *Stars on their Shoulders, Blood on their Hands: War Crimes Committed by the Nigerian Military* (London: Amnesty International, June 2015), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/1657/2015/en>.

56 J. Seldin, “Nigeria’s Boko Haram Pledges Allegiance to Islamic State”, Voice of America, 7 March 2015, <https://www.voanews.com/a/boko-haram-pledge-allegiance-islamic-state/2671613.html>.

57 According to the government, more than 13,000 Boko Haram combatants had surrendered between July 2021 and May 2022. See O. Aliu, “Irabor at Edo Varsity Founder’s Day: 51,828 Boko Haram Fighters Surrender in 18 months – CDS”, *Vanguard*, 26 March 2023, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/03/irabor-at-edo-varsity-founders-day-51828-boko-haram-fighters-surrender-in-18-months-cds>.

58 State security forces may have begun to engage former Boko Haram combatants in joint operations prior to Shekau’s death. But the term “Hybrid Forces” appears to have been coined at some point after his passing.

59 Author interview with knowledgeable source by Zoom, May 2024.

## 2.3. Creation of the Civilian Joint Task Force

It was against this backdrop that the CJTF was created. The year commonly provided for the group's establishment is 2013, but the correct date is at least a year earlier.<sup>60</sup> Whether folklore or fact, many accounts of the group's origins mention the actions of a trader, Baba Jafar Lawan, who apprehended a JAS militant in Maiduguri and handed him over to government officials in the last quarter of 2011.<sup>61</sup> He did so armed only with a stick. The trader's courage and actions inspired others in his community to similarly take up pieces of wood and take on JAS in their midst, which is why locals sometimes call the group "Yan Gora" (meaning "People with Sticks" in Hausa). There were incidents of summary justice having been meted out,<sup>62</sup> but the nascent group's cooperation with security forces grew despite anger and frustration over the previously heavy-handed treatment they had received from the uniformed personnel they were assisting. Nigerian security forces started to call the group the Civilian Joint Task Force as both a compliment and a complement to the government's JTF. Lawan and his supporters accepted this *nom de guerre*, which quickly gained currency.<sup>63</sup>

The CJTF members' intimate knowledge of local languages, communities and terrain provided security forces with actionable information that they had previously often lacked. And they gave citizens "a chance to reconnect with the state who otherwise may have looked to Boko Haram for protection".<sup>64</sup> The CJTF soon expanded to other towns across Borno and to neighbouring states. The Nigerian military sought to replicate the CJTF's successes in Maiduguri in other parts of Borno, focusing first on Bama and Gwoza, although recruitment and deployment in other states in the North East zone followed (see below).

The CJTF's strength is difficult to document with precision. Questionable record-keeping and fluid relationships among the CJTF and some of the other above-mentioned groups help to explain this.<sup>65</sup> There are no independent or official government figures on the CJTF, and so there is a reliance on the self-assessments that the CJTF generates, which tend to focus on Borno.<sup>66</sup> There is little doubt,

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60 A review of newspaper articles and academic studies shows with little variance that the CJTF was established in 2013. But in recent years, the CJTF itself when mentioning casualties it had suffered, routinely notes that it began operations in 2012. See "680 Civilian JTF Members Killed Fighting Boko Haram – Official", *Premium Times*, 30 June 2017, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/235461-680-civilian-jtf-members-killed-fighting-boko-haram-official.html>. Abba Aji Kalli, a former CJTF high-ranking official, mentioned 2011 as the year Lawan fought back, and others began to support his efforts. See S. Malik, "Civilian JTF: the Making of a Human Time Bomb", International Centre for Investigative Reporting, 18 May 2015, <https://www.icirnigeria.org/civilian-jtf-the-making-of-a-human-time-bomb>.

61 Author interview with knowledgeable source, Maiduguri, 20 March 2024.

62 International Crisis Group, "Watchmen of Lake Chad". On perceptions of the CJTF and VSO operating in North East Nigeria see K. Van Broeckhoven, Z. Marks, S. O'Neil, Mohammed B., And F. Y. Ajimi Badu, *Community Security Actors and the Prospects for Demobilization in the North East of Nigeria*, New York: University Nations University, MEAC Findings Report 18, October 2022, [https://unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NigerianCSAs\\_FINAL-1.pdf](https://unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/NigerianCSAs_FINAL-1.pdf).

63 Author interview with knowledgeable source, Maiduguri, 20 March 2024. Prior to being called the CJTF, some members of the security forces had referred to Lawan's group as "Civilian Intelligence". Ibid.

64 Similar local civilian entities, known as Vigilance Committees (Comités de vigilance), have also been effective in Cameroon and Chad. See International Crisis Group, "Boko Haram on the Back Foot?", Crisis Group Africa Briefing no. 120, 4 May 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/boko-haram-back-foot>, p. 7.

65 The CJTF and bodies such as vigilantes, hunters and self-defence groups often splinter, re-brand themselves, and join together for various lengths of time, making it difficult to count their memberships. See Felbab-Brown, "Militias (and Militancy) in Nigeria's North-East", pp. 66–87.

66 Brookings Institution, "Addressing the Ongoing Humanitarian Challenge in Nigeria", Transcript of Panel Proceedings, 2018, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/fp\\_20180326\\_nigeria\\_transcript.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/fp_20180326_nigeria_transcript.pdf).

however, that the CJTF grew exponentially in a very short period of time. In June 2013, the group's strength was around 500 personnel,<sup>67</sup> while an account published in 2016 indicated 14,000 personnel in five North East states.<sup>68</sup>

The group's strength in recent years seems to have been stable. For the period 2018–24, estimates of the number of members in the CJTF in Borno have been between 25,000 and 32,000.<sup>69</sup> The Super Overall Chairman of the CJTF, Commander Babashehu Abdulganiu, placed the number of CJTF members in Borno in March 2024 at about 26,000, adding that around 50–70 per cent of them had access to firearms.<sup>70</sup> This report uses the smaller number when calculating VSOs' overall holdings to err on the side of caution.

The CJTF is known to have been active beyond the BAY states, although specifics for exactly where (and in what numbers) are not openly discussed. It is widely reported to have served in the three other states of North East zone: Bauchi, Gombe and Taraba. Some CJTF members are deployed in the same state from which they were recruited, whereas others relocate to serve elsewhere.<sup>71</sup> The CJTF National Chairman, Dr. Kailani Mohammed, acknowledged in 2022 that the CJTF was operational in states in the North West zone, but did not divulge where.<sup>72</sup>

More is known about the group's composition and division of labour. Of considerable significance, and as discussed below, the CJTF reflects communities' religious and ethno-linguistic complexities. While the age of members lies in the range 15–50 years old, the majority are considered to be youths (i.e., from teenagers up to 30 years old; for more information see below).<sup>73</sup> The group's make-up is skewed, however, when it comes to gender: the vast majority of CJTF are male – boys and men. Although the number of girls and women serving in the CJTF is disputed,<sup>74</sup> it is nonetheless clear that girls and women do not participate in combat duties, but they are involved in surveillance and in searching females.<sup>75</sup>

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67 The youth heralded from across Maiduguri's 15 wards. See M. Al-Amin, "Vigilantes in the Service of the Nigerian Army", *Deutsch Welle*, 7 September 2013, <https://www.dw.com/en/nigeria-deploys-vigilantes-against-boko-haram/a-16936631>; and International Crisis Group, "Watchmen of Lake Chad", p. 4.

68 Bamidele, citing CJTF Chairman Baba Lawan Jafar, reports there were 10,000 CJTF in Adamawa, 1,200 in Bauchi, 715 in Gombe, 1,156 in Taraba and 627 in Yobe. See Bamidele, "Sweat is Invisible in the Rain", p. 132.

