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COMMUNITY-BASED SECURITY AND COUNTERINSURGENCY IN NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA: A CHRISTIAN ETHICAL EVALUATION OF THE CIVILIAN JOINT TASK FORCE (CJTF) IN COUNTERING BOKO HARAM

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ABSTRACT
The Boko Haram insurgency has significantly transformed patterns of insecurity and community responses in Northeastern Nigeria, particularly in Borno State, where state security capacity was initially overwhelmed by sustained attacks on civilian populations. The emergence of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) represents a community-based response that has supported counterinsurgency through local intelligence, surveillance, and identification of suspected insurgents. This study examines the emergence, security contributions, and ethical challenges of the CJTF, with particular attention to its implications for community-based security and the protection of human dignity. It adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary sources, including books, journal articles, policy reports, and theological texts, and is anchored in Christian Just War Theory and broader Christian ethical perspectives on proportionality, legitimate force, and the protection of non-combatants. The study finds that the CJTF has contributed significantly to local intelligence gathering, community protection, and military counterinsurgency efforts. However, its informal structure and limited institutional accountability have also created risks of misidentification, excessive use of force, and violations of due process. These challenges reveal a persistent ethical tension between community self-defence and the preservation of human dignity. The study concludes that community-based security arrangements such as the CJTF can make meaningful contributions to counterinsurgency when properly regulated, but may undermine justice when they operate without adequate oversight. It therefore recommends stronger institutional integration, ethical and human rights training, and effective accountability mechanisms.

Keywords: Boko Haram insurgency; Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF); community-based security; counterinsurgency; Christian ethics; Just War Theory; human dignity; non-state security actors.

Introduction

The Boko Haram insurgency in Northeastern Nigeria has reshaped security governance in ways that extend beyond conventional military responses, drawing local communities into active participation in counterinsurgency operations. In several affected states such as Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, the rise of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) emerged as a grassroots reaction to sustained violence, mass displacement, and weakened state presence. The insurgency itself has been widely documented as a complex blend of ideological extremism, socio-economic marginalisation, and governance failure (Onuoha, 2014; Thurston, 2017). Within this environment, community actors assumed security roles that blur the boundary between civilian life and armed engagement, raising questions about legitimacy, protection, and moral responsibility.

The ideal framework of security governance within a constitutional state assumes that the monopoly of force remains with formal security institutions operating under legal oversight and accountability. In contrast, the reality in Northeastern Nigeria reflects a fragmented security landscape where state capacity was initially insufficient to protect vulnerable populations from Boko Haram attacks, kidnappings, and territorial occupation. Communities in Maiduguri and surrounding areas resorted to self-organisation, leading to the formation of the CJTF as an auxiliary force supporting military operations (International Crisis Group, 2016). This shift produced consequences that include improved intelligence gathering and territorial recovery, alongside concerns about vigilantism, reprisals, and uneven adherence to due process.

Christian ethical thought offers a moral lens for assessing such developments, particularly through traditions that emphasise human dignity, restraint in the use of force, and the pursuit of peace even in contexts of violence. Christian moral reasoning does not dismiss self-defence, yet it insists that coercive action must remain proportionate and oriented toward the protection of life rather than retaliation or dehumanisation (Hauerwas, 2010; Augustine of Hippo, trans. 2006). The involvement of largely civilian and faith-influenced communities in armed counterinsurgency raises ethical tensions, especially when the boundaries between protection and participation in violence become blurred. These tensions invite closer examination of whether the CJTF aligns with or departs from core Christian ethical commitments in conflict situations.

This study engages the CJTF phenomenon as both a security innovation and a moral problem. It explores the gap between state-centred security ideals and community-driven realities shaped by survival imperatives under insurgent threat. The discussion also considers how Christian ethical frameworks can interpret the actions of civilians who become embedded in counterinsurgency operations, particularly in contexts where formal protection systems collapse or become overstretched. Attention is given to the implications of such arrangements for justice, accountability, and the sanctity of human life within protracted internal conflict.

Conceptual Clarifications

Community-Based Security: Community-based security refers to security arrangements in which local populations participate actively in preventing, detecting, and responding to threats within their environment, often in collaboration with or parallel to formal state institutions. The concept rests on the assumption that security is not solely a state monopoly but a shared responsibility shaped by lived realities of vulnerability and trust deficits. In contexts where state security presence is weak or delayed, community actors become informal yet influential nodes of surveillance and protection. Onuoha describes such formations in Nigeria's conflict zones as "grassroots survival mechanisms" that emerge where institutional protection is inconsistent (162). In practice, this model produces both resilience and ethical uncertainty, since informal security

actors often operate without codified accountability structures, leading to blurred lines between protection and coercion.

Critical reflection on community-based security reveals a tension between necessity and regulation. The ideal framework assumes structured cooperation with state authorities, yet the reality in insurgency-affected regions often involves spontaneous mobilisation shaped by fear and urgency. In Northeastern Nigeria, community vigilance systems evolved not from policy design but from repeated exposure to violence and state insufficiency. This gap generates consequences that include improved local intelligence gathering as well as the risk of mistaken identity and collective punishment. The absence of formal oversight weakens procedural safeguards that ordinarily protect non-combatants under established security doctrine.

