



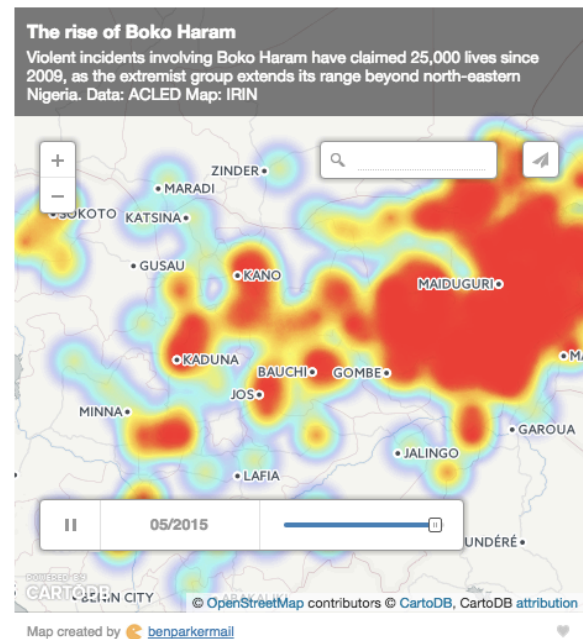
Is Nigeria attempting the impossible in trying to de-radicalise Boko Haram militants? IRIN's Editor-at-Large [Obi Anyadike](#) speaks to the prisoners, their victims, and the de-rad "treatment teams" trying to reintegrate them into society. He explores what drove the men to join an insurgency that is tearing the region apart.

**Prison officer Malam Tata has a calling.** He sees it as his religious duty to help people reach salvation, and believes few have erred as grievously as the 43 Boko Haram militants under his care in Kuje Prison, on the outskirts of the Nigerian capital, Abuja.

Tata has spent 26 years in the prison service. He leads a team of imams, Muslim religious leaders, in a unique, homegrown de-radicalisation strategy aimed at rehabilitating the Boko Haram inmates. His team, all prison officers, has the most intimate contact with the group, leading them in daily spiritual discussions that question the basis of their ideology of violence.

“Some of them are illiterate. They can’t even cite the Qur’an, yet they say they are doing jihad,” says Tata, a cheerful, trim-looking officer. “Some of them are learned. They have read the Qur’an and the Hadith, but they don’t really understand Islam. Satan has whispered in their ear.”

Kuje, a medium-security facility, is the testbed of Nigeria’s prison-based countering violent extremism (CVE) programme, launched in March. At its heart is the idea of “treating” the men on terrorism-related charges: that through activities like therapy, sport, schooling and vocational training, their behaviour can be modified; the risk of them recruiting while inside reduced; and eventually they can be reintegrated into society.



Building a bond between the “treatment team” and the Boko Haram inmates, officially known as “clients”, is seen as crucial to the success of the CVE strategy. Tata talks in patriotic terms about why he joined the team, and his belief that in doing God’s work, he earns a spiritual reward.

That offers some comfort. “These are very, very dangerous people. Anything can happen. We know they communicate with their people on the outside,” he reminds me.

Tata has personal experience of the risks: he was wounded during an attack on a prison by Boko Haram, although he refuses to talk about it. He

believes the military tide has turned and now the insurgents are on the run. The “clients” in Kuje “know they are losing,” he says. “They watch TV.”

**The day I visit the prison, Arsenal is playing Chelsea** in Kuje’s version of the Champions League: both prison teams lustily supported, the cheers floating over the yard wall.

But my destination is the “de-rad” wing, a quieter, more secluded set of modern classrooms, originally planned as an open university. Unlike the rest of the austere prison, there is even air-conditioning.

I sit down in a small room with one of the “clients”. The stocky man on the other side of the desk wears jeans and a tight t-shirt. He has an Afro, a scraggly beard and a large ring on his finger. He calls himself a commander, but looks more like a guy you might see in a club. He speaks in Hausa, the lingua franca of the north, in short sentences, finishing each thought with a “tell him” to the imam who is translating – eager for his story to be understood.

Halfway through the interview, the “commander,” who doesn’t want to reveal his name, pauses. The imam has a cold so he leans forward and asks whether he wants the air-conditioning turned off. It seems a genuine, solicitous moment.

He sees himself as a transformed man, which he ascribes to Tata and his team. When asked during the interview where the Qur’an justifies killing civilians, the commander repeatedly says he can’t remember. It becomes clear that he doesn’t want to explore that old frame of mind. “I’ve changed. I don’t want to talk about justification.” The imam suggests we move on.



