ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND
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HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Publisher
http://jssidoi.org/esc/home

HIRED GUNS AGAINST TERRORISM: ASSESSING THE USE OF COMMERCIAL SOLDIERS IN NIGERIA'S COUNTERTERRORISM STRATEGY

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Abstract. Despite Nigerian military efforts, Boko Haram remains a major threat and the potential role of private security services in combating this threat is largely unknown. Through a qualitative case study, this study fills a critical gap by examining the potential role and impact of private security services and highlighting their effectiveness, commitment to long-term sustainability, and respect for human rights in the fight against Boko Haram. Applied to a broader context, the findings hold significant potential for developing more effective strategies in response to security threats, not only in Nigeria but also in other countries facing similar security challenges.

Keywords: private security services; terrorism; Boko Haram; Nigeria

1. Introduction

The stillborn August 2000 defense agreement between the Nigerian government of President Olusegun Obasanjo and the Clinton administration of the United States on military aid is the first attempt to obtain foreign military aid since the establishment of the Fourth Republic in 1999. Despite debates over the nature and legitimacy of this agreement, it initiated the development of a US-sponsored program aimed at reforming the Nigerian military, increasing its effectiveness, and bringing it into line with democratic norms (Omoruyi, 2000; Akpuru-Aja, 2003; Kwaja, 2014). Although, according to Fayemi (2003) and Aning et.al (2008), critics raised concerns about potential encroachment on national sovereignty and military independence, this was the first integration of private security services into Nigeria's national security structure—a practice that would be repeated in the future.

The use of private security services in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations, while often criticized by local communities and occasionally viewed with disdain, has gained prominence due to a number of political and ethical considerations. Considerations for these companies, which provide security-related services such as military and security training, logistical support, and security personnel to states, individuals, and international

organizations, include their relative affordability compared to maintaining national armies, their technical and professional expertise and aversion to casualties that reduce public support for participation in military operations, and the need to be able to plausibly deny involvement in operations (Bamigboye, 2022). However, while their use in civil wars such as Sierra Leone and Angola in the 1990s and later in conflict zones such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Rwanda, and Sudan has been critically examined, discussions often revolve around their potential impact on modern statehood, the need for accountability and the risks of human rights abuses that require effective regulation (Singer, 2004; Tonkin, 2011). While these are important scholarly contributions that have shaped the literature on this subject, this article contributes to the existing literature on private security by shifting the focus from normative debates to an empirical examination of the potential of these private security firms in the rapidly evolving post-Cold War security landscape of our world by examining the effectiveness of the use of private security forces in the fight against Boko Haram in Nigeria. This is because the threat of Boko Haram persists despite the efforts of the Nigerian military and other security agencies, underscoring the need for alternative strategies and providing an opportunity to examine the potential of these companies for national security and stability (AFP, 2023). Given the need for more empirical data on the effectiveness of private security services in such contexts, this article adds to the burgeoning literature on private security services and aims to provide an insightful, results-based assessment of this approach in the context of its use in Nigeria.

Similar to other African countries such as Somalia, Kenya, Chad, and Cameroon, which have faced numerous terrorist attacks in recent years, Nigeria faces major security challenges, particularly from the insurgent organization Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād, which means "Group of People of the Sunnah for Dawah and Jihad" in Arabic and is commonly referred to as Boko Haram (Kulungu, 2021; Okoli, 2022). In 2015, the government acknowledged the need for private military forces to participate in its security framework by hiring the Specialized Task, Training, Equipment, and Protection (STTEP) to intensify its counterterrorism efforts. Although the government initially denied the presence of private force within its borders because of their popular depiction as ruthless mercenaries until Leon Lotz, a South African private military personnel, was reportedly killed fighting Boko Haram on March 9, 2015, it confirmed that it had contracted the private security firm Specialized Task, Training, Equipment and Protection (STTEP) to intensify counterterrorism operations, demonstrating its reliance on foreign private security services in the fight against terror in Nigeria (Cropley, & Lewis, 2015; Ahmed-Yusuf, 2015; Allison, 2015; Nielsen, 2016).

This article makes two main arguments. First, it argues that private security firms, especially those that are well versed in the African context, can make an important contribution to addressing security challenges, which include the threat posed by Boko Haram in Nigeria, by increasing overall stability in northeastern Nigeria and other regions affected by the group. Second, the article argues for a collaborative approach between private security companies and other security actors, such as government agencies and local law enforcement to align security and development goals, which could lead to a more holistic and sustainable approach to security. The article first discusses the challenges posed by Boko Haram and the failures of the Nigerian military, then examines the role of private security services. It then examines the effectiveness of these services in the Nigerian context, and finally paves the way for a detailed discussion and conclusion.

2. Methodology

This article uses an outcome-based approach, similar to other studies that have attempted to assess the effectiveness of security interventions in different contexts to assess the effectiveness of private security companies, specifically Specialized Tasks, Training, Equipment, and Protection (STTEP) (Schroeder, Chappuis, & Kocak, 2013; Bell et al, 2013; Kinsey & Krieg, 2021, Shigenoi & Maekawa, 2022; Bjarnesen, 2023). STTEP is an international private military and security company with relevant experience in Africa that was selected for its significant engagement against Boko Haram in Nigeria between January and March 2015 (STTEP, 2009). Using

qualitative case study research, this study provides an in-depth analysis and exploration of participants' perspectives, attitudes, and experiences (Trochim & Donnelly, 2007). The choice of this methodology is primarily because it allows for open-ended questions and asks for more detailed responses and unexpected insights that emerge during data collection, which the author quantifies with statistical and numerical information on the frequency, patterns, and trends of terrorist attacks in Nigeria using datasets from the Global Terrorism Database. The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) is a data collection that provides comprehensive information on terrorist attacks at home and abroad and the organizations and individuals responsible for these atrocities. The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland records all incidents that have occurred from 1970 to the present and includes them in this database. It is common practice for researchers, policymakers, and counterterrorism practitioners to refer to GTD to gain a better understanding of the global nature, patterns, and trends of terrorism. In this way, thematic analysis provides an understanding of the experiences and viewpoints of stakeholders, while the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) can numerically assess the impact and consequences of the use of private security firms, providing an objective perspective on the issue by allowing the effectiveness of STTEP operations in Nigeria to be measured to support an outcome-based approach.

