# Carrots or Sticks? A Commentary on Military Force as an Effective Response in Counter-Terrorism

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*Abstract*: - **Terrorism in its operational sense refers to the purposive adoption of lethal violence aimed at human or non-human target with the objective of making the state or an agency of the state to act in line with the demands of the perpetrators. While there is a degree of disagreement among scholars on what terrorism itself implies there is a higher intensity in the debate on the most effective strategy for counter-terrorism. Situated within the latter front of the debate this commentary argued for the use of military force as an effective first-approach counter terrorism measure. It argued that negotiation create a sense of credibility to terrorist organization among the populace- which have a negative impact on the political capacity of the state while validating the demand of the terrorist organization. Hence military force was advised as first line of action against lethal terrorist attacks so as to reinforce the status of the state as the legitimate monopoly of the apparatus of force. Furthermore military force when successful creates collateral cost on the limited human and material resources of the terrorist organization which reduces its capability in the short and long run.**

*Key words:* **Terrorism, Counter-terrorism, military force, Boko Haram, terrorist organization, State**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 9/11 terrorist attack on the United States there is an increase in the amount of scholarship that focuses on the concept of terrorism in its entire ramification and one of such focus is mirrored on state responses and counter-terrorist effectiveness. Fundamental to this quest is the need to understand the extent to which military force acts as an effective response to terrorism as an alternative to dialogue and negotiation.

As a concept, terrorism have been used to describe a particular distinctive kind of political violence. According to Virginia (2015), terrorism is the use of indiscriminate violence as a means to create terror among masses of people or fear to achieve a religious or political aim. For a political action to be labelled as terrorism, it has to fulfill the following requirements:

i. Clarity of Objective: Terrorism is not just an act of violence but there must exist a clearly defined objective to which the action is garnered to achieve. For example, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) has a clear objective which is the liberation of Palestine. In Nigeria today, the Boko Haram objectives are encapsulated within the fanatic Islamization of Northern Nigeria along with its own doctrine of non-western education and sharia code.

ii. Victim: For a terrorist action to be said to have occurred there must be a victim. Although Virginia (2015) limited the victim profile of terrorism to a mass of people, it does not compulsorily have to be human victims. In fact, Dode and Ufomba (2014) in their own paper opined that terrorist simply picks targets that reduce the national power of the targeted states as a means of blackmailing to give in to its demands.

iii. Fear: The overall aim of terrorism is to create fear. In fact, fear is its currency with which it interacts with the state since its ability to achieve and fail in reaching its objective is dependent on the level of fear its members are able to create among policymakers and the general public.

Putting these three requirements in mind our operational definition of terrorism here is the use of violence aimed at human or non-human targets, with the purpose of achieving a predetermined and clearly defined objective through influencing popular opinion or policy. Our focus here will be to examine if military force is an effective option in counter-terrorism or not but first we must understand if terrorism itself is effective.

## II. DETERMINANTS OF THE LEVEL OF EFFECTIVENESS OF TERRORISM

The effectiveness or ineffectiveness of terrorism to achieve its aim has generated quite a large amount of attention in the literature. This is so because understanding this is a key in explaining why groups chose to terrorize.

There is no agreement among scholars on whether or not terrorism is an effective strategy or not. In fact, there are more debates across the divide than there are terrorist organizations. One must understand that effectiveness here means the terrorist organization making the state to do what it wants it to do. There is a plethora in the post – 9/11 literatures that suggest that terrorism is an effective tool (Pape, 2003, 2005; Stanton, 2013; Louise, 2006; Kydd & Walter, 2006). In fact, some suggest that terrorist organizations are rational decision-makers whose aim is to ensure that the cost of carrying out a particular attack is relatively lower than the

impact of that attack. The rationale behind this suggestion is that there is an asymmetry between the victim states and the terrorist organization in terms of human and material resources with the odds tilted overwhelmingly against the terrorist organization. Hence, it aims to achieve maximum impact with every course of action (Eminue & Ufomba, 2011, Dode & Ufomba, 2014).

