



AFRICA SECURITY BRIEF

A PUBLICATION OF THE AFRICA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Mitigating Radicalism in Northern Nigeria

BY MICHAEL OLUFEMI SODIPO

- ◆ Boko Haram and other violent Islamist groups have been able to tap grievances over widespread poverty, government corruption, ethno-religious divides, and abuses by security forces to fuel a rise in Islamic radicalization in northern Nigeria.
- ◆ Active engagement of youth and communities in peacebuilding programs that facilitate interactions among individuals of disparate backgrounds, teach values of tolerance, and promote nonviolent conflict resolution have been effective in diminishing prejudice and mitigating the appeal of radical ideologies.
- ◆ Countering radicalization requires a full spectrum of initiatives, including apprehending extremist leaders, sustained development investments in marginalized communities, promotion of values of inclusivity to mitigate the spread of extremist ideology, and the rehabilitation of radicalized former fighters.

HIGHLIGHTS

Northern Nigeria has been the locus of an upsurge in youth radicalization and virulent militant Islamist groups in Nigeria since 2009. Nigeria's ranking on the Global Terrorism Index rose from 16th out of 158 countries in 2008 to 6th (tied with Somalia) by the end of 2011.¹ There were 168 officially recorded terrorist attacks in 2011 alone. Bombings across the northeast prompted President Goodluck Jonathan in May 2013 to declare a state of emergency in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States. Many Nigerians have come to question whether the country is on the brink of a civil war.²

Prime among the groups behind this spike in violence is Boko Haram, a militant Islamist sect that seeks to impose shariah law throughout Nigeria. An air of apprehension now pervades daily life in northern Nigeria. Many are afraid to openly mention "Boko Haram," whose name has become synonymous with violence and destruction. The group has launched hundreds of coordinated attacks across the northern region since July 2009 that have resulted in the deaths

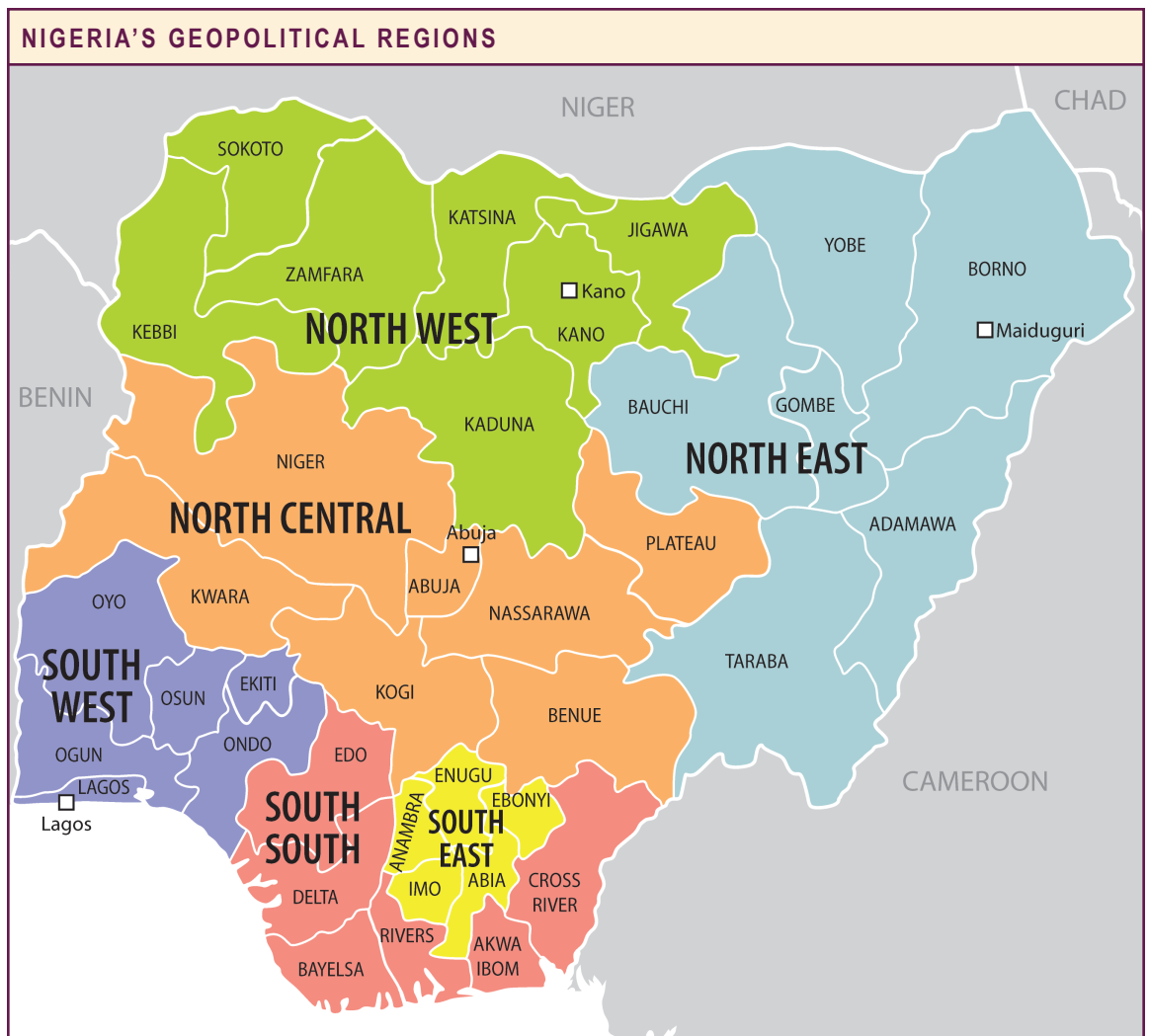
of over 6,000 people and the displacement of tens of thousands more. Boko Haram's targets include the security forces, Christians, and Muslims accused of cooperating with the government.³ It bribes children to report neighbors who are unsympathetic to the group and forces prisoners it frees from jail to join regardless of whether they share the group's ideology.⁴ Its numerous attacks have struck police stations, military facilities, churches, schools, beer halls, newspaper offices, and the United Nations building in the capital, Abuja. Ordinary citizens fear both Boko Haram and the state security forces, with the latter accused of human rights abuses. With each battle between security forces and Boko Haram insurgents, civilian casualties mount. When security forces redeploy elsewhere claiming to have repelled Boko Haram, the militants return, regroup, and seek revenge. As a result, social and economic activities in the northern states are diminishing markedly, communities are fracturing, and general anxiety is growing.