Additionally and for critical analysis, the author uses process tracing, a research method that shifts the analytical focus from causes and outcomes to the hypothesized causal mechanisms in between (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). In essence, the mechanisms are not causes, but causal processes that are triggered by causes and link them to outcomes in a productive relationship. In this way, this study examines the sequence of events or the course of decision-making, transforming initial situations into case outcomes. Specifically, the research outlines the strategies and tactics used by STTEP in the fight against Boko Haram in Nigeria from January to March 2015. The goal is to show the causal relationship between the independent variable (STTEP deployment) and the resulting dependent variable (success or failure in combating Boko Haram) via intervening factors such as cooperation between the private security contractor and the state military, psychological warfare, guerrilla tactics, relentless pursuit, and improved technologies used in the operation. In essence, the dependent variable-the success or failure in fighting Boko Haram-can change, underscoring the need to understand how the independent variable can influence it through the intervening factors.

Following the principles of counterinsurgency theory (COIN) which recognizes four fundamental principles of counterinsurgency, namely that the primary objective of counterinsurgency is to secure popular support, that the actor fighting the insurgency must define a precise political objective, that the actor must also fully understand the terrain, and that a significant commitment of labor, resources, and manpower is essential to a successful counterinsurgency, (Galula 1964), three outcome indicators-inclusiveness, sustainability, and effectiveness-are identified. In particular, inclusiveness is understood as the ability of the collaborative security web to include state institutions and private security actors without undermining the legitimacy of the state as a provider of public security. Sustainability is assessed in terms of the longevity of security outcomes from short- to long-term. That is the ability of the counterinsurgency effort to bring violence to the level manageable by local security forces, the establishment of political, economic, and social institutions able to address many of the structural problems fomenting instability, and the ability to eliminate the hatred, mistrust, and prejudices that fueled the conflict (Moore, 2007; Shemella, 2011) Finally, the effectiveness of the approach is assessed based on the recapture of territory, the frequency of Boko Haram attacks, the capture of Boko Haram members, civilian casualties, changes in Boko Haram tactics, and whether STTEP operations were in compliance with international humanitarian law.

3. The Boko Haram Insurgency

The transition of Nigeria, a federal state of about 223 million people in West Africa, from military rule to democracy after about four decades since its independence in 1960 has been overshadowed by an escalating internal security crisis that has caused great concern among the Nigerian government, citizens, and the global

community (Onuoha, 2010; Isma'ila & Madu, 2016; World Population Review, 2023). In just a decade criminal violence including kidnappings, militancy, religious conflict, and armed robbery has increased at an alarming rate. The most disturbing aspect is the sharp increase in religiously motivated violence, which threatens public order and the security of the people of Nigeria. This disturbing escalation of religious extremism, highlighted by events such as the Sharia conflict in several northern states in 2000 and the Miss World riots in 2002, poses a serious threat to Nigeria's statehood. Even more troubling, religious conflict claimed more than 10,000 lives in Nigeria between 1999 and 2003, and violent incidents have continued thereafter (Isaacs, 2003). The emergence of the Boko Haram insurgency has further exacerbated the situation and contributed to the growing number of casualties, displacements, and orphanages caused by religious unrest in Nigeria.

Boko Haram whose name is derived from Hausa and translates as "Western education is forbidden," is an Islamic extremist movement founded as a Salafist movement in 2002 by Mohamed Yusuf and active in northeastern Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and northern Cameroon. Its aim is to oppose Western education and ideals and promote the formation of an Islamic state in Nigeria. It first gained widespread attention in 2009 when it carried out a series of attacks against government and civilian targets in the northeast of the country and has since then committed various acts of violence throughout its history, including bombings, targeted killings, kidnappings, and attacks on educational institutions, places of worship, and commercial centers which makes it responsible for the deaths of numerous people, including civilians, military personnel, and politicians (Amaechi, 2016; Onuoha & George, 2016). Violent incidents such as the bombing of the police headquarters in Abuja on June 16, 2011, which killed two people and injured many, and the bombing of the headquarters of UN in Abuja in 2011, which killed 23 people and injured over 100, serve as examples of such hostile acts (Pantucci & Jesperson, 2015; Markovic, 2019).

It can be observed that Boko Haram's goals and strategies have changed over the course of its existence. Initially, the organization focused on confronting the Nigerian government and advocated for an Islamic state within the country's borders. After pledging allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014, it adopted more extreme and aggressive strategies, including the use of suicide bombers and attacks on civilians, and appeared even more lethal than ISIS (Hentz, 2018). For example, the group carried out 493 attacks in 2014, killing 7,112 people, including both victims and perpetrators (with victims accounting for 97 percent of the dead). On average, there were about 15 fatalities in each incident. Contrastingly, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) carried out 1,241 attacks in the same year, killing 9,324 people. Consequently, ISIS was responsible for an estimated seven fatalities per attack in 2014, which is significantly less than half the average fatalities caused by Boko Haram per attack (Oriola, 2016).

The attacks carried out by Boko Haram in Nigeria have had a significant economic impact due to the group targeting its attacks on commercial enterprises, and essential public facilities, causing disruptions to economic operations and impeding progress. For instance, estimates indicate that Nigeria's macroeconomic condition has been significantly affected by the loss of foreign direct investment (FDI) and potential FDI inflows amounting to 1.33 trillion naira, affecting mainly the northeast region (Ikpe, 2017). This damage manifests itself in the form of infrastructural decay, disruption of local and intra-African trade, and mortality and displacement, each of which has profound implications for labor markets, tourism, and transportation. These challenges are exacerbated by increased business costs triggered by rising risk and insurance premiums, as well as disruption of foreign and local investment due to perceived instability and the resulting paralysis of services, particularly air transport. In addition, heightened border security measures have led to disruptions in intraregional trade and business, particularly between Nigeria and Cameroon, resulting in delays to infrastructure projects such as the Chad-Cameroon railroad.