Ozcam (2018) in his own study sees the effectiveness of terrorism as dependent on certain circumstances which creates a favourable environment and outcome. He opined that:

Terrorism is an effective method in some countries and only certain conditions. There is an ongoing debate about why kind countries are more vulnerable to terrorism's effects. For example, it has been argued that democratic countries are more vulnerable to terrorist blackmail, whereas authoritarian countries are less so. In authoritarian countries, terrorism effect might be diminished due to several reasons. For example, the news about the terrorist act does not find its way to the wider society because the media is restricted. Under such conditions, the terrorist group would not be able to make use of the theatrical and symbolic impact of the terrorist act (Ozcam, 2018: 94).

Other factors that shape the level of effectiveness of terrorist attacks are:

1. Power of Government Institutions: Countries that have strong government institutions, high level of inclusiveness and political capacity in power transition terms are less vulnerable to terrorist blackmail. This is largely due to its capacity to draw resources from its institutions and coordinate its response to such attacks. Countries like Israel, the United States of America, Britain, France, etc falls within this group. The government institution is simply strong enough to absorb the pressure of the attack and dilute the impression it will create among the citizenry, therefore, avoiding fear or panic. This makes the attack largely ineffective since it could not achieve its primary aim. In the other side of the spectrum, terrorist attacks are relatively effective in countries with weaker institutions. For example, the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria. The organisation have achieved some level of effectiveness in creating panic both among the citizens and the military. There exist cases of local morale among troops and others simply abandoning their post altogether.

2. Societal Response: How a society responds to terrorist attacks usually play a crucial role in the level of effectiveness achievable by the terrorist group. Societies like Israel, Turkey, France, etc that have stronger political culture are less vulnerable as compared to lower political culture states like Nigeria. In the former, the citizens rally round the

flag and identify the terrorist as a common enemy regardless of party affiliations. In the latter, the citizens see the attack as a government failure and isolate themselves from active participation in combating it. In some cases, terrorist attacks are blown out of proportion by opposing political parties using social media to create a sense of fear or panic which they hope will discredit the incumbent government among the electorates. What that does in effect is that it increases the effectiveness of the terrorist since it reinforces its credibility as a force and help in spreading the fear it desperately wanted. This, in turn, affects the societal response and undermines the socio-political capacity of the state to effectively coordinate its own countermeasures.

3. Wellbeing of Citizens: States with a higher standard of living are less vulnerable than poor states. Logically states with a high standard of living have a lower incentive for recruitment into non-religious terrorist organizations. Furthermore, there tends to be a higher connection between civil society and the state in these countries.

4. Timing: The period and time of a terrorist attack usually play a significant role in its level of effectiveness. Terrorist attacking shortly before election always draw more attention in the media since it is usually escalated into an election issue.

In the other side of the debate there exists an impressive amount of literature that suggests that terrorism is an ineffective strategy. To this line of thought, the achievement of terrorism as a political strategy is too insignificant and hence should not be regarded as a positive course of achieving a political objective. The findings in these studies include:

i. Only 3 out of 42 cases (7%) of terrorism were able to accomplish a clearly defined political objective (Abrams, 2006).

ii. Data compiled by Fortna (2011) showed that insurgent groups that employ terrorism are NEVER successful in attaining their pre-defined goals.

iii. In their own study Stephen & Chenoweth (2008) observed that nonviolent organizations are more likely to achieve their defined goals than their violent counterparts.

iv. Cronin (2009) observed that violent organisations usually have a setback in the achievement of their cause than the nonviolent ones while Jones & Libicki (2008) concluded that "in most cases, terrorism had little or nothing to do with the outcome".