Counterinsurgency in Nigeria

Counterinsurgency in Nigeria refers to coordinated military, political, and socio-economic strategies aimed at dismantling insurgent networks, restoring state authority, and stabilising affected populations. The Boko Haram conflict provides a central case where counterinsurgency operations combine kinetic military campaigns with civilian engagement and intelligence-driven interventions. Thurston notes that the Nigerian counterinsurgency experience is shaped by "shifting alliances, fragmented authority, and uneven state capacity" (Thurston 214). These conditions complicate standard military doctrine, as insurgents operate within civilian populations, making distinction between combatants and non-combatants increasingly difficult.

The theoretical ideal of counterinsurgency assumes clear coordination between military force and civilian governance structures aimed at winning both territorial control and public trust. The Nigerian experience departs from this model due to delayed responses, corruption allegations, and limited trust between citizens and security agencies. In several northeastern communities, reliance on local vigilante groups became a pragmatic extension of counterinsurgency strategy rather than a formally integrated component. This adaptation produces measurable gains in territorial recovery while also introducing ethical dilemmas concerning proportionality, accountability, and civilian exposure to retaliatory violence.

Christian Ethical Frameworks in Security Analysis

Christian ethical engagement with security issues emerges from long-standing theological reflections on violence, justice, and the preservation of human dignity in conditions of conflict. Classical traditions such as Just War Theory, Augustinian realism, and Christian pacifism offer differing moral responses to the use of force, yet they converge on the belief that violence cannot be morally neutral. Augustine's political theology allows coercive force only under constrained moral conditions, where the intention is ordered toward peace rather than domination or revenge (Augustine 112). This orientation places emphasis on moral intention and restraint rather than battlefield effectiveness, insisting that security actions must be evaluated through ethical boundaries rather than strategic success alone.

Just War reasoning further develops these constraints through criteria such as legitimate authority, proportionality, and discrimination between combatants and non-combatants. These criteria function as moral filters intended to prevent the normalisation of violence as an everyday instrument of governance. In conflict environments such as Northeastern Nigeria, where insurgency and civilian insecurity overlap, these principles become difficult to apply with clarity. Armed responses that involve civilians, such as auxiliary security formations, test the limits of moral proportionality and raise questions about whether emergency conditions can justify expanded participation in coercive force.

Modern Christian pacifist thought introduces a more critical stance, questioning whether violence can ever serve as a faithful expression of Christian discipleship. Hauerwas maintains that Christian moral identity loses coherence when violence becomes accepted as a routine response to insecurity, arguing that the church is called to embody an alternative social ethic that resists coercive logic (Hauerwas 67). This perspective complicates interpretations of community-based armed groups, since moral legitimacy cannot be reduced to the urgency of survival or the absence of state protection. Ethical judgement must also consider the spiritual and social consequences of participation in violence, especially its effects on communal trust and moral formation.

Within the context of the Civilian Joint Task Force, Christian ethical frameworks generate a persistent tension between the protection of vulnerable lives and the risk of moral compromise through participation in coercive security practices. Civilian involvement in counterinsurgency may be interpreted as an act of neighbourly protection, yet it also risks eroding distinctions between defence and retaliation. The moral question extends beyond immediate security outcomes to the longer trajectory of peacebuilding, reconciliation, and human dignity. Northeastern Nigeria therefore becomes a critical setting for examining how Christian ethics negotiates the fragile boundary between necessary protection and the moral costs of violence.

Historical Context of Boko Haram Insurgency in Northeastern Nigeria

The Boko Haram insurgency in Northeastern Nigeria emerged from a complex interplay of religious radicalism, socio-economic deprivation, and long-standing governance deficits that predate its violent escalation in 2009. The group, formally known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, initially developed as a religious movement in Maiduguri under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf, whose teachings attracted young people disillusioned with poverty, corruption, and state neglect. Thurston describes the early movement as one that "combined Salafi critique with local grievances against political elites" (Thurston 43), a combination that allowed it to gain traction among marginalised youth in urban and rural Northeastern communities.

The turning point in the insurgency occurred in 2009 following a violent confrontation between Boko Haram members and Nigerian security forces, resulting in the death of Mohammed Yusuf and hundreds of followers. This event marked a transition from a largely ideological movement into a militant organisation committed to armed rebellion against the Nigerian state. Onuoha observes that the aftermath of Yusuf's death "created a cycle of revenge and radicalisation that reshaped the group's operational identity" (Onuoha 167). The collapse of dialogue between the state and the movement contributed to the expansion of violence, including targeted assassinations, prison breaks, and attacks on public institutions.

The geographical spread of Boko Haram's activities intensified between 2010 and 2015, with Borno State becoming the epicentre of insurgent control. Towns such as Gwoza, Bama, and parts of Maiduguri experienced periods of occupation, during which the group imposed strict governance structures based on its interpretation of Islamic law. International Crisis Group notes that Boko Haram's territorial control at its peak represented "a parallel authority challenging the legitimacy of the Nigerian state in the Lake Chad region" (International Crisis Group 14). Civilian populations were subjected to displacement, forced recruitment, and widespread insecurity, creating one of the largest internal displacement crises in Africa.

The socio-political environment that enabled the insurgency also reflects deeper structural issues, including unemployment, weak educational infrastructure, and distrust between citizens and state institutions. These conditions created fertile ground for recruitment, particularly among young men with limited economic opportunities. Thurston argues that the movement's growth

cannot be separated from "the structural inequalities embedded in Northern Nigerian society" (Thurston 91). In many communities, the absence of effective governance blurred distinctions between ideological sympathy, coerced participation, and survival strategies under insurgent rule.