69 J. Ibrahim and S. Bala, "Civilian-Led Governance and Security in Nigeria After Boko Haram", Special Report no. 438, United States Institute of Peace, December 2018, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/12/civilian-led-governance-and-security-nigeria-after-boko-haram>, p. 5.

70 Author interview with Commander Babashehu Abdulganiu, Super Overall Chairman, CJTF, Maiduguri, 28 March 2024.

71 Some CJTF members from Borno have served in other states. See G. Ogunjobi, "The Proliferation of Weapons in Zangon Katak is an Even Graver Problem than the Illiteracy and Food Scarcity Plaguing the Region", *New Lines Magazine*, 9 January 2023, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/nigerias-young-bear-arms-to-protect-land-and-homes>.

72 Nigeria's North West zone consists of seven states: Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Zamfara. See S. Isuwa, "CJTF To Government: Involve Kaduna, Niger, Sokoto, Zamfara, Katsina Youths In Military Operations", *Leadership*, 2022, <https://leadership.ng/cjtf-to-govt-involve-kaduna-niger-sokoto-zamfara-katsina-youths-in-military-operations>.

73 D. E. Agbiboa and C. C. Aniekwe, "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\\_Vigilante\\_Groups.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-03/Understanding_Vigilante_Groups.pdf), p. 5; H. Idris, "Women Join Hunt for Boko Haram Suspects in Borno", *Daily Trust*, 8 July 2013, <https://dailytrust.com/women-join-hunt-for-boko-haram-suspects-in-borno>; and Amnesty International, *Stars on their Shoulders, Blood on their Hands*, p. 24.

74 Monguno reports that of the roughly 25,000 CJTF operating in Borno, fewer than 100 were women. See S. L. Monguno, "Thousands of Volunteer Security Groups Receive Skills Training to Become Empowered and Self-Reliant", *Radio Ndarason*, 21 April 2018, <https://ndarason.com/en/thousands-of-volunteer-security-groups-receive-skills-training-to-become-empowered-and-self-reliant>, p. 40. However, Idris noted seeing 30 girls and women at checkpoints in Maiduguri alone. See Idris, "Women Join Hunt for Boko Haram". Given the passage of time, both accounts could be true, but in the light of the continued threat of suicide bombers and the persistent use of girls and women in this role, 100 in 2017–2018 seems to be an underestimate.

75 Idris, "Women Join Hunt for Boko Haram"; and Monguno, "Thousands of Volunteer Security Groups Receive Skills Training".



# 3. Arms Acquisition Among Borno's Four Volunteer Security Outfits

Although significant gaps exist regarding information on the number and composition of civilians that are members of VSOs in Borno state, even less is known about their arms holdings and sources of supply.<sup>76</sup> This section seeks to shed light on these issues. It is organized into two subsections. The first looks at what arms the groups obtain without government support. It covers both supply and demand factors. Concerning supply, the broader trade in illicit arms and the existence of local artisanal weapons are explored. Demand takes into account conflict dynamics, legislation, as well as cultural beliefs and predispositions. The second subsection examines what VSO members obtain directly from federal, state, and local government entities. The section's focus is on firearms, but to provide important context, it also touches on the provision of non-lethal equipment. Based on the research for this section, Borno State-based VSO possess, or have access to, an estimated 25,000 firearms; an estimate of roughly one firearm for every two VSO members in Borno State.

## 3.1. Firearms Obtained without Direct Government Support

Although industrially-produced guns of various levels of sophistication circulate widely in North East Nigeria and environs,<sup>77</sup> VSO members in Borno state initially did not seek such firearms.<sup>78</sup> While the group quickly supplemented its arsenal of sticks to include bows and arrows, machetes, swords, and knives, its members decided not to possess firearms in its early days of operation because the CJTF members viewed a civilian possessing an assault rifle, for example, as proof of membership of Boko Haram.<sup>79</sup>

VSOs readily acknowledge, however, that they have obtained artisanal firearms and industrially produced hunting rifles outside direct government authorization or support. According to a CJTF commander, residents in areas where his members patrolled donated money to procure such weapons to supplement the group's cutlasses and sticks.<sup>80</sup> Artisanal firearms are fabricated in – and available across – Nigeria.<sup>81</sup> A popular weapon, known as a Dane gun, is typically a single-barrelled muzzle-loaded shotgun that is popular with traditional hunters.<sup>82</sup> Gunsmiths also produce shorter and more portable pistol-like firearms.

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76 For an examination of factors influencing demands for weapons in North East Nigeria, see J. Kleffmann et al., *Factors Driving Weapons Holding in North East Nigeria*, MEAC Findings Report no. 33 (Geneva; UNIDIR, December 2023), <https://doi.org/10.37559/MEAC/23/11>.

77 Berman, *The Management of Lethal Material in Conflict Settings*, pp. 18–20.

78 Author interviews with knowledgeable sources, Maiduguri, July 2023, January 2024 and March 2024.

79 A. Okeowo, "Inside the Vigilante Fight Against Boko Haram", *New York Times Magazine*, 5 November 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/magazine/inside-the-vigilante-fight-against-boko-haram.html>.

80 Ibid.

81 M. Nowak and A. Gsell, "Homemade and Deadly: Craft Production of Small Arms in Nigeria", Small Arms Survey Briefing Paper, June 2018, <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/handmade-and-deadly-craft-production-small-arms-nigeria>.

82 Agbiboa and Aniekwe, "Understanding and Managing Vigilante Groups in the Lake Chad Basin Region", p. 5.





A gunsmith displays an artisanal firearm he produced by hand. Adamawa state, April 2015. Credit: © Jerome Starkey.

It seems fair to assume that VSOs during more than 10 years of conflict have also obtained industrially-produced firearms outside government oversight. These would include assault rifles and, quite possibly, crew-served weaponry as well as myriad munitions. State security forces are spread thin and cannot be everywhere. In 2019 the army withdrew its forces from dozens of posts across the countryside in favour of a dozen-plus garrisons in major towns and cities. VSOs, however, remained in their communities. Moreover, the threat from Boko Haram increased across many parts of Borno, rather than decreased, during this period. The idea that at least one VSO unit did not possess any sophisticated weaponry to defend its village, undertake patrols or engage attackers in hot pursuit beggars belief. The proposition that all such materiel would have been turned over to authorities when Nigerian security forces subsequently began to redeploy to the hinterland some years later is similarly implausible.

This research has identified at least five key supply and demand factors to explain why the CJTF is not procuring and using industrially-produced weapons in sizeable numbers:

1. In Nigeria, a civilian may only be issued with a licence to own or carry a few types of firearms: shotguns that are not automatic, semi-automatic or otherwise outfitted with any sort of mechanical reloading device; sporting rifles of calibres other than 7.62 millimetres (mm), 9 mm, 0.300 inches and 0.303 inches; and muzzle-loaded non-rifled firearms.<sup>83</sup>

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83 See 1959 Firearms Act. A license for a hunting rifle costs 1,000 naira per year and is valid for a 12-month period. Interview with knowledgeable source, Maiduguri, January 2024; UNIDIR, “Towards a National Framework on Weapons and Ammunition Management in the Federal Republic of Nigeria”, November 2016, <https://unidir.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/towards-a-national-framework-on-weapons-and-ammunition-management-in-the-federal-republic-of-nigeria-en-680.pdf>.