*The “Commander” ...  
(Obinna Anyadike/IRIN)*



*... The “believer”  
(Obinna Anyadike/IRIN)*

**Ferdinand Ikwang heads the national de-rad programme**, which falls under the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA). In his portfolio is a web of interlinked projects tackling the economic and social triggers of recruitment, as well as laying the groundwork for a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) effort once Boko Haram is defeated or a peace agreement is reached.

He has a robust position on the men that have taken up violence. Those who have committed atrocities will stay in prison under de-rad. But the low-level footsoldiers who have gone through CVE will be considered for release and allowed “to continue with their lives”, albeit under surveillance.

The yardstick is not whether they drop their beliefs, but whether they are likely to “pick up a gun”, says Ikwang.



*Man on a mission: Ferdinand Ikwang,  
head of the de-radicalization*

Kuje is not the only prison holding Boko Haram inmates. Agwata, near the eastern city of Onitsha, has roughly 100 who surrendered earlier this year, and de-rad is about to start there as well, staffed by officers trained in Kuje. There are other ONSA facilities filling up as Boko Haram start to lay down their weapons in increasing numbers.

Participation in de-rad is voluntary. In Kuje, four inmates have chosen not to join the treatment programme for apparently practical rather than ideological reasons: they are contesting the government's accusation that they are members of the group.

Most of the 39 other "clients" – all on remand – have been in detention for the past four years, although not always in Kuje, and when in the hands of the security services, not under the most humane of conditions.

**The benefits of joining de-rad are clear:** firstly, most get to live in segregated cells with a single double-bunk, a far cry from the conditions in the rest of the prison, opened in 1989 as an 80-bed facility, but which currently holds 910 prisoners.

They have a refurbished wing to themselves, funded by the European Union, where their structured daily activities are held. They have basics like toilet paper and soap. It's a level of care unheard of in Nigeria's under-funded prisons, where the word rehabilitation is rarely voiced.

"The cardinal objective of the programme is not to force anyone to join. It's to get voluntary buy-in," says Kasali Yusuf, coordinator of the joint ONSA/prison service team in Kuje. "They may initially join just for the privileges, which do tend to soften their hearts."



But with Boko Haram inmates already deeply unpopular among the general prison population, “the special privileges lead to rancour and have been a challenge for us. We’ve had to explain [to the other prisoners] that it’s funded by a special [EU] programme,” says Yusuf.

Yusuf’s boss, the manager of the “treatment team,” is psychologist Dr Wahaab Akorede. After reviewing the case studies of the 43 clients, he concludes that what differentiates them from the run-of-the-mill criminals he’s used to dealing with is their level of anger, their desire to “smash everything”.

It suggests they themselves are “victims of trauma”: so desperate, with so little opportunity, they are ready to trust that paradise is their reward for martyrdom.

Neither Akorede nor Yusuf – both Muslims and senior prison officers – see much evidence of deep religiosity among many of the men in the treatment programme.

Instead, Akorede ticks off other potential triggers: polygamous families where wives compete for their husband’s affection to the detriment of the children; an Islam, as traditionally taught in the north, that leaves young men ill-prepared for the modern workplace; and the callousness of successive governments that has consigned so many to suffering and an early death, “to the point where God must be tired of seeing Nigerians”.

“Alienation” is his preferred explanation for Boko Haram’s appeal. These are mostly men with little formal education, with hand-to-mouth jobs on the urban margins, “looked down upon even by Muslims in their own community as riff-raff”. They are angry, “and religion is the platform to vent that anger”.

Akorede divides the men in Kuje into two groups – the “big fish” and the followers. “The big fish are the smart ones. They know how to manipulate people. They say, ‘Your religion is special and it’s under threat’.” In effect they create a cult, in which everyone – including the religious and traditional establishment – are the enemy.

And where an appeal to religion and martyrdom is not enough, Boko Haram offers aid to your family. “So here’s a man that is not happy within himself. He has not been given an opportunity to be educated. He has no future. If you give him 10,000 naira [\$50], he will carry that bomb,” says Akorede.



*Aftermath: 75 people died in Boko Haram’s bombing of the Nyanya bus park in Abuja, April 2014 (Ikechukwu Ibe/IRIN)*

**The "commander" smiles** when asked the date he joined Boko Haram. The sect was founded in 2002 by a young cleric, Mohammed Yusuf, and took root in the northeastern city of Maiduguri, the heart of a region that has been at the centre of Islamic learning for centuries.

But the commander's radicalism predates the movement. "I was Boko Haram before Boko Haram existed," he boasts, using the group's official name, "Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad" (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad).