The sustained violence produced long-term consequences that extend beyond military engagement, affecting social cohesion, religious relations, and everyday life in affected regions. Communities were forced to adapt to repeated cycles of attack and displacement, while state responses fluctuated between forceful military operations and limited humanitarian interventions. The historical trajectory of Boko Haram therefore reflects not only the evolution of an armed group but also the fragility of state authority and the vulnerability of civilian populations within contested spaces of governance.

Emergence and Operational Structure of the CJTF

The Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) emerged in 2013 in Maiduguri, Borno State, as an improvised community response to escalating Boko Haram attacks that had overwhelmed both local policing structures and military intelligence capacity. Its formation was not the product of formal state policy but a spontaneous mobilisation driven by neighbourhood survival instincts after repeated incursions, kidnappings, and killings. Pérouse de Montclos notes that the CJTF "originated as a neighbourhood watch system that gradually acquired paramilitary characteristics in response to insecurity" (Pérouse de Montclos 118). Early members relied on local knowledge, informal networks, and physical identification methods such as facial recognition and linguistic cues to distinguish suspected insurgents from civilians.

The operational structure of the CJTF evolved rapidly from loosely organised street patrols into a semi-formal auxiliary force integrated into Nigerian military operations in the Northeast. Its recruitment patterns were largely shaped by localised networks of trust, with membership drawn predominantly from unemployed youth, hunters, and community volunteers familiar with the local terrain and social dynamics. Bamidele traces a similar trajectory, noting that the CJTF emerged from a spontaneous mobilisation of volunteers in Maiduguri and gradually developed into a formally recognised auxiliary force positioned between civilian community structures and the command structures of the Nigerian military (171–79). Over time, coordination with the Nigerian Army became increasingly structured, particularly in intelligence gathering, checkpoint operations, and search-and-identification missions in areas recovered from insurgent control.

Organisationally, the CJTF developed internal divisions that mirrored functional security tasks rather than rigid bureaucratic hierarchies. Units were often assigned to specific neighbourhoods or strategic locations such as checkpoints, markets, and transit routes. Leadership structures varied across locations, with some commanders appointed through community consensus while others emerged through military recognition or operational experience. Williams and Okereke describe the CJTF as "a decentralised network whose authority derives from local legitimacy and battlefield cooperation rather than statutory recognition" (Williams and Okereke 209). This decentralisation created flexibility in operations but also produced inconsistencies in discipline and accountability.

The integration of the CJTF into broader counterinsurgency efforts introduced both tactical advantages and operational risks. Local members provided critical intelligence that assisted in the identification of Boko Haram suspects and recovery of occupied territories, particularly during military offensives in Borno State between 2014 and 2016. However, the absence of formal training in human rights law, arrest procedures, and use-of-force protocols contributed to incidents of abuse and misidentification. Pérouse de Montclos notes that the CJTF's reliance on community intelligence "sometimes led to accusations of profiling and extrajudicial punishment" (Pérouse de

Montclos 131). These tensions reflect the fragile balance between community defence and the institutional requirements of lawful security practice.

Community Participation in Security Governance

Community participation in security governance in Northeastern Nigeria reflects a gradual shift from exclusive state control of security to a more dispersed model shaped by necessity, local knowledge, and survival pressures. The collapse of trust in formal security institutions during peak Boko Haram violence created conditions where communities assumed active roles in surveillance, intelligence gathering, and suspect identification. Mohammed and Ibrahim describe this shift as a "bottom-up securitisation process driven by civilian exposure to persistent insecurity" (Mohammed and Ibrahim 74). In practical terms, markets, motor parks, and neighbourhood associations became informal security nodes where information about suspected insurgent activity was circulated and acted upon.

The structure of community participation often operates through pre-existing social networks such as youth associations, vigilante groups, religious communities, and traditional leadership institutions. These structures provide legitimacy and coordination mechanisms that formal institutions sometimes lack in remote or conflict-affected areas. Adeyemi and Fatile observe that community security arrangements in Nigeria "derive authority from proximity, familiarity, and shared vulnerability rather than statutory recognition" (63). This proximity enables rapid identification of unfamiliar individuals, though it also increases the risk of misclassification based on ethnicity, dress, or perceived behavioural markers.

Interaction between community actors and formal security agencies has produced a hybrid governance arrangement in which intelligence flows upward from civilians to military and police units. In several northeastern towns, community members assist in checkpoint operations, guide military patrols through difficult terrain, and provide early warnings of suspicious movements. Campbell notes that such arrangements "expand the intelligence reach of the state while simultaneously reshaping the boundaries of civilian participation in warfighting" (Campbell 88). The effectiveness of this collaboration depends heavily on mutual trust, which remains uneven due to historical grievances and incidents of abuse.

Tensions within community participation emerge when security responsibilities overlap with informal justice practices. Some community actors engage in detention, interrogation, or punishment of suspected insurgents without formal legal authority. Such practices raise concerns about accountability and due process, especially in environments where identification errors can have fatal consequences. Onapajo and Uzodike argue that civilian participation in counterinsurgency "creates a grey zone where legitimacy is socially constructed rather than legally guaranteed" (119). This grey zone complicates efforts to distinguish between lawful community defence and vigilantism.