2. Sophisticated firearms are not cheap in Nigeria. In Borno state, a used industrially produced hunting rifle or shotgun from Europe costs roughly 275,000 naira (USD260), and at least 700,000 naira (USD760) for a new hunting rifle.<sup>84</sup> In contrast, a rudimentary artisanal Dane gun may cost 20,000–25,000 naira (USD24–32).
3. When VSO members go on combat operations with state security personnel, they are required to hand over any weapons they recover from Boko Haram to the security forces (see Box 7 for more information on the recovery of Boko Haram weapons through a buy-back programme). VSO members insist that they strictly follow this condition.<sup>85</sup> Government officials acknowledge that, while it is possible that some individuals serving in VSOs may hold on to some of the recovered ammunition, they too believe that the checks and balances that the security forces have established are largely effective regarding this issue.<sup>86</sup>
4. VSOs take pride in their work and want to be seen as doing a good job combatting the insurgency. Their members do not want to lose the trust and respect they and their VSOs have earned – both from security forces and their communities. Interviewees in Borno state also explained that many vigilantes, especially those serving in the CJTF, do not want to risk losing access to patronage and largesse.<sup>87</sup>
5. Demand among some individuals in VSOs may not be so strong due to cultural beliefs and practices. Amulets, scarification and other forms of magic are believed to possess or impart properties that make recipients impervious to bullets.<sup>88</sup> This means that, despite being outgunned, there is not a perceived need to be similarly or better armed to successfully combat their foes.<sup>89</sup>

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84 Author interviews with knowledgeable sources, Maiduguri, July 2023, January 2024 and March 2024. Interlocutors said they were not aware of prices for assault rifles on the black market. During the period July 2023–March 2024, both the official and black-market naira–US\$ exchange rates experienced significant volatility. The ranges offered reflect black market rate. 85 For example, see A. Sahabi, “Boko Haram Commander, Deputy Killed as Hunters Clash with Insurgents in Borno”, The Cable, 31 May 2022, <https://www.thecable.ng/boko-haram-commander-deputy-killed-as-hunters-clash-with-insurgents-in-borno>.

86 Author interviews with knowledgeable sources, Nigeria, July 2023 and January 2024.

87 Author interviews with knowledgeable sources, Nigeria, January and March 2024.

88 Agbiboa and Aniekwe, “Understanding and Managing Vigilante Groups in the Lake Chad Basin Region”.

89 Commenting on well-publicized instances of soldiers running into the bush when confronted by a Boko Haram attack on their position, the BoSHA Commander in Borno was sympathetic to these soldiers’ plight. He said that the soldiers did not have amulets that made them impervious to bullets. Tellingly, he spoke of the need for drug counselling for some of his hunters given societal ills and challenges but did not call for more numerous or powerful arms for his members. Author interviews with Commander Bakar Mustapha Bunu, State Secretary, BoSHA, NHFSS, Maiduguri, 24 July 2023 and 21 January 2024. That said, there are plenty of examples of hunters and vigilantes who lament that Boko Haram has them outgunned and implicitly suggests that having more and better arms would be a good thing.



# Box 7: Nigerian Government Efforts to Recover Boko Haram Weapons

Although not a focus of this study, it merits mention here that Nigerian authorities have created an incentive scheme to encourage members of JAS and ISWAP to turn in their weapons and register for the government’s Disarmament, Demobilization, De-radicalization, Rehabilitation, Reconciliation and Reintegration (DDDRRR) programme. The threat of attack from the insurgents has been reduced in part because of a gun-buyback arrangement that provides jihadists with 200,000 naira (\$217) for an assault rifle and somewhat more for rocket-propelled grenade launchers and machine guns. The government set this amount – which is below the cost for a used hunting rifle (see subsection 3.1) – so that it would not create a demand for weapons. As of March 2024, state security forces have reclaimed more than 300 sophisticated weapons via this initiative.<sup>90</sup>



Weapons Nigerian authorities have recovered from Boko Haram factions. Maiduguri, June 2024. Credit: © Abdulkareem Haruna.

90 Author interview with Brig-Gen. Abdullahi Sabi Ishaq (Ret.), Security Advisor, Borno state government, Maiduguri, 28 March 2024.

## 3.2. Firearms Obtained with Government Support

Several federal government security agencies as well as Borno state bodies and actors provide or help procure firearms for Borno-based VSOs. They do so either directly or indirectly. The extent to which such activities and practices are in line with the current legal and regulatory framework at the national level, including the 1959 Firearms Act, is unclear. As noted below, Borno state officials have interpreted Nigerian laws and regulations on firearms control to restrict the provision of certain types of firearms to all VSO members. In some cases, the arming of VSO members resembles basic training for military conscripts, rather than an authorization process for civilian possession of firearms. Overall, it has proven challenging to understand the conditions imposed on recipients of assault rifles.

The research for this report found that an early package of support during 2013–2014 included the provision of firearms. This formed part of the Borno Youth Empowerment Scheme (BOYES), which Borno state Governor Kashim Shettima launched in 2013 to train and equip up to 5,000 members of the CJTF to serve alongside security force personnel.<sup>91</sup> By 2014, some 2,000 CJTF members had been selected, of which approximately 1,850 completed the programme. Although the initiative did not engage the envisaged 5,000 personnel,<sup>92</sup> some of those that completed the training received assault rifles, as well as uniforms, patrol cars, identification documents and a monthly stipend.<sup>93</sup>

Efforts to account for arms provided to VSOs during 2015–2019 proved unsuccessful. Borno state's Ministry of Justice understood the country's 1959 Firearms Act as prohibiting the provision of most types of firearms to civilians, but the security situation was deemed to require the arming of civilians. Given the sensitive nature of such actions, officials did not adhere fully to established record-keeping practices.

It is nevertheless possible to shed some light on actions taken by state authorities and representatives to arm VSOs during this period. During the years 2015–2017, Nigerian security forces reportedly began training and arming a CJTF Special Force of around 200 people, as well as a Rapid Response Squad. VSO members were also trained and equipped to serve alongside a separate Nigeria Police Force Rapid Response Squad. Perhaps around 500 VSO members received arms as part of these two initiatives up to 2019.<sup>94</sup>

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91 Borno Government: to Train 5,000 'Civilian JTF' by 2015", *Premium Times*, 28 October 2013, <https://www.premium-timesng.com/news/top-news/147407-borno-govt-train-5000-civilian-jtf-2015.html?tztc=1>.

92 Author Interview with Commander Babashehu Abdulganiu, Chairman, CJTF, Maiduguri, 21 July 2023.

93 International Crisis Group, "Watchmen of Lake Chad".

94 The strength of the initial CJTF Special Force was 200. See International Crisis Group, "Double-edged Sword: Vigilantes in African Counter-Insurgencies", Crisis Group Africa Report no. 251, 7 September 2017, <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/251-double-edged-sword.pdf>. This force has grown. See Wilshusen, *Today's Solution, Tomorrow's Problem?*.

But people knowledgeable about the matter were reluctant to provide specific details other than to say the figure of "800" was too high. Author interviews with knowledgeable sources, Maiduguri, January 2024 and March 2024.

More is known about VSOs serving alongside the Agro Rangers of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), which was established in 2019 to enhance community security and reassure farmers that it is safe to harvest their crops. Five hundred VSO members from BoSHA, the CJTF, Kesh Kesh and the VGN participate in this programme. They all possess firearms, but the NSCDC did not arm them.<sup>95</sup> It is understood that the VSOs received their weapons from other state actors.<sup>96</sup>

Since 2020, the Borno State Security Trust Fund (BSSTF) has procured and distributed some 2,000 firearms to VSOs.<sup>97</sup> The Fund, which was established in 2019 and became operational in 2020, has transferred industrially-produced guns and artisanal Dane guns to divisional police officers (DPOs) for distribution across most of Borno's 27 LGAs. A little more than half of these weapons – shotguns exclusively – have been allocated to members of the CJTF. BoSHA, Kesh Kesh and VGN members have received slightly less than half, which include both shotguns and hunting rifles.<sup>98</sup>

On top of the roughly 5,000 weapons that governmental authorities furnished in the above-mentioned programmes, state authorities have provided more firearms to VSOs. It is known, for example, that LGA executive chairmen – apparently in consultation with local DPOs – have helped secure funds as well as used their influence to work with government officials to obtain weapons for VSOs.<sup>99</sup> These weapons would have consisted primarily, if not entirely, of Dane guns, hunting rifles and shotguns. At least two other government bodies have provided firearms to VSOs in Borno. At least one transfer that took place after 2020 included about 150 firearms, which were mostly pump-action shotguns but also included some Dane guns and hunting rifles.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, military units in Borno have provided the CJTF with assault rifles: one for each volunteer on a joint mission. The VSO member receives one magazine of (up to) 30 bullets per operation. The assault rifles provided are mostly from captured weapons that the military recovers from enemy forces.<sup>101</sup>

There are also credible reports that some CJTF members are sometimes equipped with rocket-propelled grenade launchers and gun trucks outside joint operations.<sup>102</sup> The weapons purportedly come from battlefield capture as a result of engagement with JAS and ISWAP elements. It is likely that some commanders of military units have established trust and a good working relationship with the CJTF in areas experiencing prolonged insecurity and elevated threats. This could explain why interviewees said that some CJTF members possess assault rifles and other sophisticated firearms for extended periods of time, albeit under the supervision or acquiescence of security forces.<sup>103</sup>

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95 Author interview with knowledgeable source, Maiduguri, March 2024.