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The insurgency in northern Nigeria is a security concern not just for Nigeria but for the broader Sub-Saharan region and the international community. Boko Haram's violent campaign has grown in terms of capabilities (the use of suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices), membership (which now includes foreign fighters from Chad, Mauritania, Niger, Somalia, and Sudan), and the formation of splinter factions. The most prominent of these is Ansaru (its full Arabic name is *Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan* and means "Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa"), which was formed in January 2012 and targets Westerners in Nigeria and neighboring countries. The frequency and sophistication of attacks have steadily

grown, signifying enhanced planning and funding. Boko Haram's February 2013 kidnapping of French tourists, Ansaru's killing of seven foreign construction workers in northern Nigeria, and the participation of fighters from these groups in the conflict in Mali, moreover, reveal their international outlook.

Nigeria's strategic importance to the global jihadist movement should not be underestimated. With a population of 167 million, 19 percent of which is aged 15-24, Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa. Its Muslim population (roughly 75 million) is the sixth largest worldwide. Nigeria is also Africa's largest producer of oil and is home to the continent's second largest economy. Nigerians have been linked to international terrorist plots, and jihadists from beyond Africa have sought to recruit in Nigeria.⁵ Unless Nigeria and its partners can address the growing radicalization of Nigeria's youth and the festering ethno-religious tensions across the country, many poor and marginalized northern Nigerians will

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continue to gravitate toward radical Islamist groups, turning the north into a hub of insecurity. This, in turn, has security and economic implications for the broader region and international partners.

GENESIS OF RADICALIZATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

Though violent Islamist radicalism in northern Nigeria has surged in the past decade, the notion of jihad in Nigeria has long historical roots. From 1802 to 1812, Usman dan Fodio launched a jihad and ultimately founded the Sokoto Caliphate that spanned northern Nigeria and part of Niger.⁶ Dan Fodio's social and political revolution against what he saw as the greed and violation of shariah law by African Muslim elites was widely popular. The Caliphate also represented an Islamic banner of resistance to colonial conquest, the rejection of secular government, and the regional networking of Islamic movements in Nigeria and beyond.