Additionally, its impact on Nigeria's social fabric has been significant. In particular, the education sector in the northeast region has been affected by the group's targeted attacks on schools and teachers. The United Nations

Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that the extremist group Boko Haram is responsible for the deaths of some 2,295 educators and the displacement of more than 19,000 educators. This unrest is exacerbated by the destruction or looting of some 1,400 educational institutions, primarily in the northeastern region. The immediate result is that more than 600,000 children have no access to education (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2017; Williams & Istifanus, 2017; Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2018). The group was also observed to target religious leaders and places of worship, fueling interfaith tensions (Olaniyan & Asuelime, 2014; Onapajo & Usman, 2015; Olojo, 2017). In addition, the group has reportedly abducted women and children, exacerbating the security situation in the region and leading to an increase in gender-based violence (Okoli & Azom, 2019; Ajayi, 2020; Oluwaniyi, 2021). Furthermore, the attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram in Nigeria also have humanitarian consequences in addition to security, economic, and social impacts. The group's activities have also resulted in significant displacement, forcing large numbers of people to leave their homes and communities. The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance such as food, shelter, and medical care has increased significantly. The United Nations recently reported that the number of people in need of aid has risen to about six million this year. Last year, the number was 5.5 million. At the same time, the number of people at acute risk of starvation in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states has risen from 4.1 million to 4.3 million, despite the fact that UN's 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan calls for $1.3 billion specifically for northeastern Nigeria, but has been able to secure only 25 percent of the total amount needed (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019; Onapajo, 2020; AFP, 2023).

The human rights implications of Boko Haram's attacks in Nigeria are equally significant, particularly as the group reportedly commits extrajudicial killings (Ojo, 2010). The Nigerian health care system has also been severely affected by Boko Haram attacks on hospitals and medical personnel, leading to a decline in the quality of regional medical care. This is true even as the phenomenon has had a significant impact on the physical and psychological well-being of the population, particularly in regions where the group operates (Solanke, 2018; Ekhator-Mobayode & Asfaw, 2019; Oginni, Opoku, & Nketsia, 2022). The country's political landscape has also been affected by Boko Haram attacks. This is because the group's actions have increased perceptions of insecurity and instability in the country, affecting the government's ability to govern effectively and deliver services to the people, negatively impacting public approval of the government, and further exacerbating political unrest in the country (Hentz, 2018; Brechenmacher, 2019; Ojo, 2020).

In addition, Boko Haram's attacks also have regional implications. The group has been designated as a terrorist organization by several nations, including the United States. Its activities have affected regional security and economic development, contributing to overall instability in the West African region (Institute for Economics and Peace [IEP], 2015; Okolie-Osemene & Okolie-Osemene, 2019; Ojo, 2020). For example, the group has been involved in regional conflicts in the Lake Chad region, which is contiguous with Nigeria, Niger, and Cameroon and that has led to attacks in these countries and affected regional security and stability. In 2015, Chad experienced a series of attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram, including a detonation in downtown N'Djamena. More than 23 people were killed in that incident. Chad subsequently deployed military personnel to the region to combat the dissident group (BBC, 2015; Scott, 2020). Nonetheless, Boko Haram's involvement in fighting in Chad, Niger, and Cameroon has resulted in significant destruction and displacement, as well as disruption of economic and social activities. The abovementioned has also contributed to destabilization and insecurity in the region, which, combined with the immediate consequences of hostilities, harms the inhabitants of these countries and has had an unfavorable impact on Nigeria's position in global peacekeeping (Virginia, 2015; Hentz, 2018; Scott, 2020). In addition, the attacks perpetrated by the group have caused physical damage and instability, leading many people to evacuate their homes and seek refuge in protected areas and camps. The ongoing conflict has also led to significant degradation of basic services such as health care and education and has contributed to the spread of disease and other health problems in the region (Badewa, 2022; Kangdim et al., 2022). Although several countries have deployed their military resources and personnel to combat the group, and even formed regional alliances and partnerships to coordinate their actions, the group has continued to carry out attacks and has

demonstrated its resilience as a persistent threat (Falode, 2016; Mickler, Suleiman, & Maiangwa, 2019; Kindzeka, 2023; Delanga, 2023)

4. Nigeria's Military Failure to Combat Boko Haram

The inability of the Nigerian Armed Forces (NAF) to effectively counter terrorist threats can be attributed to the lingering effects of the country's long and intermittent military rule between 1966 and 1998, which prioritized regional quotas over qualifications in its military recruitment practices, reflecting ethnopolitical factions and fears of domination prevalent in the early years of the independent Nigerian military (Bappah, 2016). This fundamentally shaped the professionalism of the military and continues to cast a shadow over the nature of current civil-military interactions. Thus, despite the social and institutional changes in Nigeria since the transition to democracy in 1999, the country's foundational dynamics continue to influence sociopolitical structures and have manifested themselves in a deterioration of military professionalism post-1999 under civilian governments, inadequate counterterrorism management and doctrine by senior military leaders, and underlined the lack of resolve by President Jonathan's leadership and the military to fight the insurgency once and for all.

In particular, there was a significant shift in civil-military relations in Nigeria after the change from military to democratic government in 1999. Civilians exercised 'subjective control' over the military a development that led to the politicization of the military and consequently to an erosion of its professionalism (Huntington, 1957). This included the forced retirement of high-ranking military officers and the deliberate underfunding of the military to prevent it from becoming powerful enough to overthrow the fledgling democracy (Ibrahim, 2017; Varin, 2018). At the same time, concerns arose about the legitimacy of the recruitment process, which transformed military service from a national service into a platform for personal gain, career advancement, and self-aggrandizement (Onwubiko, 2013; Bappah, 2016), while dwindling professionalism was exacerbated by non-transparent security spending and pervasive corruption responsible for failing to procure the necessary weapons and ammunition that could be used to combat Boko Haram (Egbo, Nwakoby, Onwumere, & Uche, 2010; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2015; Ukpong, 2017; Punch Editorial Board, 2021; Sahara Reporters, 2023).