The sustainability of community participation in security governance remains uncertain in the absence of clear institutional frameworks and legal protections. While local engagement has contributed to territorial recovery and improved intelligence in insurgency-affected regions, long-term reliance on informal security structures risks entrenching parallel systems of authority. The experience of Northeastern Nigeria demonstrates that community participation is neither purely beneficial nor inherently problematic; its outcomes depend on regulation, oversight, and the ethical orientation of actors involved.

Ethical Dimensions of Civilian Involvement in Armed Conflict

Civilian participation in armed conflict introduces a complex ethical terrain where survival imperatives, moral responsibility, and questions of legitimate violence intersect. In Northeastern

Nigeria, the activities of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) place ordinary citizens in direct engagement with counterinsurgency operations against Boko Haram, raising difficult moral questions about the boundaries between defence and participation in violence. Ethical analysis of such involvement requires attention not only to security outcomes but also to the moral costs attached to the transformation of civilians into auxiliary security actors. Christian ethical traditions, particularly Just War reasoning, provide one of the most sustained frameworks for interrogating these tensions in contexts of insecurity and political breakdown.

Just War Thought and the Moral Limits of Self-Defence in Non-State Security

Christian Just War tradition provides a structured moral framework for evaluating the legitimacy of force, particularly in situations where political order is under severe strain. Emerging from Augustine's reflections and subsequently developed through medieval and contemporary Christian ethics, the tradition maintains that the use of violence cannot be morally neutral and must satisfy conditions such as legitimate authority, just cause, right intention, proportionality, and discrimination between combatants and non-combatants. Augustine's insistence that coercive force is defensible only when directed towards the restoration of peace rather than vengeance establishes a demanding ethical standard for the use of violence (112). This principle provides an important basis for assessing the moral legitimacy of community-based security actors such as the CJTF.

Within this framework, self-defence occupies a carefully limited moral space rather than constituting an unrestricted right. The protection of innocent life against unjust aggression may be morally permissible, but such permission does not remove the obligation to exercise restraint. Hauerwas challenges approaches that treat violence merely as a practical instrument of security, arguing that Christian discipleship requires continued fidelity to peace even in circumstances of threat (67). His position reinforces the distinction between the necessity of defending vulnerable communities and the moral obligation to ensure that defensive action does not become excessive or retaliatory. Thus, a defensive act may initially satisfy the requirements of Just War reasoning while gradually departing from them when restraint and accountability are abandoned.

The experience of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) in Northeastern Nigeria places this ethical framework against the realities of prolonged insecurity and institutional fragility. Communities in Maiduguri mobilised after years of Boko Haram attacks involving mass killings, forced recruitment of children, and the destruction of homes, often when military responses were delayed or inadequate. Pérouse de Montclos describes this mobilisation as a response to necessity rather than formal institutional authorisation (121). This context helps explain why local youths relied on their knowledge of neighbourhoods and community networks to identify suspected insurgents. Agbiboa similarly associates civilian security participation with declining confidence in state policing, which encouraged communities to develop self-policing arrangements operating within an uncertain legal environment (214). Williams and Okereke place formations such as the CJTF within broader institutional grey zones, where fragmented authority creates persistent difficulties concerning accountability and oversight (212). These observations establish the structural conditions within which the CJTF's moral and legal ambiguity developed.

The ethical difficulty becomes more pronounced when protective action extends into coercive practices without adequate oversight. Reports from Bama and Konduga describe cases in which individuals were assaulted or detained on the basis of appearance, dialect, or neighbourhood suspicion, with some subsequently cleared of links to insurgency. Such practices demonstrate how community-based identification mechanisms can become vulnerable to error when fear and uncertainty shape judgement. Campbell argues that civilian participation in security can expand

the operational reach of formal security institutions while simultaneously weakening procedural safeguards (90). This observation is significant because the effectiveness gained through local knowledge can come at the cost of due process when community actors exercise coercive authority without adequate institutional controls. Eke similarly observes that communities may substitute immediate collective judgement for formal legal procedures when state policing is perceived as distant, ineffective, or compromised (141). The ethical concern, therefore, lies not in community participation itself but in the displacement of lawful procedures by unregulated forms of collective judgement.

Onapajo and Uzodike further caution that prolonged civilian involvement in counterinsurgency can gradually shift protective activities towards informal coercive practices operating beyond effective legal restraint (123). Their argument draws attention to the danger that measures initially justified as community protection may acquire punitive characteristics over time. Akinseye-George extends this concern by arguing that when informal security actors exercise coercive authority without adequate oversight, justice can become personalised and reactive, thereby weakening institutional accountability (77). This perspective demonstrates that the problem extends beyond individual misconduct to the broader institutional consequences of unregulated security practices. Falana likewise argues that informal security violence, even when motivated by genuine survival needs, can undermine constitutional protections and weaken public confidence in formal justice institutions (92). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the moral legitimacy of community self-defence cannot be separated from the legal and institutional mechanisms through which coercive power is exercised.