In the early 1900s, the British colonists extended their control northward, including over the Sokoto Caliphate. Yet the resulting northern and southern protectorates of Nigeria were governed separately due to their cultural differences until 1914 when both were finally amalgamated by the British for economic reasons. Even after unification, north and south remained separate as the colonial system of indirect rule—governing the protectorates through indigenous rulers—merely institutionalized existing divisions. With the building of infrastructure—such as new railway lines—immigrant laborers and traders from the south settled into cantonments in most major northern cities. The effect of these *sabon gari* (“strangers’ quarters” in Hausa), was the concentration of southern Igbo and Yoruba Christians in homogenous pockets within Hausa-Fulani Muslim cities. This initiated a sharp indigene/settler dichotomy that became a powerful tool through which politicians mobilized supporters for narrow political motives.

The rapid growth of Islamic and Christian revivalism in the 1970s laid the foundation for contemporary radicalism in northern Nigeria. The puritanical tendency among the adherents of both religions in northern Nigeria gave rise to increasingly zealous political actors. The Iranian revolution of 1979, which led to the emergence of an Islamic government, inspired many northern Nigerian Muslims. Radical Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brothers, later renamed the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, led by Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky of Kaduna

State, introduced a militant pro-Iranian Shiite version of Islam into northern Nigeria in the 1980s.

Meanwhile, the Maitatsine movement, which had been active since the early 1970s, became Nigeria's first violent extremist group.⁷ The sect was ideologically opposed to modernization and abhorred the use of anything perceived as Western. The founder of the movement, Muhammadu Marwa, an Islamic preacher who migrated from Cameroon to Kano in 1945, earned the name *Maitatsine* (“he who curses” in Hausa) for his provocative preaching against moderate Muslims and the government. Maitatsine's group harassed the established Islamic order and incited marginalized sections of the population against urban elites. The resulting outburst of riots that began in Kano in the summer of 1980 spread to other parts of northern Nigeria even after Marwa was killed by Nigerian security forces in December of that year. The riots claimed the lives of 4,177 people. The Maitatsine movement introduced many of the tactics that became common in Nigeria's current Islamic radicalization, including the mobilization of poor communities against established urban Muslims, the justification of violence against non-Muslims, the identification with global Islamic movements, and the incorporation of global jihadist tactics into local operations.

Nigeria's part in the post-September 11, 2001, global radicalization surge is evident in various ways. Nigerian nationals were among the few Africans arrested in Afghanistan for allegedly fighting alongside the Taliban. In the months following the September 11th attacks, 7 out of 10 boys born at a hospital in Kano were named Osama.⁸ In 2002, Osama bin Laden called on Muslims to rise up in rebellion in only two African countries: Morocco and Nigeria.⁹ Other occurrences that brought northern Nigeria's religious radicalization to the attention of the world included: resistance to polio eradication campaigns, which were perceived as a Western plot to sterilize Muslims; deadly riots in 2002 sparked by a national newspaper article making light of Muslims' objection to Nigeria hosting the Miss World beauty pageant; and in 2006 violent protests following the publication of Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, which resulted in 130 deaths in Nigeria, more than any other country.

Boko Haram, founded around 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf, is the latest incarnation of these long-running trends. Espousing the same goal of Islamization of Nigeria as earlier jihadists, Boko Haram claims that rampant government corruption, political exclusion, and social

REGIONAL DIVERGENCES IN QUALITY OF LIFE

Region	Youth Literacy (% Age 5-16)	Primary School Attendance (%)	Secondary School Attendance (%)	Access to Improved Drinking Water (%)	Access to Improved Sanitation (%)	Small & Medium Businesses per 100,000	Watches Television Once a Week (%)	Reads a Newspaper Once a Week (%)
North East	18	43	24	39	28	9	19	9
North West	24	37	21	47	37	13	21	10
North Central	43	67	41	51	27	18	49	19
South West	78	79	64	73	26	20	73	21
South South	70	80	59	63	32	14	75	30
South East	66	79	58	71	41	15	52	27

Sources: Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics, Nigeria National Population Commission, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. Survey figures for “Drinking Resources” and “Sanitation” are from 2012, all others are from 2010.

inequality would be remedied with adherence to Boko Haram’s puritanical view of Islam. It also seeks to link with the international jihadist network. Since 2009 Boko Haram has surpassed the Maitatsine movement’s level of violent expression.