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Author interviews with knowledgeable sources, Maiduguri, January 2024 and March 2024.

99 Ibid.

100 Author interviews with knowledgeable sources, Maiduguri, March 2024; interview by Mohammed Aliyu-Sarki of Commander Bulama Harun Biya, Commandant, Borno State Chapter, Kesh Kesh Vigilante Group, Bama, 28 March 2024.

101 Author interview with Major-General Gold Chibuisi, theatre commander, Operation Hadin Kai, Maiduguri, 15 January 2024.

102 Author interviews with knowledgeable sources, Maiduguri, January 2024 and March 2024.

103 Author interviews with knowledgeable sources, Maiduguri, July 2023, January 2024 and March 2024.



# 4. Arms Management among Borno's Four Volunteer Security Outfits

Weapons and ammunition management (WAM) is the oversight, accountability and governance of arms and ammunition throughout their life cycle, including the establishment of relevant frameworks, processes and practices for safe and secure materiel acquisition, stockpiling, transfer, end-use control, tracing and disposal. While WAM has generally focused on state-held conventional arms and ammunition, this section documents various measures undertaken – with or without government support – to prevent the misuse and diversion of weapons and ammunition held by VSOs in Borno state.

Subsection 4.1 first highlights practices that have an indirect effect on the misallocation and misuse of arms and ammunition. It focuses on recruitment (including vetting and oversight) and retention (including remuneration and benefits) practices. It also touches on alternative livelihood training for VSO members – both for those who are armed and those who are not (as the issue of “haves versus have nots” is a real concern) – to reduce demand for weapons and their potential unintended usage. Subsection 4.2 then examines stockpile management practices to promote accountability and good practices, or what might be described as direct measures.<sup>104</sup> It explores efforts to safeguard materiel against external threats and to safekeep materiel against internal challenges. The latter steps are clearer and more straightforward. They include marking and record-keeping, which have a deterrent effect against diversion by those with privileged access. Safeguarding includes physical infrastructure and related security procedures, such as the construction of storehouses and perimeter security. Such efforts help to prevent access to friends and foes alike, but for this report's purposes are primarily intended to counter external threats.

## 4.1. Indirect: Protections against Misallocation and Misuse

### 4.1.1 Recruitment and Vetting

Initial recruitment to the CJTF might best be described as opportunistic. Some joined out of revenge because family members had been victims of Boko Haram violence. Others took up sticks to join their ranks due to community pressure or feeling they had no choice.<sup>105</sup> Self-protection against military heavy-handedness<sup>106</sup> and self-validation were also motivating factors.<sup>107</sup>

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104 The United Nations has developed international guidelines that promote established good practice concerning weapons and ammunition management (see MOSAIC and IATG).

105 S. Morna, “Who Will Care for Us?": Grave Violations against Children in Northeastern Nigeria”, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (Watchlist), September 2014, [https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/2111-Watchlist-Nigeria\\_LR.pdf](https://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/2111-Watchlist-Nigeria_LR.pdf), pp. 28–29.

106 Author's written correspondence with Dr. Vincent Foucher, Senior Research Fellow, French National Centre for Science Research, 22 April 2024. Access to formal and informal economic opportunities that CJTF membership subsequently offered were also factors.

107 Agbiboa and Aniekwe, “Understanding and Managing Vigilante Groups in the Lake Chad Basin Region”.



CJTF's outreach was wide-ranging and inclusive. Membership broadly reflected that of the larger surrounding society. Members hailed from all 27 of Borno's LGAs and from many LGAs across Adamawa and Yobe. No effort was made to exclude any of Borno's dozen-plus ethnic groups (those serving in the CJTF include the Babur, Dogole, Hausa, Kanuri, Lamu, Mafa, Margi, Shuwa, Tera and Zalita ethno-linguistic groups).<sup>108</sup> There is reported widespread appreciation among citizens across Borno that the CJTF's composition reflects the communities in which it serves – consisting of Muslims, Christians and animists, as well as men, women and (initially, see below) children. Physical attributes determined suitability to join the CJTF, not age.<sup>109</sup>

New members were expected to pledge fidelity to the cause of countering the threat that Boko Haram posed to their communities. They took an oath of good conduct on the Koran to never steal, to not engage in false witness, to abstain from politics and to display equanimity:

*We have committed our lives to fighting the ungodly activities of the Boko Haram, and we cannot implicate any innocent person as a result of hatred, rivalry, or any other differences. We would not take anything, including money, as a bribe from anyone and we swear by the Holy Qur'an that we would expose any member of the sect, be they our parents, relatives, neighbours or friends and we would not turn our back on them... It is this mission that is the true Jihad not their acts of wickedness.*<sup>110</sup>

Members of the Christian faith were asked to take an oath of allegiance using the Bible, and accommodation was made for those who declared themselves to be animist.<sup>111</sup>

The CJTF's vetting mechanisms and efforts to instil decorum among its members has not met with unqualified success. With the group's rapid growth – combined with a heavy reliance on members exercising self-constraint – there are reports of Boko Haram having infiltrated the CJTF,<sup>112</sup> of members who misused their influence and the trust placed in them, and of the CJTF not just preying on civilians, but also challenging and attacking members of the security forces.<sup>113</sup> Drug use among members has been reported as widespread and alleged instances of sexual abuse, theft and intimidation have

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108 Author interview with Daniel Agbiboa, professor, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 5 March 2024.

109 The group, in its early years of operation, reportedly included children as young as 13. See: S. Morna, "Who Will Care for Us?", pp. 28–29.

110 C.M.A. Kwaja, "Non-State Armed Groups in Adamawa State", in *Non-State Armed Groups in North East Nigeria: Challenges and Opportunities for Security Sector Governance*, eds Freedom C. Onuoha and Chris A. M Kwaja, CLEEN Foundation Monograph Series no. 31 (Abuja: CLEEN Foundation, 2018), [https://www.academia.edu/37945557/Non\\_State\\_Armed\\_Groups\\_in\\_North\\_East\\_Nigeria\\_Challenges\\_and\\_Opportunities\\_for\\_Security\\_Sector\\_Governance](https://www.academia.edu/37945557/Non_State_Armed_Groups_in_North_East_Nigeria_Challenges_and_Opportunities_for_Security_Sector_Governance), p. 17. See also Ripples Nigeria, "Untold Story".

111 Author interview with Daniel Agbiboa, professor, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 5 March 2024.

112 For example, Abuja charged a Boko Haram partisan of using his membership in the CJTF as cover and to gain intelligence. The government accused the individual in question of helping orchestrate the abduction of the students in Chibok along with attacks on security forces and civilians, including the death of a traditional leader. See N. Ibeh, "Nigerian Military Busts Boko Haram Cell Responsible for Chibok Schoolgirls, Gwoza Emir's Murder – DHQ", *Premium Times*, 30 June 2014, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/164184-nigerian-military-bursts-boko-haram-cell-responsible-for-chibok-schoolgirls-gwoza-emirs-murder-dhq.html>.