### III. COUNTERTERRORISM AND EFFICACY OF MILITARY FORCE

The failure of dialogue to dissuade terrorist groups makes negotiation less attractive to states. It also lends some level of credibility to the terrorist organization when that are

sort after by state actors so s to negotiate the outcome of their actions. This leaves the issue of counter-terrorism and state reaction to threat largely open to the military alternative, but this, in turn, has generated more questions concerning to use of violence to stop terrorism. One is forced to ask is the military option an effective counter-terrorism measure? We shall answer this question by using a case study approach.

### IV. CASE STUDY: NIGERIA (THE BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY)

The Boko Haram is an Islamic organization formerly known as the Jamaat Ahl as-Sunnah lid-D wah wa'l-Jihad which means "Group of the people of Sunnah for preaching and Jihad" is a terrorist organization that has as its primary objective the creation of an Islamic state in Northern Nigeria based largely upon the Salafist ideology. The organization at inception was a non-violent group led by Mohammed Yusuf with the intent of "purifying Islam in Northern Nigeria" but this pacifist status changed in 2009 after the murder of Mohammed Yusuf and the organization was then led by Abubakar Shekau and under his leadership the organization evolved into what the Global Terrorism Index tagged as the world deadliest group.

At inception, the major targets of Boko Haram were soft targets. They bomb market places, mosques and important building or a carefully selected religious or political figure. Their area of operation covered the entirety of the Northern region of Nigeria which covers $20,131km^2$ including the federal capital territory. The Nigerian government responded with a military force which initially achieved a mixed result. The military operation succeeded in sweeping out of most part of Northern Nigeria into the North-Eastern State of Borno. From this area, the group launched a coordinated counter-attack and captured territories which they declared an Islamic State. This called for a multi-national joint task force operation between Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Chad which recaptured all the territories and isolated the group in the vast area of the Sambisa forest and Camerounian mountain.
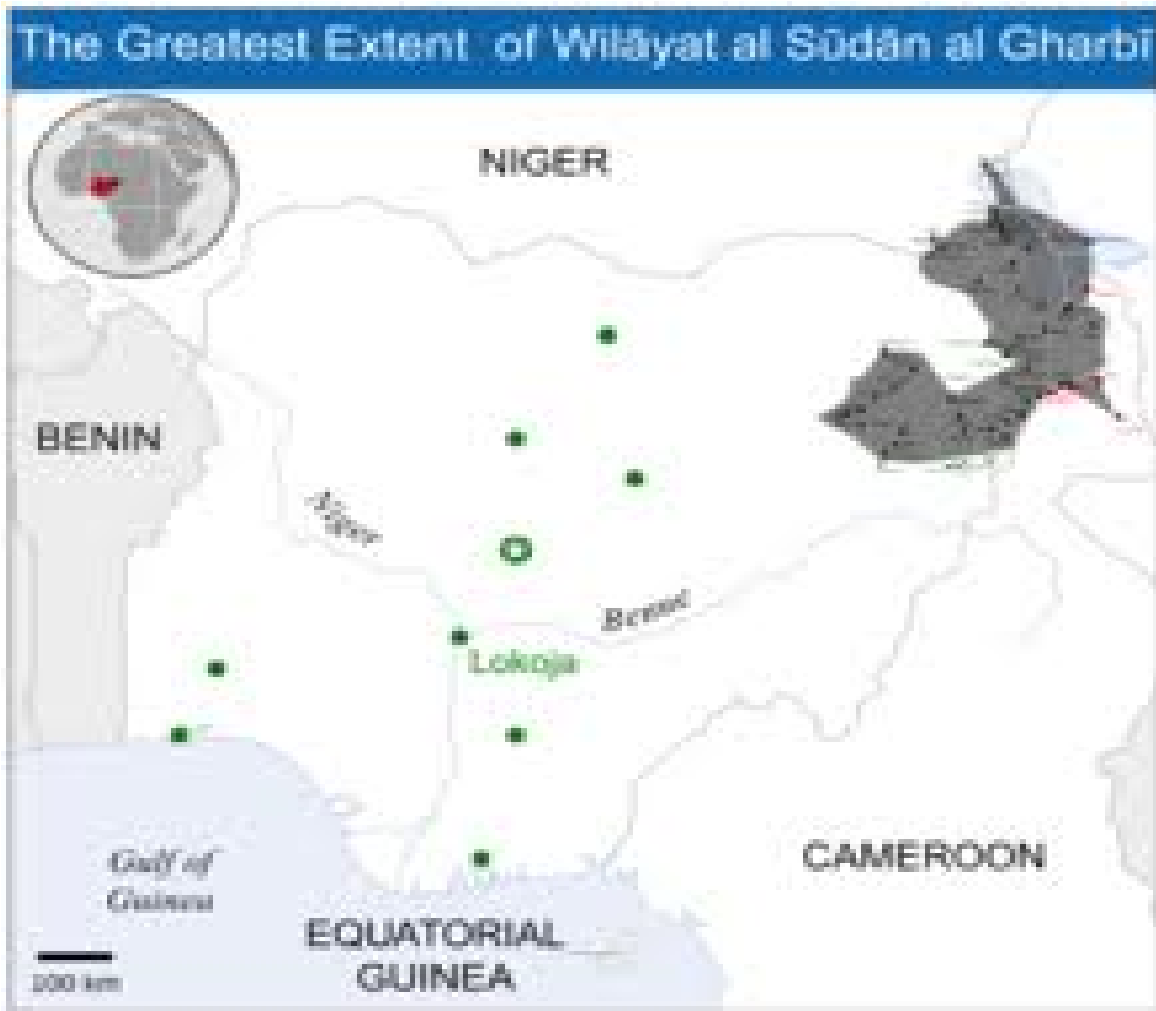