He was a member of the Nigerian Taliban ("Al sunna wal Jamma"), which had recruited mujahedeen to fight in Afghanistan. The group had been preaching jihad, or holy struggle, and had attacked police stations and government buildings along the northeastern border with Cameroon through much of 2004, before Yusuf began to talk of violent resistance to Nigeria's secular state.

The Taliban, among them university graduates from the University of Maiduguri, along with some of Yusuf's more radical followers, were routed when their camp was attacked by the army in northeastern Yobe State. But the commander was not among them – he had thrown in with Yusuf, who at the time was building a grassroots movement that senior political leaders in Maiduguri were keen to cultivate.

The commander comes from "a family that valued education". But he was rebellious and quit school early, going into business with a grinding mill in his hometown of Biu. When his father found out, he threw him out of the house. And so the commander began to gravitate towards Islam, ending up in a madrassa in neighbouring Adamawa State run by a Pakistani sheikh.



**Nigeria was in ferment at the time over the issue of Shariah Law.** Its introduction by 12 predominantly Islamic northern states in 2000 was driven by a demand from the Muslim street for an egalitarian antidote to the venality and corruption of Nigerian life. But instead, an elite-serving “[political Shariah](#)” stopped any real reform, and as a result, the northern establishment came to be seen as the target by some radicals.

“It was easy to attract youths. They were eager to hear about jihad,” says the commander. Part of the reason is the traditional Almajirai system, under which millions of young boys in the north are still schooled. They are attached to a Qur’anic teacher (who doesn’t always have a firm understanding of the text) to learn by rote for years, supporting themselves and their mentor by begging.

It has left the north educationally disadvantaged, with a simmering street-level militancy.

Nigeria’s northeast has the worst social indicators in the country. A tradition of northern progressive movements existed up until the 1980s to champion the rights of the “talakawa” (commoners) against the feudal conservative establishment seen as responsible for their poverty, but nowadays populist resistance against injustice is much more likely to be religiously grounded.

**The confrontation between Boko Haram and the authorities exploded in July 2009.** Yusuf had fallen out with the Borno State government and, after the killing of a group of his followers, he promised revenge. His men attacked police stations and government buildings in four northern states. In days of fighting, 700 people died, including Yusuf, killed while in police custody in Maiduguri.



*Praying for deliverance: Maiduguri has come under repeated attack by Boko Haram since 2009 (Obinna Anyadike/IRIN)*

The commander, who fled to the northern city of Kano and laid low until his capture, draws a distinction between the early days of Boko Haram, and the extreme violence of the group under Yusuf's successor, Abubakar Shekau, a war-time leader seen as more lethal than learned, who made common cause with the global jihadist movement.

"I don't know how it happened. In all the towns they capture, they kill the people. Who are you going to rule? That's what I don't understand," says the commander. More than 25,000 people have died in Boko Haram-related violence both inside Nigeria and [across its borders](#) – the vast majority fellow Muslims.

Tata has lined up another "client" for me to talk to, a slight man in glasses with a neatly trimmed beard and a clean white dashiki, or tunic. He speaks reverentially about what he regards as Yusuf's integrity and "truthfulness".

His explanation for Boko Haram's emergence is that Nigerian society needed to be cleansed of corruption, injustice and homosexuality.

He'd been part of Yusuf's cabinet or "shura," and says that before he was caught in 2011 he led Boko Haram in three states: Bauchi, Gombe and Plateau. He accuses the authorities of unwarranted aggression, exemplified by the bulldozing of the group's sprawling [Markaz](#) mosque complex after the Maiduguri uprising, and the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf, for which no policeman has been convicted.

If anybody epitomises Akorede's thesis on the dangers of frustrated, angry individuals, it is this intense man.



*Boko Haram on the march (YouTube, SaharaTV)*

He was one of "38 or 40" siblings, and although he completed primary school, he dropped out of secondary school around the age of 12. He became an electrical car mechanic in Maiduguri, but the poverty of the north and the indifference of the wealthy stirred him. "I believed if

you were ready to use violence, you could achieve your aims," he says.

He doesn't talk about where he fought or what he did, simply saying: "Before this programme, I would have no time for you. There would be no jokes. I was hard. Now I realise it's important to listen and share views."

**Ahmed Musa is weeping, his face buried in the crook of his arm.** He is a member of the [Civilian Joint Task Force](#) (CJTF), a vigilante group that

emerged in 2013 in support of the army to drive Boko Haram out of Maiduguri. But Ahmed's two brothers were both militants. The youngest one "I loved so very much," he says.

He tried to get him interested in his small business, to turn him away from militancy, "but he never stayed". Instead, his youngest brother approached him with a group of men and asked him to keep some weapons for them. Ahmed had recently joined CJTF and heard his brother had put his name on a kill list. The arms storage request was his last chance.