Second, the Nigerian military, bound by its constitutional obligation to suppress internal revolts such as the Boko Haram insurgency (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999), initially downplayed the threat and even continued to ignore warnings of Boko Haram attacks even as the group aggressively exploited grievances in marginalized communities and among individuals to radicalize and recruit followers—a mistake that became apparent under President Jonathan in 2014 (Ajakaye, 2015; ThisDayLive, 2015; Pérouse de Montclos, 2018). That miscalculation took a heavy toll, especially after the unlawful execution of the group's leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009, which inadvertently strengthened radical factions within the group. As a result, the insurgents, who subsequently resorted to suicide bombings, guerrilla warfare, and the strategic use of social media for propaganda, intensified their threat to national security. In response, the government imposed a state of emergency in three northeastern states, namely, Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe, signaling increased counterinsurgency efforts (BBC, 2013). However, these efforts were undermined by widespread discontent within the military, primarily due to inadequate equipment and declining morale, culminating in human rights abuses against civilians. This escalating discontent led to mutinies among soldiers and the proclamation of an Islamic caliphate by the insurgent leader. To make matters worse, the credibility of the military suffered from inaccurate public statements about its operations (Iwuoha, 2020). On the contrary, Boko Haram demonstrated superior strategic communications and often appeared more reliable than the military, which exacerbated the erosion of the military's credibility at home and abroad.

Although President Goodluck Jonathan approved the National Counterterrorism Strategy (NACTEST) on April 30, 2014, it proved ineffective. NACTEST included measures such as conventional military training, socioeconomic solutions to combat Boko Haram's recruitment methods, and community initiatives involving

religious and customary leaders. However, the program's implementation was hampered by corruption. This was in addition to Boko Haram's demonstrated ability to exploit grievances within marginalized communities and among individuals, effectively radicalizing and recruiting followers (Akinola, 2015; Eji, 2016). Furthermore, his perceived indecisiveness hampered both domestic and international assistance efforts. For example, alleged links between political elites, including then Borno State Governor Ali Modu Sheriff and Boko Haram remained largely uninvestigated, and fueled skepticism (Iyekekpolo, 2018). Criticism also stemmed from the Jonathan administration's underestimation of the insurgency's severity, which inadvertently contributed to its strengthening. For instance, the handling of the Chibok kidnapping also shed light on a missed opportunity to mobilize national and international support, even as Jonathan's preoccupation with his 2015 reelection campaign rather than fighting the insurgency was seen as a glaring shift in priorities (Bappah, 2016).

Given the obvious difficulty of addressing the root causes of the insurgency, preventing Boko Haram from recruiting members, combating the corruption that had beset the military, providing armament that could match that of Boko Haram, and devising an effective military strategy that could confront Boko Haram, which had developed an extraordinary ability to adapt its strategies and objectives in response to changing conditions, the Nigerian government determined that a different, comprehensive, and coordinated approach was needed to meet the multi-faceted and complicated challenge posed by Boko Haram. To this end, private military and security contractors were proposed and hired as a tactic to combat Boko Haram, and Specialized Tasks, Training, Equipment, and Protection (STTEP) was hired to train, advise, and provide intelligence support to the military and other security forces to improve their ability to combat Boko Haram (Freeman, 2015; Varin, 2018; Adamo, 2020; Kinsey & Krieg, 2021).

5. **The Use of Private Security Services in Nigeria**

Faced with the failure to contain the insurgency, incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan felt compelled to develop a strategy when he realized that the escalating threat of the Boko Haram insurgency could hurt his chances of winning the 2015 election, especially since the abduction of more than 250 Chibok girls had sparked reactions around the world (McVeigh, 2014). Although the Nigerian government justified the outsourcing of military expertise to contractors on the grounds that it was necessary for the training and deployment of sophisticated equipment, Varin (2018) argues that, on the contrary, the contract was a consequence of the inadequacy of the Nigerian armed forces and the failure of efforts to address the sociopolitical factors that fueled the insurgency, which necessitated an alternative approach to the problem. Moreover, as the Nigerian military struggled to contain the group and was criticized for its lack of success in countering its attacks, contracting STTEP was seen as a way to address these issues and provide the Nigerian military with the "strategic, operational, and tactical" support it needed to effectively combat the group, especially since it appeared that previous training by outsiders such as the US and France left much to be desired, due to a lack of effective training, misguided advice, the absence of a clear strategy, widely varying tribal affiliations, ethnicity, religion, languages, and cultures, coupled with a limited understanding of the conflict and the enemy, and particularly the nature of counterinsurgency (Murphy, 2020; Adamo, 2020).

Potential sources of support for Nigeria include its traditional geopolitical partners (such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Israel) and private actors. Regrettably, the Nigerian government failed to obtain military support from its allies because of the Nigerian armed forces' reputation for human rights abuses, corrupt practices, and fears of possible infiltration by Boko Haram (Cropley & Lewis, 2015; Murphy, 2015). Consequently, the government resorted to seeking assistance from the private sector, whose employees were expeditiously branded as "mercenaries" by the media (Kinsey & Krieg, 2021). Eeben Barlow, former chairman of STTEP, revealed that the company was originally contracted in mid-December 2014 to train a rescue force for the Chibok girls. However, due to the tactical growth of Boko Haram, the company was soon transformed into a combat force known as the 72nd Mobile Strike Force (72MSF). This transformation occurred when the insurgents began

seizing territory, including Gwoza, and extending their control to parts of Baga near Lake Chad in early January 2015. As a result, they gained control of about 20,000 square miles, which is slightly larger than Costa Rica. This strike force, which the company had carefully assembled "from scratch" to rescue the Chibok girls, had "its own organic air support, intelligence, communications, logistics, and other relevant combat support elements" and began training in January 2015 (Murphy, 2015a; Nielsen, 2016; Blair, 2015).