Source: Wikipedia. The grey area shows the area controlled by Boko Haram

The military parlance it will be reasonable to say that the military force was effective in curbing the Boko Haram terrorist attack in that it reduced the group's area of attack to a minimum hence greatly decrease the number of civilian deaths and property destruction except in few parts of Borno State.

The success of military force in Nigeria to limit terrorism is not an isolated and peculiar situation. In recorded military history there are more instances where military force was used to counter terrorism than mere dialogue. The successful protection of Israel on the world map instead of being annihilated by Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Hams or Hezbollah owns more to the Israeli Defence Force (IDF), Mossad and other security apparatus than to dialogue. The counter-terrorist policy of the Algerian government and the use of maximum military force played a crucial role in the dislodgement of the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria. This strategy will use to a high degree of effectiveness by the United States and the allies in the war against terror in Afghanistan and Assad's government current fight against ISIL.

While negotiation and peaceful settlement are preferred ways to end a conflict it never the less does not favour the state when it comes to terrorism because unlike inter-state disputes terrorism questions the validity of the state and the capacity of its government to protect the lives and properties within its defined territory which for all purposes is the essence of government. The use of force has a symbolic advantage in that it reinforces the state's legitimacy and monopoly in the ownership and use of the apparatus of violence. It also increases the collateral cost of terrorism in terms of human and material resources, therefore, making it less attractive for individuals or organization to employ terrorism as a strategy to achieve political aims.

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper concerned itself with the question: Is military force an effective counterterrorism strategy? In a world where there is a strong sense of human feeling especially considering the occurrence of human rights abuses states are increasingly encouraged to seek alternatives to force as a way of combating terrorism. Using Nigeria as a main case study and citing other cases, this paper argues that military force is a potent strategy to combat terrorism. The use of force reinforces the state's monopoly for violence and although some scholars believe that force puts the terrorist group in a position of playing the victim and appealing for the sentiment from the population it never the less appears to be a preferred situation than the symbolic effect of negotiation. The use of negotiation and not force against terrorists appears to give them a sense of credibility among the population and symbolically equate the potency of the group and rightfulness of its course with the legitimacy of the state. It is therefore recommended that the state should always give priority to the possible use of force whenever an organisation resort to the indiscriminate use of lethal force to create fear among its citizens for the purpose of achieving a given goal.

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