Christian ethical reflection therefore sharpens rather than resolves the tension between protection and restraint. Iroegbu's philosophy of personhood emphasises that actions which diminish the worth of the human person also damage the moral integrity of the wider community (158). Applied to the CJTF, this principle requires attention not only to the security benefits produced by civilian participation but also to the treatment of suspected insurgents and other vulnerable persons. It follows that the moral evaluation of the CJTF cannot rest solely on its contribution to counterinsurgency effectiveness. Its legitimacy must also be judged by whether its practices consistently preserve human dignity, proportionality, justice, and accountability. The CJTF experience consequently exposes a central dilemma for Christian ethics: measures undertaken to protect communities may gradually develop into practices that undermine the very dignity, justice, and restraint they were intended to defend.

Protection of Human Dignity and Non-Combatants

Human dignity holds a foundational place in Christian ethical reflection on violence, particularly in situations where armed conflict blurs the distinction between combatants and civilians. Rooted in the doctrine of the imago Dei, this principle holds that every person possesses inherent worth that cannot be suspended on the basis of suspicion, fear, or collective accusation. Augustine's moral reasoning likewise calls for restraint in warfare to prevent non-combatants from being drawn into cycles of punishment and retaliation (118). This principle is especially significant in the context of the Boko Haram insurgency, where insurgents deliberate use of civilian environments has complicated the distinction between combatants and non-combatants. The ethical challenge, therefore, is to protect communities from armed violence without allowing uncertainty about identity to weaken the moral obligation to protect innocent life.

The operational reality in Borno State illustrates the difficulty of maintaining this distinction. Boko Haram's presence within civilian settlements in Maiduguri, Konduga, and communities around Damboa encouraged security actors to rely on local identification networks,

including CJTF surveillance and community intelligence. Such arrangements could improve the speed and effectiveness of threat detection, but they also created opportunities for error when identification depended on informal indicators such as dialect, dress, unfamiliarity, or lack of local recognition. Pérouse de Montclos observes that community-based identification mechanisms can rely on informal criteria that produce both successful detection and serious errors (129). This observation is significant because the same local knowledge that strengthens community-based security can also become a source of misidentification when suspicion replaces reliable evidence. Reports from areas such as Gamboru and Mafa of displaced persons being detained or assaulted following mistaken identification further demonstrate the human consequences of such failures.

The protection of non-combatants therefore cannot be treated as a secondary consideration in the assessment of CJTF activities. Within Christian ethics, the moral status of civilians does not depend on the efficiency of security operations or the intensity of the threat confronting a community. Even where security actors face genuine difficulties in distinguishing insurgents from civilians, the obligation to exercise restraint remains. The CJTF's reliance on community-based intelligence consequently presents a double-edged reality: local familiarity can enhance protection, but it can also create conditions in which assumptions about identity become grounds for coercive action. The ethical issue is not simply whether the CJTF successfully identified insurgents, but whether its identification practices provided sufficient safeguards against wrongful detention, assault, and other forms of harm.

This concern becomes particularly important when suspected collaborators are subjected to punishment without judicial verification. Such practices undermine the distinction between suspicion and guilt and risk transferring the authority to determine culpability from established legal institutions to informal security actors. In this respect, the Christian principle of human dignity provides a basis for evaluating not only the intentions behind CJTF operations but also the treatment of persons subjected to suspicion. The protection of civilians requires procedures capable of limiting arbitrary coercion, particularly in circumstances where fear, trauma, and uncertainty can influence community judgement.

The ethical dilemma in Northeastern Nigeria therefore extends beyond operational effectiveness to the preservation of moral responsibility within communities affected by prolonged violence. The CJTF's contributions to intelligence gathering, territorial recovery, and community protection demonstrate the potential value of local participation in counterinsurgency. At the same time, reported cases of misidentification and excessive force reveal the vulnerability of human dignity where informal security arrangements operate without adequate procedural safeguards. Odinkalu argues that security arrangements that bypass due process can create conditions in which suspicion displaces evidence and fear weakens the foundations of justice (88). This observation reinforces the central argument of this section: the legitimacy of community-based security cannot be measured solely by the threats it neutralises, but also by the extent to which it protects the dignity and rights of those whom it is established to defend.

Contributions of CJTF to Counterinsurgency Efforts

The Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) became an important auxiliary structure in Nigeria's counterinsurgency architecture, especially at the height of Boko Haram territorial expansion between 2013 and 2016. Their intimate knowledge of local terrain, language patterns, and community networks significantly improved intelligence gathering for the Nigerian military in Borno State. In Maiduguri, CJTF members supported house-to-house identification exercises that assisted in reclaiming neighbourhoods such as Gwange and Bulumkutu from insurgent influence. Pérouse de Montclos notes that civilian vigilante mobilisation "provided critical local intelligence

that formal security agencies lacked during peak insurgency operations" (121). Fawole similarly observes that community-based security actors often become "force multipliers in environments where state capacity is overstretched" (66). These contributions demonstrate how proximity to affected populations can translate into operational advantage during asymmetric warfare.

Operational collaboration between CJTF and the Nigerian military also improved early warning systems in rural corridors linking Maiduguri to Damboa and Bama. Informal checkpoints and night patrols helped disrupt insurgent movement, particularly during periods when Boko Haram relied on ambush tactics and disguised infiltration. Reports from local communities indicate that CJTF intelligence assisted in identifying insurgent hideouts in forested border areas near Sambisa. Campbell argues that civilian participation in such contexts "extends the intelligence reach of the state into otherwise inaccessible social spaces" (90). The effectiveness of these contributions, however, depended heavily on trust between military commanders and local actors, which fluctuated across different operational zones.