6. The Methods and Strategies Employed by STTEP

The STTEP approach as a security contractor enhanced the capabilities of local forces by providing training, strategic guidance, and air and artillery support to the 72nd Mobile Strike Force on the principle of relentless warfare. According to Eeben Barlow, "the Strike Force was never intended to hold the ground. Instead, it operated on the principle of relentless offensive", which he describes as key to effective counterinsurgency, similar to the strategy employed by Executive Outcomes in Angola and Sierra Leone. This approach, a form of unconventional mobile warfare, involves continuously pursuing and attacking the enemy, particularly a non-state actor such as a terrorist group that does not have a defined battlefield or traditional command structure, without allowing it to regroup or recover (Murphy, 2015). The primary objective of relentless pursuit is to disrupt the enemy's operations and prevent it from consolidating its gains (Barlow, 2011). To achieve this, a combination of military and nonmilitary means are used to pressure the enemy, such as targeted airstrikes, ground operations, reconnaissance, and psychological operations. In this way, the enemy's operations are disrupted by creating a constant state of uncertainty that makes it difficult for them to plan and execute operations, keeps them on the defensive, and prevents them from gaining popular support.

In the past, Boko Haram relied on guerrilla tactics, striking unexpectedly and choosing its own time and place in the hope that media coverage would increase the impact of its attacks. Under the leadership of Major General Barlow, who commanded the 72nd Mobile Strike Force, a new strategy was introduced. Instead of adopting a defensive posture, the team actively sought out and engaged the enemy, using aggressive tactics to weaken its defenses and ultimately overwhelm it with superior firepower. To implement this relentless pursuit, Barlow emphasized the importance of troops being able to feed on the move, quickly track the enemy, use helicopters to stay ahead of the enemy, communicate effectively, be aggressive, be proficient in night operations, and have greater firepower than enemy forces (Murphy 2015b). This approach typically involves horizontal and vertical operations by special or intelligence forces trained to operate independently yet in coordination with other units such as reconnaissance units and military units equipped with advanced technology such as drones and other surveillance equipment. In this way, STTEP contractors were responsible for leading and organizing the mission. They were responsible for decision-making, communications, and strategy, working closely with Nigerian forces and directing them to specific regions, unlike previous operations that relied on aerial surveillance information conducted by US and French forces in the area and shared with Nigerian forces 24-48 hours after the fact (Barlow, 2018). At the same time, the hired forces employed aerial vehicles, such as helicopters and armed aircraft, maneuvering swiftly and close to the ground to engage Boko Haram militants both during the day and at night, which ultimately led to the destruction of numerous Boko Haram assembly points, concentrations, and equipment and negatively impacted the numbers and morale of Boko Haram forces.

The use of psychological warfare, also known as "psywar" or "PSYOP," is not a new concept and was not developed in Nigeria, but it is recognized as an effective counterinsurgency tool and has been identified as an important component in the fight against Boko Haram in Nigeria. The aim is to sway the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of a target group or adversary, leading to a reduction in their will to fight while simultaneously gaining support from the [target] population (Crossman, 1952; Sun Tsu, 2013; Bennett, 2019). In this case, the Nigerian Army and the local population were the targets. This was largely because the Nigerian armed forces were struggling not only with a lack of capability but also with low morale, having previously often been overrun by insurgents and fled from operations, resulting in valuable equipment falling into the hands of Boko Haram.

Psywar, deployed on the principle of relentless pursuit and used to combat Boko Haram in the Mafa region in January 2015, proved successful. For instance, the terrorist group carried out a series of attacks on the local population, causing many to flee to Maiduguri. As a result, a military unit was dispatched to retake the town of Mafa, located about 57 kilometers west of Maiduguri. The mission was a success, recapturing the town and pushing Boko Haram back about five kilometers. The 7th Infantry Division took control of the town, and the 72 MSF soldiers returned to Maiduguri to the cheers of the local population. Despite ongoing efforts to retake key Boko Haram strongholds in Bama and Gwoza, MSF gunships continued to fly sorties, and a small helicopter unit conducted several mortar attacks on known Boko Haram positions. Tragically, during a nighttime operation to prepare for the attack on Bama, a Nigerian Army T-72 tank mistakenly fired on an MSF MRAP, resulting in two MSF combat casualties. As a result, the attack on Bama was temporarily postponed. Nevertheless, MSF managed to recapture Bama from Boko Haram 48 hours later. Subsequent troops from the 7th Infantry Division quickly took control of Bama and cleared it to repel possible counterattacks by Boko Haram. Similarly, media and security officials in Abuja confirmed that STTEP contractors conducted nighttime attacks against Boko Haram in Sambisa Forest, a large camp where the abducted girls are believed to be held by the insurgents. Accordingly, the Nigerian military reportedly moved in the next day and claimed credit for the successful operations (Nossiter, 2015). This suggests the effectiveness of psychological tactics and relentless offensive, as well as a strong partnership between the Nigerian military and STTEP.

At the same time, the STTEP approach aimed to shape warfare to meet the needs of the local population. This was achieved by teaching and enforcing basic ethical principles and by implementing social responsibility programs aimed at providing essential services to the local population, such as medical clinics, clean water, and job opportunities whose ultimate goal was not only to provide aid but also to encourage popular participation in the fight against Boko Haram (Barlow, 2018). In addition, the STTEP approach also worked closely with local citizen militias known as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). The CJTF, which was established by Borno State in June 2013 and now includes thousands of volunteers, is seen as a valuable force multiplier by the Nigerian security forces, although there has been frequent tension between the CJTF and the security forces due to police and military brutality against the vigilantes (Agbiboa, 2020). Recognizing this divide and the utility of the local military for intelligence, translation, support, and local acceptance, the STTEP approach overcame these tensions by encouraging cooperation between uniformed forces and citizen militias in their operations to combat Boko Haram.