113 Malik, "Civilian JTF".

continued.<sup>114</sup> That said, the CJTF was not full of Boko Haram spies or individuals of questionable character. Many hundreds of CJTF members have since become formal members of various state security services, including the federal Department of State Services (DSS).<sup>115</sup>

During 2013–2018, oversight by the CJTF hierarchy of its personnel became more rigorous. First, the CJTF – together with the DSS – relatively early on weeded out 150 members who were deemed to be affiliated with Boko Haram or otherwise untrustworthy or of low character.<sup>116</sup> Second, in 2016 the United Nations added the CJTF to its list of armed groups using child soldiers. In response, the CJTF began working with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and agreed in 2017 to stop recruiting children and to remove those already serving in CJTF units in various communities.<sup>117</sup> In 2021, the CJTF said it had made good on its pledge, by delisting 2,203 youths from its rank and file.<sup>118</sup> That same year the United Nations formally took the group off its list of armed groups using child soldiers.<sup>119</sup>

The VGN and BoSHA also work hard to recruit people carefully to help ensure that they uphold law and order. Vigilantes are subjected to a background check before being recruited. They are required to take an oath that they will not sabotage the VSO’s efforts. VGN members also receive support to protect against spirits and evil forces.<sup>120</sup> Hunters must be 18 years of age or older and have written permission both from their parents and from a community leader to be considered eligible to join.<sup>121</sup> Those who are chosen to work with the military take an oath on the Bible or the Koran to promise not to divulge state secrets or otherwise undermine security forces’ operations.<sup>122</sup>

Another layer of vetting occurs when VSO members seek to participate in federal- or state-sanctioned programmes. As noted above, the DSS reviewed the suitability of the first 2,000 CJTF selected to participate in BOYES. Subsequently, the DSS is understood to have reviewed the candidacies of BoSHA, CJTF and VGN members who volunteered to serve in Sokoto and Zamfara states.<sup>123</sup>

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114 For example, see Ripples Nigeria, “Untold Story”.

115 See A. Haruna, “250 Former Civilian-JTF join Nigerian Army”, *Premium Times*, 22 July 2016, <https://www.premium-timesng.com/news/headlines/207345-250-former-civilian-jtf-become-nigerian-soldiers-join-army.html>; E. Cropley, “On Boko Haram Front Line, Nigerian Vigilantes Amass Victories and Power, Reuters, 15 June 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-security-vigilantes/on-boko-haram-front-line-nigerian-vigilantes-amass-victories-and-power-idUSKBN1960FK>; and Ripples Nigeria, “Untold Story”.

116 The News Agency of Nigeria article quotes Babashehu Abdulganiu as speaking of the role of the “Department of State Security” in identifying and weeding out CJTF members who used drugs or were involved with criminality. See News Agency of Nigeria, “1,773 CJTF Operatives Die Fighting Terrorists in North-East”, *Pulse*, 22 January 2023, <https://www.pulse.ng/news/local/1773-cjtf-operatives-die-fighting-terrorists-in-north-east/rx3pthj>. DSS is also known as State Security Services, and it is common to conflate the two.

117 O. Odeyinka, “Borno Task Force Ends Recruitment of Child-Soldiers, Disengages 2,203”, *Ripples Nigeria*, 15 February 2022, <https://www.ripplesnigeria.com/orno-task-force-ends-recruitment-of-child-soldiers-disengages-2203>.

118 363 of the 2,203 children were girls. *Ibid.*

119 United Nations Children’s Fund, “UNICEF Reacts to UN Delisting of CJTF from List of Organizations Using and Recruiting Children in Armed Conflict”, Press Release, 18 October 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/press-releases/unicef-reacts-un-delisting-cjtf-list-organizations-using-and-recruiting-children>.

120 D. Bitrus, “We’re Waiting for Government’s Permission to Lead War Against Boko Haram – Borno Vigilance Group Commandant”, *Punch*, 20 December 2020, <https://punchng.com/were-waiting-for-governments-permission-to-lead-war-against-bharam-borno-vigilance-group-commandant>.

121 Author interview with Commander Bakar Mustapha Bunu, State Secretary, BoSHA, NHFSS, Maiduguri, 18 January 2024.

122 A. Haruna, “Boko Haram: Borno Deploys 500 Hunters after Oath-Taking”, *Premium Times*, 31 January 2019, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/north-east/309141-boko-haram-borno-deploys-500-hunters-after-oath-taking.html>.

123 Author interviews with knowledgeable sources, Maiduguri, March 2024.

## 4.1.2 Retention and Compensation

Retention of CJTF members was not an initial problem. The threat that Boko Haram posed to communities across the BAY states remained a very real – indeed, a growing – challenge. Demand for the CJTF’s services was great as was the supply of willing recruits. In 2013, the Borno state government created a framework, BOYES, to remunerate some CJTF members for their efforts. Under the scheme, those CJTF members that completed the training received 15,000 naira a month.<sup>124</sup> The initial plan for possibly 6,000 CJTF members to participate in BOYES was shelved after the army determined that too many recruits were not trustworthy enough to arm and to serve alongside them in operations.<sup>125</sup> By May 2015, some 3,000 CJTF members had been registered with the Borno state government, of which some 2,000 of whom had received training.<sup>126</sup>

The Borno state government has subsequently augmented its support for the CJTF serving alongside the military. For example, in 2022 it raised the volunteers’ monthly salaries to 30,000 naira.<sup>127</sup> Families of those CJTF members who have served alongside the military and who have died in such service now also receive financial assistance. Borno’s governor, Babagana Zulum, has provided 300 children of slain CJTF members with 300 million naira towards their education.<sup>128</sup> Additional assistance is provided on an ad hoc basis.<sup>129</sup>

Vigilantes and hunters also receive benefits in the case of death. Seventy-seven vigilantes have died due to the insurgency since 2012. Their families have received 400,000–550,000 naira, along with cooking oil and rice.<sup>130</sup> Hunters’ families receive 250,000 naira for the burial of a fallen hunter, plus some food items and school fees for children. During the Boko Haram insurgency up to the end of December 2023, 28 hunters had lost their lives due to the conflict.<sup>131</sup> BoSHA members’ casualty numbers have grown in 2024 due to casualties among its hunters in Sokoto and Zamfara states. Hunters serving in those two states receive 70,000 naira a month, and the families of those who die in service in those two states receive 5 million naira.<sup>132</sup> VGN members from Borno who, as of March 2024, were only serving in Sokoto similarly received 70,000 naira a month and their families were to be compensated with around 5 million naira in the event that they were killed.<sup>133</sup>

## 4.1.3 Alternative Livelihoods

Besides receiving arms, military training and financing as described above, VSO members have also obtained some employment opportunities as well as training in leadership and life skills. This is important because the vast majority of the CJTF’s Youth Vanguard – that is, those not trained and armed to work

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124 This monthly payment was augmented to 20,000 naira in 2019. Author interview with Commander Babashehu Abdulganiu, Chairman, CJTF, Maiduguri, 21 July 2023.

125 International Crisis Group, “Watchmen of Lake Chad”, pp. 5–6.

126 Malik, “Civilian JTF”.

127 Author interview with Commander Babashehu Abdulganiu, Chairman, CJTF, Maiduguri, 21 July 2023.

128 News Agency of Nigeria, “1,773 CJTF Operatives Die”.

129 Malik, “Civilian JTF”.

130 Author Interview with Commander Mohammad Tar, Commandant, Borno State Chapter, VGN, Maiduguri, 19 January 2024.

131 Author interview with Commander Bakar Mustapha Bunu, Borno State Secretary, BoSHA, NHFSS, Maiduguri, 18 January 2024.