Community legitimacy played a central role in sustaining CJTF operations, particularly in areas where state institutions were perceived as absent or ineffective. In Konduga and Mafa, local populations often supported CJTF patrols because they provided immediate responses to threats that formal security agencies could not always address promptly. This pattern echoes Aina's broader argument that non-state security initiatives gain ground where the state's capacity to address existential threats falls short, leaving a security vacuum that communities fill through informal coercive means (76). This shared sense of vulnerability strengthened cooperation but also blurred the boundary between civilian protection and informal policing authority. The CJTF thus became embedded in the everyday governance of insecurity rather than functioning merely as a temporary emergency response.

Despite these contributions, CJTF operations also exposed structural weaknesses in Nigeria's security governance framework. The absence of formal integration policies, standardized training, and accountability mechanisms created inconsistencies in operational conduct across different local units. These conditions set the stage for ethical ambiguity, especially when intelligence gathering merged with coercive enforcement practices. Suberu argues that hybrid security arrangements in Nigeria often reflect "institutional improvisation in the absence of coherent reform" (141). This improvisational character remains central to understanding both the effectiveness and fragility of CJTF contributions.

Risks, Abuses, and Ethical Tensions in CJTF Operations

CJTF operations in Northeastern Nigeria have been accompanied by significant ethical risks arising from the absence of formal oversight and uneven application of coercive authority. In Maiduguri and surrounding towns such as Bama and Gamboru, reports emerged of individuals being detained or assaulted based on suspicion rather than verified evidence. These actions often occurred during peak insurgency periods when fear and uncertainty shaped community responses to perceived threats. Onapajo and Uzodike note that civilian counterinsurgency actors "risk transforming protective violence into informal systems of coercion without legal restraint" (123). Chidi Odinkalu similarly warns that informal security practices can produce "parallel systems of justice that operate outside constitutional guarantees" (88). Such conditions create ethical instability where protective intent becomes difficult to separate from punitive excess.

Misidentification remains one of the most persistent risks associated with CJTF activities. Internally displaced persons returning to communities after military clearance have, in some cases, been mistakenly identified as insurgent collaborators due to unfamiliarity with local dialects or lack of recognition by vigilante members. In Konduga and Mafa, such cases reportedly led to

temporary detention and physical abuse before clarification was established. Pérouse de Montclos observes that community-based identification systems "inevitably generate errors when fear becomes a primary lens of judgement" (129). These errors raise Christian ethical concerns about the violation of innocence, particularly within a moral framework that prioritises the protection of non-combatants under all conditions.

Ethical tension also emerges from the informal disciplinary practices adopted by some CJTF units. During retaliatory phases following Boko Haram attacks, certain members engaged in punitive actions that extended beyond immediate self-defence. In Bama, local accounts describe situations where suspected collaborators were subjected to collective punishment without due process. Yemi Akinseye-George argues that "when informal actors exercise coercive power without legal constraint, justice becomes vulnerable to emotional and retaliatory distortion" (77). These patterns reveal how prolonged insecurity can normalise practices that conflict with both legal standards and Christian moral expectations of proportionality and restraint.

Community legitimacy played a central role in sustaining CJTF operations, particularly in areas where state institutions were perceived as absent or ineffective. In Konduga and Mafa, local populations often supported CJTF patrols because they provided immediate responses to threats that formal security agencies could not always address promptly. This pattern echoes Aina's broader argument that non-state security initiatives gain ground where the state's capacity to address existential threats falls short, leaving a security vacuum that communities fill through informal coercive means (76). This shared sense of vulnerability strengthened cooperation but also blurred the boundary between civilian protection and informal policing authority. The CJTF thus became embedded in the everyday governance of insecurity rather than functioning merely as a temporary emergency response.

Theological and Ethical Evaluation of CJTF Practices

Christian ethical evaluation of CJTF practices requires moving beyond the question of whether the formation contributed to counterinsurgency to consider whether its methods can be morally justified within competing Christian approaches to violence. Just War thought permits the use of force under carefully defined conditions, whereas Christian pacifism questions whether participation in coercive violence can be reconciled with the character and witness of Christian discipleship. The CJTF therefore provides a useful case for examining the tension between the moral responsibility to protect vulnerable communities and the Christian commitment to restraint, peace, and human dignity. Augustine's moral vision provides an important starting point by maintaining that even necessary force must remain directed towards peace and constrained by concern for innocent life and justice (118). This framework permits the legitimacy of defensive action to be recognised without treating security effectiveness as sufficient justification for every method employed.

Just War reasoning is particularly relevant to the CJTF because its emergence can be understood partly as a response to the failure of formal security institutions to provide adequate protection. From this perspective, community mobilisation against Boko Haram may possess a morally defensible protective intention, particularly where civilians faced sustained and immediate threats. However, the moral legitimacy of such action depends on more than the existence of a just cause. Proportionality, discrimination, accountability, and restraint remain essential considerations. The CJTF's involvement in identifying suspected insurgents, conducting patrols, and supporting military operations can therefore be ethically defensible where these activities are directed towards protecting civilians and responding proportionately to genuine threats. The

difficulty arises when protective authority expands into detention, punishment, or violence without adequate procedural safeguards.