Table 1. Table of Findings

Findings	Descriptions
The STTEP approach	Improve the capabilities of local forces through training, strategic guidance, and air and artillery support to the 72nd Mobile Strike Force under the principle of relentless warfare.
Relentless Offensive strategy	Involves continuously pursuing and attacking the enemy without allowing it to regroup or recover. It involves using military and nonmilitary means to pressure the enemy, such as targeted air strikes, ground operations, surveillance, and psychological operations.
Horizontal and vertical operations	Through special or intelligence forces trained to operate independently but in coordination with other units, such as reconnaissance units and military units equipped with advanced technology. STTEP contractors were responsible for mission direction, organization, decision-making, communications, and strategy.
Use of helicopters and gunships	Attack Boko Haram both during the day and at night, ultimately destroying numerous Boko Haram staging areas, concentrations, and equipment.

Psychological warfare	Used to increase the aggression level of troops and instill fear in the enemy. The psywar, based on the principle of relentless pursuit and was used to combat Boko Haram in the Mafa region in January 2015, has proven successful.
The success of the mission	The mission succeeded, retaking the town and pushing Boko Haram back about five kilometers. MSF succeeded in retaking Bama from Boko Haram 48 hours later.
Tragic incident	During a nighttime operation to prepare for the attack on Bama, a Nigerian Army T-72 tank accidentally fired at an MSF MRAP, resulting in two MSF combat casualties.

Source: Author

Events after January 2015 suggest that the deployment of Specialized Tasks, Training, Equipment, and Protection (STTEP) may have not only helped Nigerian forces fight Boko Haram, but also laid the groundwork for the rejuvenation of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which was once a formation of LCBC states, i.e., the four littoral states surrounding the Lake Chad Basin (LCB), to promote sustainability, resolve disputes, and support integration, peace, and security in the LCB. Now it has been restructured into a unit to fight Boko Haram to address the problem of insecurity in the region. Thus, the MNJTF has now been transformed into a military alliance, established in October 2014, comprising soldiers from Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin. This was in response to the increasingly cross-border nature of Boko Haram's insurgency and the realization that a coordinated regional approach was necessary to effectively combat the group (Agbiboa, 2017). This alliance has conducted several operations against Boko Haram since January 2015, resulting in the recapture of areas previously controlled by the group and the disruption of its operations. According to the Nigerian government, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) successfully regained control of 36 towns in three different states during the months of February and March 2015 (Popovski & Maiangwa, 2016; Hassan, 2021). Despite these successes, however, the MNJTF has faced obstacles such as a lack of coordination and cooperation among its member states, as well as funding and logistical problems that have hampered its ability to fully carry out its mandate (Agbiboa, 2017).

7. Quantitative Findings from the Global Terrorism Database

According to the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), the provision of special operations, training, equipment, and protection significantly limited Boko Haram's ability to carry out terrorist attacks. When analyzing the number of incidents from July 2014 to December 2014, a total of 207 attacks were recorded, while between January and March 2015, when STTEP was operational, a total of 139 incidents were recorded, indicating a decrease in operations conducted by the insurgents. However, if we use the same database to calculate insurgent attacks, 301 attacks were recorded between March 31 and December 31, 2015, suggesting that STTEP's withdrawal left a gap for Boko Haram to exploit (Global Terrorism Database, 2015). This is consistent with Barlow's prediction that the insurgents would regroup and their operations would become much more violent after the company's tactical withdrawal at the end of the three-month contract, which expired around March 28, because President Jonathan had promised that the contract would not be renewed in the event of an electoral defeat (Murphy, 2015c; Adamo, 2020).

Further analysis of terrorist attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram from January to December 2016 shows that 251 attacks were recorded during this period, a decrease from the rest of 2015 following the STTEP's withdrawal. The author used the same database to track Boko Haram attacks from 2017 to 2020 and the results show that there were 300 attacks in 2017, 210 attacks in 2018, 300 attacks in 2019, and 219 attacks in 2020. These numbers indicate a fluctuation in the number of attacks by Boko Haram over the four-year period from 2017 to 2020. While the number of attacks peaked at 300 in both 2017 and 2019, it declined to 210 in 2018 and increased slightly to 219 in 2020, indicating fluctuations in Boko Haram activity that may be due to factors such as changes

in strategy, leadership, external support, or counterinsurgency effectiveness. However, the data presented suggest that despite a decrease in Boko Haram attacks in 2016 following STTEP's withdrawal, the fluctuating numbers of attacks from 2017 to 2020 indicate that counterinsurgency efforts were less stable without STTEP, indicating the significant influence of STTEP's strategic support in combating Boko Haram and maintaining a more controlled environment.

While this assessment, covering a short ninety-day period, gives an indication of short-term effectiveness, it is difficult to make a definitive long-term assessment given the time frame. However, one very plausible explanation is that the Nigerian Armed Forces were able to improve their strength and morale through the training they received under the Specialized Tasks, Training, Equipment, and Protection (STTEP) program, which in turn led to more successful counterinsurgency operations. In general, the role of STTEP appears to be critical to effective counterterrorism, as STTEP presence was associated with a decrease in Boko Haram attacks and STTEP absence resulted in an increase or fluctuations in violence, suggesting that organizations such as STTEP may be critical to maintaining a consistent and effective counterterrorism strategy. This also indicates the significant impact of the partnership on the operational strategies of the armed forces and provides valuable insight into the benefits of an integrated approach to the doctrine of "relentless pursuit." However, the significant decline and inconsistency in success rates is concerning, as it may indicate a possible return of the Nigerian armed forces to earlier, less effective strategies.