132 Author interview with Commander Bakar Mustapha Bunu, Borno State Secretary, BoSHA, NHFSS, Maiduguri, 27 March 2024.

133 Author interview with Commander Mohammad Tar, Commandant, Borno State Chapter, VGN, Maiduguri, 22 March 2024.

alongside state security forces – did not benefit from the BOYES framework and received only sporadic financial support from communities in which they served, or none at all. Early on, there were some modest additional employment opportunities for these CJTF members. In 2015, the Borno State Environmental Protection Agency (BoSEPA) announced its intention to recruit 5,000 CJTF members to serve as “Street Vanguard” to help with sanitation in Maiduguri. They would be paid 10,000 naira a month.<sup>134</sup> Then, in 2018, Governor Zulum expanded the BOYES programme to include a Neighbourhood Watch in Maiduguri and Jere LGAs. The 2,900 Youth Vanguard recruited into the Watch received 20,000 naira a month.<sup>135</sup> These units primarily target the enforcement of order and crime control at the neighbourhood level and in public spaces.<sup>136</sup> Subsequently, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), together with partners, trained more than 2,500 VSO members about respect for humanitarian laws and human rights, how to counter sexual and gender-based violence, and ways to de-escalate and resolve conflict.<sup>137</sup>

Efforts to provide CJTF members with alternative livelihoods continue. For example, in 2022, UNDP trained 300 people in road safety skills to make them successful candidates to serve as road traffic marshals.<sup>138</sup> In the light of the programme’s initial success, UNDP and the Borno State Transportation Management Agency (BoTMA) subsequently trained and hired a further 263 individuals in 2023. The vast majority of those trained in this programme were former VSO members.<sup>139</sup> Also in 2023, UNDP, together with the Borno State Agriculture Development Programme (BoSADP) and the European Union, assisted 1,500 VSO members to become farmers, fishers, herders and tailors.<sup>140</sup>

## 4.2. Direct: Safeguarding and Safekeeping to Prevent Diversion

### 4.2.1 Safeguarding against External Threats

The manner in which VSOs store their firearms varies. The VGN in Borno does not have any central depositories for firearms and ammunition. Security and proper storage of such materiel is the responsibility of its individual members.<sup>141</sup> BoSHA, in contrast, has a storehouse in each of the 27 LGAs in Borno to help safeguard its members’ firearms and ammunition. The local commander assigns guards to ensure that each facility is secured 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. As of January 2024, none of its armouries had been attacked.<sup>142</sup>

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134 News Agency of Nigeria, “1,773 CJTF Operatives Die”.

135 One hundred CJTF as part of the Neighbourhood Watch are deployed in each of the two LGAs’ 27 Wards (Borno, 15; and Jere, 12). However, two particularly large wards in Maiduguri (Lamisila-Jabarmari and Maisandari) each have 200 Watch members. See A. Haruna, “Borno inducts 2,900 youth as Neighbourhood Watch force against drugs and crime.” *Premium Times*. 26 May 2018, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/north-east/269875-borno-inducts-2900-youth-as-neighbourhood-watch-force-against-drugs-crimes.html?tztc=1>.

136 P. Adzande, “(In)formal Security Providers and Urban Safety in Maiduguri, Nigeria”, African Cities Research Consortium, 14 November 2022, <https://www.african-cities.org/informal-security-providers-and-urban-safety-in-maiduguri-nigeria>.

137 Author written correspondence with knowledgeable source, June 2024.

138 United Nations Development Programme, “Accelerating Community Development Through Youth Empowerment”, UNDP Nigeria, 30 June 2022, <https://www.stories-undpnigeria.org/accelerating-community-development-through-youth-empowerment>.

139 Coordination Specialist, Sub-office and Stabilization – Nigeria, UNDP, Maiduguri, 28 March 2024.

140 Monguno, “Thousands of Volunteer Security Groups Receive Skills Training”, p. 40.

141 Author interview with Commander Mohammad Tar, Commandant, Borno State Chapter, VGN, Maiduguri, 22 March 2024.

142 Author interview with Commander Bakar Mustapha Bunu, Borno State Secretary, BoSHA, NHFSS, Maiduguri, 18 January 2024.

Borno state authorities apparently issue ammunition to VSOs only sparingly. BSSTF, for example, is understood to have provided no more than 250 shotgun shells at a time for use by VSOs in LGAs outside Maiduguri in parts of Borno State that are particularly insecure. This limit is regarded as a measure to mitigate the risk and impact of potential diversion should the vehicle transporting the materiel have its contents seized while in transit from the state capital.<sup>143</sup> This practice suggests that storage of ammunition in VSO armouries, stations or members' homes in Borno does not represent a great risk of diversion of significant quantities of ammunition.

VSO members have received training from state security forces on how to handle a weapon and on comportment in a conflict setting. Instruction has included target practice as well as how to clean and maintain one's firearm to keep it in proper working condition. Respect for authority and the importance of discipline among the rank and file is also taught.<sup>144</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Safekeeping against Internal Threats

The BSSTF keeps records of the serial numbers of the shotguns it has purchased and of the Divisional Police Office to which each of those firearms has been allocated. Craft-produced Dane guns do not have serial numbers or other conventional markings. It is then up to the DPO to determine how firearms are to be distributed among VSOs and subsequently accounted for.<sup>145</sup> Research for this report was unable to gather reliable information on such practices.

Several VSOs report that they keep logbooks of some of the firearms that they dispense to their members. Kesh Kesh, for example, has a ledger for the shotguns it has issued to its vigilantes.<sup>146</sup> The VGN similarly keeps a written account of firearms it allocates to its members.<sup>147</sup> It provides the weapons it receives from the BSSTF via DPOs to its members on a case-by-case basis as needs arise. It reports that all such firearms are accounted for.<sup>148</sup> As BoSHA disburses firearms from its armouries it records the recipient's name, telephone number, address and next of kin, as well as the weapon's make, model and serial number. The amount of ammunition issued to the hunter in question is also noted.<sup>149</sup>

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143 Author interview with knowledgeable source, Maiduguri, March 2024.

144 Author interviews with knowledgeable sources, Maiduguri, January 2024 and March 2024. Moreover, VSO members have also received instruction on protection of civilians. Ibid.

145 Author Interview with knowledgeable source, Maiduguri, March 2024.

146 Interview by Mohammed Aliyu-Sarki of Commander Bulama Harun Biya, Commandant, Borno State Chapter, Kesh Vigilante Group, Bama, 28 March 2024.

147 Author interview with Commander Mohammad Tar, Commandant, Borno State Chapter, VGN, Maiduguri, 22 March 2024.

148 Ibid.

149 Author interview with Commander Bakar Mustapha Bunu, State Secretary, BoSHA, NHFSS, 27 March 2024, Maiduguri.

Under Nigerian law, only the police are authorized to issue licences for civilian possession of a limited range of firearms (see subsection 3.1 above). Dane guns are exempt from this check. However, the police in Borno have, apparently, not issued firearms possession licences since at least 2019.<sup>150</sup> BSSTF-procured firearms that VSOs have received apparently do not necessitate a corresponding licence.<sup>151</sup> This does not inherently mean that the DPO responsible for overseeing the distribution and security of these firearms is not aware of how these weapons are being used, and by whom. It is not clear how the Borno state authorities consider the distribution of firearms to VSOs in connection with the civilian licensing provisions of the 1959 Firearms Act.