UNDERLYING DYNAMICS OF RADICALIZATION

Radicalization is a process by which an individual or group adopts extreme political, social, or religious ideals that reject the status quo, undermine contemporary ideas regarding freedom of choice and expression, and condone violence to achieve ideological ends, including undertaking terrorist acts. It typically starts with changes in one’s self-identification. Grievances, frequently driven by personal or group concerns regarding local issues as well as international events, fuel this change.¹⁰

Upon independence in 1960, mutual distrust and strong ethno-religious identities in both north and south prevented a truly pan-Nigerian identity from developing. Nigerian politics were and remain characterized by a keen competition for socioeconomic resources with the state seen as the main dispenser of these benefits. “This competition...encourages recourse to sectional identities, so much so that loyalty to ethnic communities takes precedence over national loyalty.”¹¹ In the competition for allocation of political power and resources, ethno-religious sentiments are exploited.

The resonance of groups like Boko Haram in northern Nigeria has much to do with the relationship between youth unemployment, limited economic opportunities, and the emergence of terrorism.¹² *Almajiri*—poor children sent far from their homes to study Islam with a Koranic teacher—find themselves destitute, with little or no formal education, begging to survive, and often

swept into religious clashes. In 2006, there were 1.2 million *almajiri* in Kano State alone. Pervasive poverty is also another driver. In a country that officially earned approximately \$50 billion in revenue from its oil reserves in 2012,¹³ 70 percent of the northern population lives under the poverty line, and the mostly Muslim north has higher unemployment than the national average (see table).¹⁴

MITIGATING THE RADICALIZATION OF YOUTH AND ETHNO-RELIGIOUS TENSIONS

The Peace Club, a project of the Peace Initiative Network (PIN), was inaugurated in Kano on May 27, 2006—Children’s Day in Nigeria. The Club aims to promote tolerance, dialogue, and understanding through peace education and team sports among young people from diverse communities and backgrounds in northern Nigeria—Muslims and Christians, indigenes and settlers. The Club started with 50 members (30 boys and 20 girls) from 7 high schools in Kano. Currently, the Club has over 8,000 members from 60 high schools and colleges (with 1,625 graduates) in 4 northern states: Kano, Kaduna, Plateau, and Gombe.

The Club was designed to: 1) promote interaction between young people from disparate backgrounds to ease ethno-religious tensions; 2) strengthen a peaceful society in Nigeria; and 3) help members develop leadership, collaborative problem solving, and cross-cultural relationship-building skills.

Muslim and Christian youths from diverse ethnic groups are trained as peer mediators and life coaches to encourage values of tolerance and nonviolent conflict resolution. Drawing on models and best practices from Northern Ireland and other conflict-affected societies, the mediators, coaches, and, at times, respected

THE PEACE CLUB PROJECT

I learned to see things from [fellow Peace Club members'] point of view. I've made a whole lot of friends, but one—Dayo—she's from the western part of the country and I myself am from the northern part of the country. We started together, we joined Peace Club together. And I got to learn a whole lot about the people of the west, and she also learned a whole lot about people from the north. We're different, we're all living in the same country, but we have so many wonderful things to share.¹⁵

- Abdulmalik, 19

community leaders teach members to question ethnic stereotypes and prejudices—to think and act as global citizens. Through organized public lectures, interschool programs, and summer peace camps, the Club also promotes a constructive approach to inclusion and diversity by embracing religious, ethnic, gender, and linguistic differences. This emphasis is particularly important since most schools in Kano are separated by gender and ethnicity.

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Peace Club members meet once a week. The meetings usually start with a game of sport. When inequities arise during a game—such as when the ball is not passed to the younger players or the girls—the coach interrupts the match. The members then put their heads together to think about how to change the rules of the game to make it fairer. They can decide, for example, that a goal scored by a girl counts as double. This is how the members learn to help one another think outside the box and inclusively. The effect of this approach is impressive: the youths often assume the role of coach themselves.

In the early days of the Club, physical altercations periodically broke out among members from different backgrounds. But fights, too, raised important opportunities, such as how to deal with differences, intercultural prejudices, and diverse values. Today, every dispute and club activity ends with a group discussion about these topics. In other words, there would be no learning process without some conflict.

The life skills learned through the Club have empowered the young members, enhanced their psychosocial well-being, and increased their resiliency, self-

esteem, teamwork, respect, and connections to others. Attitudes of tolerance by Peace Club members towards other identity groups have become the norm. Yusuf Ibrahim, age 17, reflected this transformation during a project assessment: “Before attending this program, I used to hate people who are Christians. But now I have learned through Peace Club to love and appreciate them.”