The theological stakes become sharper when Just War reasoning is weighed directly against the Christian pacifist tradition. Yoder argues that Jesus resisted the temptation to pursue social responsibility through violent means, even in pursuit of a seemingly justified cause, and that Christian discipleship consequently requires believers to renounce violence rather than claim it as a legitimate moral instrument (96). Ramsey, writing from within the Just War tradition, takes a different position, deriving from the Christian obligation of neighbour-love a set of constraints, including discrimination between combatants and non-combatants and proportionality in the use of force, that permit defensive violence only within strict moral limits (34–59). This disagreement is not merely theoretical when applied to the CJTF. A pacifist interpretation would regard civilian participation in coercive security as incompatible with Christian witness regardless of its protective intention, whereas a Just War interpretation might regard the CJTF's initial mobilisation as defensible while condemning its subsequent drift into punitive or excessive practices as a departure from the restraints that initially gave defensive action its moral legitimacy.

This distinction allows the CJTF to be evaluated without reducing Christian ethics to a single theological verdict. Just War thought provides conditional grounds for community defence while imposing demanding restrictions on how force may be exercised. Christian pacifism, in contrast, places greater emphasis on the dangers of incorporating violence into the moral practices of a Christian community. The disagreement therefore shifts the ethical question from whether violence can ever be justified to the broader question of what sustained participation in coercive security does to the moral identity of the community. In the CJTF context, this concern is particularly relevant because prolonged exposure to violence may normalise suspicion, retaliation, and coercion, even where the original purpose of mobilisation was protection.

African Christian ethical perspectives further deepen this evaluation by locating human dignity within the relational structure of community life. Iroegbu's personalist ethics emphasises that the worth of the individual is inseparable from the moral integrity of the community itself (162). Applied to the CJTF, this perspective suggests that security gains cannot be evaluated independently of how suspected insurgents, civilians, and other vulnerable persons are treated. Where communities such as Dikwa and Ngala have experienced both improved protection and allegations of excessive force, ethical assessment must account for these realities simultaneously. A security arrangement that protects some members of a community while exposing others to arbitrary coercion creates a moral contradiction that cannot be resolved through operational effectiveness alone.

The central ethical question, therefore, is not simply whether the CJTF was justified in responding to Boko Haram, but under what conditions community-based defensive action remains morally legitimate. Nnamani's observation that security without moral accountability can produce stability at the expense of justice (112) reinforces the need to distinguish legitimate protection from unregulated coercion. The CJTF may be regarded as morally defensible to the extent that its activities are directed towards protecting vulnerable communities, proportionate to genuine threats, and subject to meaningful accountability. Where these conditions disappear, however, the justification for community self-defence becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. The theological evaluation consequently supports a conditional position: Christian ethics can recognise the moral urgency of protecting communities under attack, but neither Just War reasoning nor Christian pacifism provides a basis for treating unrestrained violence as an acceptable or permanent form of security governance.

Policy Implications for Faith-Based and Community Security Models

The experience of the CJTF offers significant lessons for policy development concerning community-based and faith-informed security structures in Nigeria. One of the most pressing implications involves the need for formal integration frameworks that define roles, limits, and accountability mechanisms for civilian security actors. The absence of such frameworks in Borno State contributed to inconsistencies in conduct and blurred lines between lawful defence and informal coercion. Isike argues that "hybrid security arrangements require institutional regulation to prevent the emergence of parallel coercive systems" (97). Without such regulation, community security initiatives risk drifting into uncoordinated and ethically unstable practices.

Faith-based organisations also occupy a potential role in shaping ethical norms within community security environments. Churches in Northeastern Nigeria, particularly in Maiduguri and Yola, provided humanitarian assistance and moral support during periods of displacement, but their engagement with security ethics remains limited. Christian ethical teaching could contribute to training programmes that emphasise dignity, restraint, and non-retaliatory protection of civilians. Justin Ukpong emphasises that Christian social ethics must remain attentive to "public structures of justice and the moral formation of communities under pressure" (83). Embedding such perspectives within community security initiatives could help reduce tendencies toward retaliatory violence.

Policy responses must also address training deficits that affect non-state security actors. CJTF members often operated without formal instruction in human rights law, conflict de-escalation, or rules of engagement, contributing to ethical inconsistencies in field operations. In areas such as Bama and Mafa, these gaps became evident during detention practices and identification procedures. Campbell notes that effective counterinsurgency requires "alignment between local participation and institutional accountability structures" (90). Strengthening training and oversight mechanisms would reduce the likelihood of abuses while preserving the operational advantages of community participation.

Long-term policy thinking must also confront the moral consequences of embedding violence within community life. While CJTF contributed significantly to counterinsurgency success, its experience demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining ethical clarity in informal security systems. Suberu argues that "security reforms must reconcile effectiveness with legitimacy to prevent institutional erosion over time" (2019, 141). Faith-based and community security models, therefore, require careful structuring to ensure that protection of life does not inadvertently erode the moral and legal foundations of justice within affected societies.