The Nigerian army reportedly keeps a record of the arms and ammunition provided to VSOs, which have primarily been recovered from enemy forces.<sup>152</sup> It is not known if this oversight measure consists solely of the numbers and/or types of weapons provided and that of the corresponding ammunition, or if it includes serial numbers and headstamps. In 2022, a United Nations study reported that “security agencies in [Nigeria] seize weapons and ammunition; however, the lack of any clear and coherent national procedures and verification processes results in materiel unaccounted for and heightened risks of further diversions”.<sup>153</sup>

This subsection provides a limited number of examples of weapons and ammunition management measures used by the Nigerian state authorities and VSOs for safeguarding their conventional arms and ammunition to prevent diversion. Since 2012, VSOs are likely to have experienced more than 10,000 casualties – with the number having risen sharply since 2023. The vast majority of these casualties are the result of confrontations with Boko Haram. The CJTF alone, for example, has suffered more than 3,500 fatalities – more than half over just the past 16 months.<sup>154</sup> Thus, available evidence indicates that the majority of VSO firearms diversion incidents are the result of VSO battlefield casualties and capture, rather than from inadequate WAM practices for VSO storage facilities.

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150 Author interview with knowledgeable source, Maiduguri, March 2024.

151 Ibid.

152 Author interview with Maj-Gen. Gold Chibuisi, Theatre Commander, Operation Hadin Kai, Maiduguri, 15 January 2024.

153 United Nations, “Weapons and Ammunition Dynamics in the Lake Chad Basin”, Department of Peace Operations and United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs in partnership with the Lake Chad Basin Commission, 11 October 2022, <https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Weapons-and-Ammunition-Dynamics-in-the-Lake-Chad-Basin-FINAL.pdf>.

154 Author interview with Commander Babashehu Abdulganiu, Super Overall Chairman, Maiduguri, 28 March 2024; Author’s written correspondence with Commander Abdulganiu, 17 April 2024. The “more than 10,000” figure is the author’s and is based on a conservative estimate of two injuries per one fatality. The number of weapons and ammunition lost during such entanglements is not clear.





Example of a craft-produced firearm in circulation in Borno state. Gwoza local government area (LGA), July 2022. Credit: © Usman Abba Zanna.

## 5. Conclusion: Observations and Next Steps

Section 2 of this report documents the growth of non-state armed groups and VSOs in Borno, both in terms of numbers of entities and their memberships. Borno state's four VSOs – BoSHA, the CJTF, Kesh Kesh and the VGN – together comprise 50,000–55,000 men and women.<sup>155</sup> Section 3 indicates that about half of these VSO members possess or have access to firearms. Section 4 lists some measures and mechanisms used by Nigerian security forces and VSOs to reduce the risk of diversion of their arms and ammunition due to external and internal threats.

Several of the observations from the report's research have important implications for conventional arms control and security sector governance in Borno state, for Nigeria more broadly, and elsewhere. As noted in the report's introduction, several countries across Africa have VSO-type groups that governments arm or allow to be armed as a matter of state practice. These give rise to related policy and programming questions that merit further discussion and research.

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155 Some individuals may be a member of more than one VSO, which would result in double-counting. Author interviews with knowledgeable sources, Maiduguri, March 2024. The approximate numbers of VSO commanders provided may also have been rounded up slightly. This range seems a fair estimate. Author written correspondence with knowledgeable source, June 2024.

Subsection 5.1 presents some noteworthy observations, questions for further exploration, and recommended actions to prevent or at least mitigate the risk of misuse and diversion of arms and ammunition held and used by VSOs in Borno state. Box 8 explores possible ways forward for Nigeria at both the federal and state levels. Subsection 5.2 then introduces possible next steps for further consideration in relation to the arming of VSO-type groups in other parts of Africa and around the world.

## 5.1 Observations

During the conduct of the research for this report, several key observations and questions for further exploration arose, including:

1. Armed VSOs in Borno state are not going away. They are growing in strength. The demand for their services is such that they have begun to operate not just elsewhere in the North East zone of Nigeria, but in the North West zone as well. This gives rise to the following questions:
  - ▶ What tasks should – and should not – be given to VSO-type groups?
  - ▶ What can be done to ensure that VSO-type groups do not become politicized?
  - ▶ What can be done to protect VSO-type groups and their communities against retribution from enemy forces?
  - ▶ What can be done to make the security sector actors more capable and accountable to reduce the need for, or demands placed on, VSO-type groups?
2. About half of the roughly 55,000 members of VSOs operating in Borno state possess or have access to firearms. Most of these weapons are Dane guns, hunting rifles and shotguns. VSOs in Borno also possess industrially-produced firearms, but their numbers are difficult to document. VSOs obtain their firearms from local craft producers, from state actors and probably from battlefield capture. State restrictions on the types of weapons provided and the quantity of ammunition supplied reflect efforts to guard against unwanted proliferation of such materiel. The research for this report has identified the following questions that still need to be answered to ensure appropriate governance and oversight for VSO weapons and ammunition:
  - ▶ What weapons should the state allow VSO-type groups to possess and use?
  - ▶ What weapons should the state provide directly?
  - ▶ What control measures should be instituted to prevent and mitigate the misuse and diversion of weapons and ammunition held by VSO-type groups?
  - ▶ How can the state’s oversight of artisanal producers be enhanced?
3. This report has flagged a discrepancy concerning accounts of the terms under which state security forces dispense arms to VSOs that merit further exploration. For example, State security services claim to issue assault rifles and light weapons to the CJTF only for short durations when co-deployed with uniformed personnel and that the weapons and ammunition the CJTF recovers are turned over to government authorities. Yet members of civil society who travel widely across the BAY states have shared observations that suggest such practices are not always adhered to, noting that some CJTF appear to possess firearms more powerful than assault rifles and for extended periods of time. Thus, further research could explore:

- ▶ What materiel – both quantities and types – has Nigerian security forces furnished to the CJTF?
  - ▶ How much of this materiel is documented in centralized and updated government records?
  - ▶ What additional measures can be taken to enhance oversight and documentation of the materiel that is temporarily provided to VSO-type groups?
  - ▶ Given that ammunition is a consumable good, how do Nigerian security forces balance provision of sufficient ammunition rounds to provide for security without facilitating diversion or excessive stockpiling?
  - ▶ What additional measures can be taken to enhance recipients' accountability?
4. Limited information was obtained on VSO armouries or depots to assess their ability to counter diversion efforts. The VGN said that there is no central storehouse at the local or state level for its members' arms and ammunition. BoSHA said that it has at least one such facility in each LGA in the state and that each depot was guarded round the clock. This situation gives rise to the following questions:
- ▶ What equipment might the state provide, or might the state arrange to be provided, to help secure storage facilities of VSO-type groups?
  - ▶ What associated training should be provided to members of VSO-type groups to prevent and mitigate the risk of diversion?
  - ▶ What measures should the state put in place to ensure that this equipment and training are effective?
5. Despite considerable progress among VSOs concerning recruitment, vetting and benefits for their members and their members' families over the past 10 years, challenges remain. Drug use among their members remains a stubborn, and potentially growing, problem. VSOs in Borno state have recently experienced a greatly escalated number of casualties. They have flagged their members' socio-economic needs, including palliative care.
- ▶ What can the state do to reduce the number of casualties among VSO members?
  - ▶ What can the state do to assist those who are injured or who suffer from trauma to receive proper care?
  - ▶ What can the state do to support the families of fallen and injured VSO members to enhance esprit de corps among the rank and file?
6. Borno state and the international community via the United Nations have undertaken several payment, training and employment initiatives for VSO members. Some, such as the Borno Youth Empowerment Scheme, have a proven record of success and are stable. However, many local-level state-provided benefits to VSO members tend to be less generous and more inconsistent. Several initiatives to provide alternative livelihoods also seek to reduce demand for weapons and the likelihood of misuse. Demand for the training and associated jobs is likely to far exceed what is being offered, leading to the following questions:
- ▶ How can the number of VSO beneficiaries of payment and training schemes be increased?
  - ▶ How can the effective management of the expectations of recipients be enhanced?
  - ▶ How can tensions between "haves" and "have nots" be mitigated?