Peace Club facilitators (trained instructors drawn from member schools, local nongovernmental organizations, and religious groups) work hard to build trust among members. They also independently plan activities, such as interfaith dialogues and town hall meetings in which parents, community leaders, and religious groups participate to build a sustainable peaceful coexistence among all groups. A measure of the project's impact is its influence on members' parents, many of whom initially did not want their children to participate. Acquaintances among parents, which had evaporated during decades of ethno-religious tensions, were revived as a result of Peace Club programs. Adults from different ethnic groups now invite each other to child naming ceremonies, weddings, and funerals, which was hitherto uncommon. Children who previously never would have played together now visit one another's homes regularly, reducing ethno-religious tensions and building community resilience to future conflict triggers.

DERADICALIZATION AND DISENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS ELSEWHERE

While the Peace Clubs have been successful at mitigating the emergence of ethno-religious animosity, they are insufficient, on their own, to counter the scale and scope of youth radicalization in northern Nigeria. A more comprehensive approach is needed. Lessons of deradicalization and disengagement programs undertaken by Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Indonesia, among other countries, provide insights into the re-

habilitation of individuals who are already under the influence of radical ideologies. By seeing radicalized youth as “mised” or victims rather than irredeemable miscreants, this approach undermines extremist views and disrupts the activities of those who promote violence. These programs expose radicalized Islamists’ flawed understanding of fundamental Islamic tenets by waging campaigns about shariah principles, and the true values of the Islamic faith, and the importance of tolerance. In Saudi Arabia, this is done through media, national campaigns of solidarity against terrorism, strengthening public education, the monitoring of preaching, national dialogue conventions, establishing standards for charities, and increased international cooperation. In Bangladesh, the government works through the country’s extensive network of nongovernmental organizations to ensure the program is grassroots-led and responsive to each community’s specific situation.¹⁶ Many countries also host interfaith dialogues—a framework in which policymakers, scholars, and religious leaders exchange views on religious, social, and cultural issues in the spirit of respect, mutual tolerance, and understanding.

“by seeing radicalized youth as ‘mised’ or victims rather than irredeemable miscreants, this approach undermines extremist views and disrupts the activities of those who promote violence”

For those already imprisoned due to extremist activities, the Saudi program has determined that only 10 percent are hardcore militants. The other 90 percent can be rehabilitated.¹⁷ For these individuals, the Saudi program provides intense religious reeducation, rehabilitation (fostering a socially secure future through job training and educational opportunities), and counseling. The program also places great emphasis on providing social support not only for those incarcerated, but also for their families who may be experiencing severe financial hardships due to the imprisonment of an income earner. Such social support also helps prevent the radicalization of family members. The Saudi government has established special correctional facilities that not only separate radical Islamist prisoners from other common criminals, but from one another so as to prevent prisons from becoming breeding grounds for terrorist networking.

Lessons from a review of 15 countries’ programs for already incarcerated extremists indicate that a mix of religious reeducation, vocational training, and credible interlocutors (clerics and former radicalized youth) who can relate to prisoners’ personal and psychological needs are essential. This psychological outreach is complemented by efforts to facilitate prisoners’ transition into social networks away from extremism and systematic fostering of long-term commitments toward family, community, and country to raise the personal costs of recidivism.¹⁸ This recognizes that in addition to the economic and ideological drivers, youths join radical groups for the sense of belonging they provide.

Saudi Arabia and Singapore’s models are both highly successful—and are well resourced. But programs, such as those in Indonesia and Bangladesh, can achieve success despite limited resources. The key is having the program respond to the local context. A reeducation and rehabilitation program will work only if a former radical can find a meaningful alternative social network. Family is usually key but so too is a supportive community and employment. The Saudi program found that maintaining the relationship between former radicals and their prison counselors helped reintegration after their release. Also important to consider is the environment into which former radicals will reintegrate. In Indonesia, conflicts were winding down, which helped former radicals transition peacefully into society. In Yemen, on the other hand, local conflicts were escalating when former radicals were reintegrated, thus radicalizing influences awaited them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Redressing violent extremism in northern Nigeria will require interventions at every stage of the radicalization spectrum, from the measured use of force, to proactive development investments to alleviate socioeconomic grievances, to countering extremist ideologies, to rehabilitating individuals who have been radicalized.

Smarter response from the security sector. Recognizing that the leaders of violent radical Islamist groups are a threat to security, government efforts to identify and apprehend these individuals and limit their destabilizing influence is warranted. However, while violent responses may temporarily quell insurgency, when done in an indiscriminate manner they also radicalize already at-risk youths and produce new offshoots of extremist groups. Nigeria’s security sector, thus, must reassess its

counterinsurgency strategy. Intelligence-driven operations require continuous engagement with the local population. To establish government credibility and trust among local communities needed to elicit this level of cooperation, prompt and thorough investigations must be conducted into allegations of arbitrary detention, use of torture, and extrajudicial killings by Nigeria's security forces.