Table 2. STTEP's impact on Nigerian counterterrorism in data

Time Period	Boko Haram Attacks Recorded	Note
July-Dec 2014	207	Before STTEP's involvement
Jan-Mar 2015	139	STTEP operational, attacks decrease
Mar 31-Dec 31, 2015	301	Attacks increase after STTEP's withdrawal
Jan-Dec 2016	251	Attacks decrease from the previous year but remain higher than during STTEP involvement.
2017	300	Attack numbers increase
2018	210	Attack numbers decrease
2019	300	Attack numbers increase
2020	219	Attack numbers slightly decrease

Source: Author

Moreover, the decline in attacks over the life of the contract is also related to the number of civilian casualties and fatalities. If the frequency of attacks decreases, the likelihood that there will be fewer casualties also increases. To determine whether the decline in terrorist attacks and civilian casualties in Nigeria can be attributed to the presence of STTEP, this study examines the relationship between the decline in terrorist attacks and the decline in civilian casualties using data from the 2016 Global Terrorism Index (GTI) and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). The GTI reveals a 34 percent decline in terrorist attack deaths in Nigeria in 2015 compared to the previous year, largely due to a decline in Boko Haram activity (Global Terrorism Index, 2015; Global Terrorism Index, 2016). More detailed data from GTD indicate that during the period STTEP was in operation (January to March 28, 2015), there were 1797 fatalities and 481 casualties, significantly less than the 2547 fatalities and 1159 casualties recorded during the previous period (July to December 2014). However, following STTEP's withdrawal, the number of fatalities and casualties jumped during the remainder of 2015, reaching 2903 and 2044, respectively. These fluctuations suggest that STTEP's presence was associated with a decrease in Boko Haram attacks and civilian casualties. The subsequent increase in attacks and casualties after STTEP may suggest that the absence of STTEP led to less effective counterterrorism measures or a possible return to earlier, less effective strategies by Nigerian forces. While these figures suggest a correlation, they are not conclusive evidence of causality, as other factors such as changes in Boko Haram strategies, regional political dynamics, or the actions of other security forces could also have influenced these outcomes.

Table 3. Impact of STTEP's Presence on Boko Haram Attacks, Fatalities, and Casualties (2014 - 2015)

Period	STTEP Status	Number of Attacks	Fatalities	Casualties
July – December 2014	Pre-STTEP	207	2547	1159
January – March 28, 2015	STTEP Operational	139	1797	481
March 31-December 31, 2015	Post-STTEP	301	2903	2044

Source: Author

Moreover, the impact of the fight against Boko Haram can be gauged in part by the number of terrorists arrested and killed, although the lack of credible official records casts doubt on the accuracy of these figures, especially given that Nigerian forces have faced accusations in the past of overstating insurgent casualties and understating civilian casualties, such as in the Baga massacre, in which the government claimed 150 casualties while 2,000 civilians were killed (Felix & Ola, 2015). The possibility of politically motivated reporting, especially considering that the company was contracted before the elections and contributed to the ruling party's victory, further complicates the matter and therefore makes it difficult to rely on such figures without significant proof. Nonetheless, the lack of a credible open rebuttal and the fact that the counterterrorism force was able to kill more Boko Haram fighters than its soldiers lost is some evidence of counterinsurgency success. The accounts of Boko Haram casualties in January and February 2015 vary. Some sources claim the Nigerian government killed 42 insurgents and captured 5 others, while others report over 200 dead in Maiduguri (ENCA, 2015). According to a report published on February 18, 2015, a joint military operation was conducted to regain control of 11 towns and villages from Boko Haram fighters in Nigeria. The report stated that 300 fighters from the extremist group were killed during the operation, reportedly by the Nigerian army (Felix & Ola, 2015). This research notes that the frequency of clashes that month likely resulted in more casualties than arrests and that despite the limitations, the fact that a primary objective of counterinsurgency operations is to destroy the insurgents suggests that success has been achieved in the fight against Boko Haram (Galula, 1964).

Table 4. Reported Boko Haram casualties in January and February 2015

Date	Reported Boko Haram casualties
January 2015	42 killed, 5 captured
February 18, 2015	300 killed
Remaining days in February 2015	Over 200 were killed in Maiduguri

*Note: There is no consensus on the exact number of Boko Haram casualties, and figures may be subject to politically motivated reporting.

Source: Author

8. Discussion and Recommendations

In assessing STTEP's involvement in Nigeria, the author notes elsewhere that the decision was a good one, largely because it has increased confidence in the government's efforts and boosted the morale of the national armed forces, which are now better able to fight the insurgents in a joint effort without undermining state authority in the region (Bamigboye, 2022). However, it is difficult to make a definitive statement about the overall success of the STTEP approach in Nigeria because success can be measured in different ways. Although the STTEP approach, which included the use of special forces and psychological operations as well as the involvement of local militias, resulted in a significant reduction in violence during the period in which it was used, it could also be argued that it did not fully succeed in eradicating Boko Haram and that the group remains a significant threat in the region, especially when considered in the context of an effective counterterrorism strategy (COIN), which is a comprehensive approach that employs various "instruments of national power" and includes all resources and means necessary to address the complexity of terrorist threats (Shemella, 2011). In this sense, an effective counterterrorism strategy as one that goes beyond military means to include intelligence, law enforcement, and cooperation with civil society, as each of these tools plays a unique role in counterterrorism (Bamigboye, 2022). Thus, it could also be argued that this collaborative security web has not fully addressed the underlying problems that led to the rise of Boko Haram, such as poverty, unemployment, and marginalization, nor has it been able to fully gain the support of the local population, as tensions continue to exist between the local population and the security forces (Bamidele, 2016). Therefore, the success of the STTEP approach in Nigeria can be described as mixed, as it had some success in reducing the level of violence and destabilization caused by Boko Haram during its time in Nigeria, and recapturing territory, but was not able to completely eradicate the group and did not fully solve the underlying problems or gain popular support. This means that the assessment of STTEP's effectiveness in the fight against Boko Haram considers only the military aspect and neglects the social and political factors. The result is that while STTEP has been successful at the operational level, social and political issues remain a problem in the fight against Boko Haram terrorists and insurgent elements. Therefore, it can be said that STTEP influenced counterinsurgency primarily at the operational level, resulting in temporary strategic success. The study's findings also show that the implementation of STTEP tactics through the use of Special Forces such as special operations forces and intelligence effectively hindered the group's operations and prevented it from gaining momentum. In addition, the integration of nonmilitary tactics, such as psychological operations and civil-military efforts, also played an important role in gaining popular support and isolating the group from its support networks consequently demonstrating the effectiveness of the STTEP approach in countering the threat posed by Boko Haram in Nigeria, albeit at the operational level.