## Box 8: Considerations for Nigerian Authorities

The following considerations are offered to strengthen current efforts to ensure the transparent and responsible provision of arms and ammunition to VSOs, as well as prevent and mitigate the risk of their misuse and diversion to unauthorized end users and the illicit arms market.

### ► The Borno State Security Trust Fund:

- Check with each of the Divisional Police Offices that have received weapons from the Fund to determine the record-keeping systems employed.
- Check with each of the DPOs that have received weapons from the Fund regarding how many weapons are still securely held by VSOs that have received them.
- Collect information from DPOs on how ammunition provided by the Fund for VSO use is distributed and accounted for.

### ► The army:

- Ascertain if arms furnished to VSOs are marked with unique serial numbers in accordance with regional and international commitments and obligations undertaken by Nigeria, particular Article 18 of the ECOWAS SALW Convention. Unmarked arms can be included in ongoing Nigerian programmes to mark all small arms and firearms in the country.
- Record information on the firearms and small arms furnished to VSOs in a centralized secure database or register in accordance with Articles 9 and 14 of the ECOWAS SALW Convention. Additional information to include in the database can include the location of the arms.
- Support VSO efforts to secure and safeguard arms and ammunition against diversion and misuse. This can include expanding training in handling weapons and in stockpile management and security, as well as the provision of secure storage infrastructure.

### ► The police:

- Undertake checks on firearms licences granted to civilians to ascertain how many of the weapons remain in circulation and in possession of the licensee. If the data is not stored electronically and centrally, consideration might be given to doing so. Priority should be given to Borno state's 27 LGAs, followed by practices across Adamawa and Yobe states.



- ▶ **The government** (at both state and federal levels, with support from various partners, including the United Nations system and civil society):
  - Find ways to more systematically engage VSO members serving in the hinterland, which has not benefitted from existing training, equipping and payment frameworks to the same extent as those located in the state capital (Maiduguri) and the surrounding LGA, Jere.
  - Support an examination of artisanal weapons production in Nigeria to better ascertain supply and demand factors. Any such study should review costs, product lines, production capacity and craftsmanship. This would contribute to ongoing efforts within ECOWAS to examine how to address craft production. This approach could be led by the National Centre for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (NCCSALW). It could help to better understand VSO holdings.
  - Construct an NCCSALW destruction centre in Maiduguri to process materiel the security forces recover from Boko Haram and transfer to the Centre. All arms and ammunition should be documented and analysed prior to destruction.
  - Support studies on the populace's perceptions of VSOs' contributions to peace and security and law and order across all of Borno's 27 LGAs. Participants should not be limited to large towns. Such efforts should include the topic of VSO weapons and ammunition management.

## 5.2 Next Steps

The observations and questions posed in Subsection 5.1 have important implications for good governance, peace and security beyond Borno and north-eastern Nigeria. Borno-based VSO-type entities are increasingly prevalent and active across much of Nigeria, the Lake Chad Basin region, West Africa and other parts of the continent. It is a good time to examine and share the challenges and effective practices for preventing and mitigating the risks that the arms provided to and used by such entities contribute to illicit proliferation or to human suffering of civilian populations.

There is limited knowledge on the acquisition and management of the arms and ammunition of VSO-type entities in other countries across the continent. Therefore, given the nature of the phenomenon and the acquiescence and support of governments for this approach in different parts of Africa, gathering information on common risks and on effective measures to prevent and mitigate the risks of diversion and misuse of these arms is warranted. A comparative exploration of this issue could support policymaking at the international, regional and national levels to ensure appropriate oversight and control of arms and ammunition acquired by VSO-type groups in order to prevent or mitigate the risk of diversion and misuse of the weaponry.

This study highlights the need to consider the legal basis for providing arms and ammunition to communities and groups of civilians for self-defence or counter-terrorism purposes. The issue is not explicitly addressed in relevant international instruments that emphasize state regulation and control of firearms, small arms and light weapons, and related ammunition throughout their life cycle.<sup>156</sup>

At the sub-regional level in Africa, Article 14 of the ECOWAS SALW Convention “prohibit[s] the possession, use and sale of light weapons by civilians” and requires the regulation of “the possession, use and sale of small arms”.<sup>157</sup> It provides detailed information on the “strict control regime for civilian possession of small arms”. Parties to the Nairobi Protocol for the Prevention, Control and Reduction of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Great Lakes Region, the Horn of Africa and Bordering States (Nairobi Protocol) are expected to incorporate into their national laws a prohibition on unrestricted civilian possession of small arms and a total prohibition on civilian possession and use of light weapons.<sup>158</sup> Both the ECOWAS Convention and the Nairobi Protocol are legally binding for their states parties and require safe storage of civilian-owned small arms, marking and record-keeping by government authorities, and regional approaches for sanctions in cases of violations. The year 2024 marks 20 years since the adoption of the Nairobi Protocol, while the ECOWAS Convention will mark its 20th anniversary in 2026.<sup>159</sup> Given the changing security context for these two regions, a review of these documents in the coming years would benefit from considerations of cases for arming, or acquiescing to the arming, of communities and groups of civilians that were not considered at the time of the adoption of these landmark documents. Regionally-agreed guidance and standards would be useful for supporting efforts to provide a legal basis for regulating the distribution, safekeeping and safeguarding of arms and ammunition to prevent or mitigate the risk of their diversion and misuse.

In order to ensure that the regionally-agreed guidance and standards can be effectively implemented, the collation of effective measures to prevent and mitigate the risk of misuse and diversion of arms held by such groups will be essential for this particularly sensitive aspect of conventional arms control. It is evident that there is oversight and accountability for the acquisition and management of arms and ammunition by communities and civilians for self-defence and counter-terrorism purposes. This initial study showed a willingness by key stakeholders to engage on what can still be regarded as a sensitive matter. For example, interviewees were especially open when talking about artisanal firearms and factory-made hunting rifles and shotguns. Opportunities to learn more about indirect control measures

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156 The arming of non-state groups and the regulation of civilian possession of small arms is not explicitly addressed in the Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons, but is raised by United Nations Member States in their regular meetings to discuss implementation of the instrument. The United Nations Firearms Protocol does not explicitly address the issue as it also emphasizes state control and the criminalization of manufacture, transfer and possession of firearms not authorized by national authorities.

157 ECOWAS Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and Other Related Materials, 14 June 2006, Article 14.

158 Nairobi Protocol for the Prevention, Control and Reduction of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Great Lakes Region, the Horn of Africa and Bordering States, <https://www.recsasec.org/nairobi-protocol>, Article 3.

159 The Nairobi Protocol entered into force on 9 May 2005, while the ECOWAS Convention entered into force on 29 September 2009.







such as recruitment – including vetting – and retention as well as alternative livelihood schemes should also be pursued as part of such efforts. Such efforts should also take into account what happens when security threats to communities dissipate. What will happen to the arms and the members of community security entities that perhaps feel that they have had a privileged status that is likely to be removed?

Since the end of the Cold War, international conventional arms control processes have focused on through-life management of weapons and ammunition in the possession of state security forces. Can a similar approach be used for arms and ammunition held by civilians that are involved in community security or counter-terrorism? Which measures have proven – or could prove – most effective for safeguarding and safekeeping arms and ammunition to prevent and mitigate the risk of diversion and illicit proliferation? An expert dialogue on this issue has yet to commence within and between the conventional arms control, peacebuilding and counter-terrorism communities. Now is an opportune moment to bring experts together in an effort to identify effective ways to strengthen WAM policy, practices and capacities for the acquisition, management and disposal of arms by community self-defence groups. Such an endeavour can contribute to broader efforts to prevent and mitigate human suffering in areas in Africa affected by terrorism and high levels of armed violence.



Nigerian security forces personnel and Borno-based volunteer security outfit members after joint protection of civilians (POC) training, Maiduguri, December 2019. Credit: © Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC).



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