The international community could provide guidance on best practices to Nigeria's security sector. International actors also have a role to play in interdicting external enablers—sources of funding, foreign fighters, jihadist propaganda, and training and the cross-fertilization of tactics from other radicalized groups. Combined with government efforts to develop credible ties with local communities, such initiatives will reduce levels of violence and slow youth recruitment.

“a reeducation and rehabilitation program will work only if a former radical can find a meaningful alternative social network”

Intensive investment in development in the north.

The vast majority of those in radical groups are merely followers or sympathizers motivated primarily by economic hardship. Many are from northern Nigeria's large population of destitute youths with no formal education nor economic opportunities who regularly witness recurring ethno-religious clashes. The government and civil society actors should concentrate more resources to address these drivers of radicalization. A demonstrated commitment to the drastic reduction of poverty and under-enrollment in public education is critical to eliminating violent radicalism. Empowering citizens to acquire basic education and vocational skills would prepare them to be functional and active members of society. Finding purpose within a community would prevent many youths from seeking identity through radical Islamist ideology.

Address endemic corruption and poor governance.

Radical organizations prey on disillusioned youth who feel violated by the culture of impunity and abuses of office by the political class. Widespread corruption is responsible for the absence of trust in the government and the general feeling of hopelessness in many northern communities. The potent combination of socioeconomic and political inequalities fosters violent expressions of radicalization in northern Nigeria. The Nigerian govern-

ment should collaborate more with religious leaders, traditional elders, and civil society actors already established in northern communities to improve oversight of and trust in the government. The Kano State government, which engages local nongovernmental organizations in monitoring and evaluation of state projects, provides an innovative model in this regard.

Provide a safe space for moderate voices to be heard. Preventive efforts to counter the appeal of radical ideologies among youth must also be expanded. The government should encourage and facilitate more public discourse and transformative dialogue between Muslims, Christians, and security sector leaders on the ground in northern Nigeria to foster interfaith harmony and develop mutual understanding. Small steps, such as the work of the Peace Clubs, have made dramatic improvements in the lives of the communities. By inviting moderate Muslims and Christians to participate in facilitated interfaith dialogues and town hall meetings as well as engaging youth in creative ways to confront stereotypes and biases, Peace Club communities are now open to discussions and public debates about ethno-religious divisions and the conflict in northern Nigeria. This needs to be scaled up to engage members of the military, local police, and community leaders. By fostering facilitated engagements away from the inflammatory messages of certain exploitative politicians and Islamist radicals, ethno-religiously mixed communities can find their own voice and power through dialogue. With more consistent support and protection from police and the security sector in general, such communities will become safe havens for moderation.

Reform of radicalized prisoners. For members of radical groups who have been incarcerated, systematic rehabilitation programs are needed so that they can play constructive roles in society. The government should emulate that which it can afford from the Saudi and Singaporean examples to reform radicalized fighters who have been incarcerated. These programs have shown that it is important to have an interlocutor or counselor for a radicalized prisoner—someone who can provide constant dialogue and understanding, who can lead him through religious reeducation and counseling—so that he may come to understand his misinterpretations of Islam and how his actions run counter to Islamic tenets. Such a counselor should be a respected figure such as a moderate cleric or a reformed radical leader. Meanwhile, care must be exercised to ensure that prisons do not become recruiting grounds for extremists.

A commonality among successful reform programs is vocational training and preparing former insurgents for a return to society with skills to create a productive livelihood. Similarly, setting up a social network away from radicalizing influences is key to keeping former insurgents meaningfully engaged in community and family life, making it harder for an individual to revert.

Implementation of many of these activities would not have to rely on the government. Nigeria has a rich civil society through which deradicalization and disengagement programs could be organized. The international community could provide funding to these nongovernmental programs as well as technical experience.

Reform of communities. No matter what is done for former insurgents, if radicalizing influences are still present when they are released back into their communities there will be a higher chance of recidivism. For the community's sake alone, it is much better to engage each individual and provide a sense of belonging so as to prevent radicalization in the first place. Thus, the government should pilot programs to change the collective mindset away from radicalization—from national campaigns of solidarity against terrorism, to interfaith tolerance curricula for public education, to holding national dialogue conventions.

NOTES

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