It appears that the value of a public-private military partnership was recognized by President Muhammadu Buhari, a former military general, and successor to President Goodluck Jonathan. Buhari who had criticized his predecessor's use of a private military company before taking office. According to the Anadolu News Agency, it has been alleged that Buhari himself employed equipment and private military companies from STTEP, even though he had previously spoken out against the use of South African mercenaries and stated that their presence would not be tolerated under his leadership (Olasupo 2018). Although the Nigerian government has officially

denied these allegations, the possibility of rehiring these mercenaries is reportedly currently being discussed within the Ministry of Defense and the Nigerian military (Campbell, 2015). All of these suggest that it is critical to understand that political leadership must look at STTEP's military successes to establish a longer-term counterinsurgency policy. According to Onapajo (2017) the political leadership, especially after the transition from Jonathan to Buhari, who has a military background and is implementing a comprehensive strategy that includes diplomatic/multilateral tactics and internal military reorganization, has enabled a comprehensive approach to counterinsurgency that has resulted in favorable military engagement with anti-government forces and strategic investments, although the progress made should not be misconstrued as a victory. This research, therefore, suggests that it is important to recognize that STTEP alone cannot be considered a comprehensive solution to the Boko Haram insurgency. As a result, it is argued that it is critical to assess STTEP's success in the context of broader counterinsurgency efforts, as the insurgency in Nigeria is a complex problem that requires a comprehensive approach that includes not only military operations, but also political, economic, and social measures.

It is also important to consider the short- and long-term success of STTEP, especially since it has achieved short-term successes, such as reducing violence in the areas of operation, but it is uncertain whether these successes will last in the long term, especially since according to Mayeni Jones (2023), Boko Haram is still raging in the northeast and it is still too dangerous to travel by road between Yobe and Borno states unless a comprehensive approach is taken that addresses the underlying problems fueling the insurgency. The findings thus highlight the importance of considering the long-term sustainability of private security firms in the fight against Boko Haram. As the case study shows, when addressing pressing security issues, it is critical to consider the enduring consequences of security operations, as improving the capabilities of national security forces and other relevant security actors is crucial, without which achieving lasting stability becomes an illusion. Therefore, a systematic approach aimed at improving the counterinsurgency capabilities of the Nigerian armed forces is a more effective strategy for achieving stability than a single contractual agreement, such as the short three-month contract between STTEP and the Nigerian government.

There are other important implications for Nigeria's fight against Boko Haram. The data suggest that private security firms, particularly those with counterinsurgency experience in Africa, can provide valuable support to the Nigerian government and military in their efforts to combat Boko Haram because they have the expertise and unique experience in Africa to effectively address Nigeria's security challenges. In particular, the results of this research show that it is critical for PMSCs to understand and be sensitive to the cultural practices of the regions in which they operate. As indicated by the case study, STTEP's contractors have extensive experience in Africa since the 1980s and have most likely transferred their understanding of Africa's cultural and social complexities to their operations in the region through CSR projects, which explains their success, especially in the northeastern region where people have limited knowledge of different cultures due to lack of education. This also underscores the importance for private security companies to understand and adhere to the cultural and social conventions in an area of conflict in order to build mutually beneficial relationships with the local population. Companies thus have a responsibility to provide cultural training to security personnel to protect them from cultural misinterpretation by training them in local customs, traditions, and social conventions.

The establishment of collaborative and trust-building measures between private security firms and local communities has the potential to generate considerable advantages and is therefore considered crucial for effective counterinsurgency. In the same vein, an examination of the effects of psychological warfare on the military and local communities may lead to the achievement of effective security, especially if national forces and local populations have suffered a loss of morale due to frequent attacks. Furthermore, the findings of this research emphasize the crucial significance of host community backing in the efforts to counter terrorism and insurgency operations, specifically in the fight against Boko Haram. This is because it diminishes the support for terrorists within the local populace while simultaneously promoting community support. As shown in this research,

STTEP's strategy relies on the principles of open communication, collaboration, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) to cultivate trust and cooperation between private security companies and host communities. For this reason, the facilitation of communication channels between private security firms and community leaders has the potential to enhance the participation of local communities in security planning and execution.

Finally, STTEP's three-month deployment to Nigeria is noteworthy because there were no documented cases of human rights violations, illegal activities, or subversion of state authority by the organization. This is noteworthy because these are major issues commonly associated with the use of private security companies. Notwithstanding, it is of utmost importance that the Nigerian government and other concerned agencies establish clear regulations and guidelines for the use of private security companies and develop mechanisms to monitor and enforce their accountability beyond the requirements of international humanitarian law. This includes independent and fair reporting of cases of human rights violations.

8. Conclusion

In this article, the author examines the pivotal role of private security services using STTEP, a private military and security company (PMSC), as an example in the fight against Boko Haram in Nigeria. The author begins with an overview that highlights the remarkable contribution of private security companies like STTEP to the Nigerian security landscape, particularly in addressing the challenges posed by extremist groups like Boko Haram, and further explores this connection, highlighting how these companies' specialized expertise, rigorous training, advanced equipment, and comprehensive security services have significantly mitigated the threat posed by Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria during their operation. As a result, security and stability were significantly improved in Nigeria's north during the period, albeit with varying degrees of success. Of particular importance is the observation that while STTEP has been militarily effective, it has not adequately addressed the root problems or completely won the hearts and minds of the local population. The study cautions, however, that the success of private security firms should not be considered in a vacuum, as counterterrorism requires a multifaceted strategy. As such, this article makes a strong case for addressing the root causes of the insurgency, such as poverty, unemployment, and marginalization, in conjunction with military action. In addition, the study underscores the importance of coordination between private security firms and other security agencies for long-term security outcomes. This collaboration would lead to the alignment of goals and promote coherence between security-related operations and broader development objectives without undermining the role of the state as the primary provider of security. Finally, it underscores the indispensability of transparency, accountability, and ethics in the operations of these companies. This can be achieved by establishing a robust legal and regulatory framework that delineates their duties, ensures compliance with national and international standards, and ensures adequate reporting mechanisms for human rights violations to prevent possible abuse of power or misconduct.

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