Recommendations

1. Government security agencies should establish a clear legal and operational framework for the CJTF that defines its mandate, limits of engagement, and chain of command. This should include structured collaboration with the Nigerian Police and Armed Forces, alongside clearly defined rules of engagement to prevent abuses and jurisdictional ambiguity. This recommendation responds directly to the institutional grey zone identified in the paper, where the CJTF's locally derived authority sometimes extended beyond community protection into detention, interrogation, and punishment without clear legal oversight, particularly during operations in Bama and other insurgency-affected communities.
2. CJTF members should undergo compulsory training in basic human rights law, proportional use of force, identification procedures, and civilian protection principles. Faith-based organisations and legal institutions can contribute to ethical formation modules

grounded in both legal standards and moral responsibility. This is particularly necessary because the paper identifies cases in Bama, Konduga, and Mafa in which individuals were detained or physically abused on the basis of appearance, dialect, unfamiliarity, or community suspicion, demonstrating the consequences of inadequate identification and use-of-force procedures.

3. An independent monitoring and complaints mechanism should be established at state and federal levels to investigate alleged misconduct and sanction abuses involving civilian security actors. The mechanism should include representatives from civil society, legal professionals, and community leaders to promote transparency and public trust. The need for such oversight arises from the paper's finding that some CJTF units operated with considerable local legitimacy but without consistent accountability structures, creating conditions in which protective activities could develop into punitive or retaliatory practices, including reported collective punishment in Bama.
4. Intelligence-sharing among the CJTF, local communities, and formal security agencies should be standardised through verification procedures before information is used for detention or other coercive action. Digital reporting tools and structured documentation systems should be introduced where feasible to improve the accuracy and traceability of security information. This recommendation directly addresses the misidentification problems discussed in the paper, particularly cases reported in Konduga and Mafa involving displaced or returning persons who were temporarily detained or assaulted after being wrongly suspected of collaboration with Boko Haram. Local knowledge should therefore remain an operational advantage, but it should be treated as intelligence requiring verification rather than as conclusive evidence of guilt.
5. Churches and Christian organisations in Northeastern Nigeria should be more formally engaged in peacebuilding and ethical formation programmes that emphasise human dignity, non-violence, reconciliation, and responsible civic participation. Such programmes should address retaliatory attitudes, encourage restraint, and strengthen community approaches to conflict resolution. This recommendation follows directly from the paper's theological finding that prolonged exposure to violence can normalise suspicion, retaliation, and coercion within affected communities. It also builds on the identified potential role of churches in Maiduguri and Yola in promoting moral formation, dignity, and responsible responses to insecurity.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) is not adequately understood either as a simple success story of community participation or as an inherently illegitimate form of vigilantism. Its significance lies in the ethical ambiguity created when communities assume security responsibilities under conditions in which formal institutions are unable to provide adequate protection. The CJTF demonstrates that local knowledge, community trust, and civilian participation can become important security resources during insurgency, but the same characteristics that make community-based security effective can also create serious risks when suspicion substitutes for evidence and locally derived authority operates without effective accountability. The central contribution of the study is therefore its identification of accountability as the condition that connects security effectiveness with moral legitimacy. The ethical question is not simply whether civilian participation can contribute to counterinsurgency, but whether such participation can remain protective when it acquires coercive powers without corresponding institutional restraints. Misidentification, arbitrary detention, excessive force, and punitive

practices are not merely operational shortcomings; they represent a transformation in the moral character of community security. Once protective authority becomes detached from proportionality, due process, and responsibility for human dignity, the justification for community self-defence becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. The Christian ethical analysis further demonstrates that Just War thought and Christian pacifism provide different but complementary ways of interrogating this transformation. Just War reasoning permits a qualified defence of community protection where force is directed towards a just cause and exercised proportionately, while the pacifist tradition exposes the deeper danger of allowing violence to become normalised within the moral life of a community. African Christian personalist perspectives add another dimension by showing that the dignity of the individual and the moral integrity of the community cannot be separated. Security that protects one section of a community while subjecting others to arbitrary suspicion or coercion therefore contains an internal moral contradiction.

The CJTF experience consequently suggests that community participation should not be evaluated principally according to whether it increases the operational capacity of the state, but according to whether it strengthens protection without weakening justice. This shifts the discussion from the binary question of whether non-state security actors are legitimate to the more useful question of the institutional and ethical conditions under which their participation can remain legitimate. For Northeastern Nigeria, community-based security can form part of a broader security architecture only when local knowledge is combined with verification, clearly defined authority, training, oversight, and meaningful mechanisms for redress. The broader lesson extends beyond the CJTF itself: communities confronted with institutional failure will continue to develop mechanisms of self-protection when their lives and livelihoods are threatened. Suppressing such participation without addressing the insecurity that produced it may simply remove a local coping mechanism without resolving the underlying vulnerability, while permitting community security actors to operate indefinitely without accountability risks normalising parallel forms of coercive authority. The challenge for Nigerian security governance is therefore to preserve the protective capacities generated by communities while ensuring that these capacities remain subordinate to justice, human dignity, and accountable institutions. The lasting value of the CJTF experience is not that it establishes community-based security as either a model to be replicated or a practice to be rejected; rather, it reveals the moral and institutional conditions that determine whether community self-defence contributes to security or reproduces insecurity in another form. Christian ethics makes this distinction particularly significant because the protection of life cannot be separated from the manner in which protection is exercised. The enduring task, therefore, is to construct security arrangements in which the defence of vulnerable communities does not itself become a source of vulnerability, injustice, or diminished human dignity.

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