Instead, Ahmed led a group from the task force to arrest his brother and hand him over to the army – an almost certain death sentence. "I tied him up," says Ahmed, the anguish still raw. "I promised that I would not let anybody live in this society that was Boko Haram."



*Ahmed Musa: "I promised that I would not let anybody live in this society that was Boko Haram" (Obinna Anyadike/IRIN)*

He's unsure if his elder brother is still alive but knows he was involved in an attack on 33 Artillery Barrack in Maiduguri in 2013. He'd been a reluctant Boko Haram recruit, initiated by a friend who sold petrol on the black market. Initially, he'd just kept arms for the group, "but gradually they showed him how to fire [the weapons], and then how to cut necks [of captives]."

**It's just after midday prayer in Maiduguri,** and I'm in an area called Monday Market where Mohammed Yusuf initially used to preach. It is here he made his declaration of war against the Nigerian state in June



2009, when Maiduguri was a thriving city, the centre of a livestock-based economy with [trade networks](#) extending as far as Sudan and Central African Republic.

I'm talking to a couple of men about what gave birth to Boko Haram, and others are joining the conversation, eager to distance the city from the violence and bloodshed that followed.

But Suleiman Aliyu, a headmaster, admits there was support for Boko Haram in the community. In their simple traditional clothing, the hem of their trousers above the ankle, the movement's members were seen as pious and disciplined. Their anti-corruption message resonated; some of their wealthy followers, swept up by the millennial zeitgeist, donated lavishly. "If you didn't think deeply, you followed them," he says.

When the insurrection was suppressed, Boko Haram scattered. But an infusion of cash from jihadists in Algeria and Mali allowed them to regroup and return in 2010. An early ban by the state government on motorbike taxis, often used in ride-by shootings, meant an estimated 34,000 people lost their livelihoods – driving yet more recruits to the group.

An inept counter-insurgency operation by the army, imposing collective punishment on neighbourhoods in response to attacks, further tested people's loyalty. Meanwhile, Boko Haram splashed cash: it would "solve your needs", whether it was money for a wedding or a naming ceremony, its members "wanted to draw you in" – and killed you if you resisted.

"They wanted to take charge of everything in the community," says Aliyu. The rise of the vigilante Civilian JTF – armed with just machetes and axes – was a brave, desperate response to the terror the group imposed. These

men provided the army with the eyes and ears that allowed it to drive Boko Haram from Maiduguri by the end of 2013, and largely keep it out.



**Few people in Maiduguri admit to relatives joining Boko Haram, but Mohammed Garima is ready to talk. His 25-year-old nephew joined the group and he's still trying to understand why.**

“Poverty is maybe [one reason],” he says. The young man was a roadside puncture repairer, known as vulcanisers, probably earning around \$5 a day. “But there was something else. He was always isolating himself from people, always pretending to be more religious than everyone else.”

Garima had himself heard Yusuf preach, and wasn't impressed. “He condemned everything: the roads, social services, education, the hospitals, things we use – things he used – and there was little in what he said that was spiritual.”

In 2009, his nephew disappeared and the family realised he had joined Boko Haram. He periodically kept in touch, and when his grandmother died last year, his father demanded that he visit. While in town, he was

recognised and arrested, and Garima heard that he had died in detention in Maiduguri's Kainji air force base.

**There is unanimous conviction** among the people I speak to in Maiduguri that mirrors the position of the de-rad programme: there can be no reintegration for the most hardcore Boko Haram. "They appear in human form, but really they are devils," says one man who asked not to be named.

"This person killed your mother or father, burned your house; how can you live with them? It's not possible," adds Garima. He is slightly more conciliatory towards those coerced to join. There could be an amnesty in those cases, "but they will have to be taken to another state, otherwise people will take revenge," he says.

According to Ikwang, the head of the de-rad programme, but also a DDR specialist and lecturer at the British Defence Academy in Shrivenham, those allowed back into society will be in "halfway houses" and monitored. They will be grouped into cooperatives based on vocational skills where counselling will be mandatory.

Community acceptance is essential. "If you're returning say 400 ex-combatants to the community, you have to engage the community. If it's 400 [ex-Boko Haram] in, then you need to find places for 400 local youths in government programmes, otherwise the host community will scream and say they are going to kill them," says Ikwang.

But considering the poor track record of previous Nigerian governments in rolling out medium-term programmes, ring-fencing the funding, and spending appropriately, what's to prevent de-rad from collapsing into

scandal and waste? Akorede's response is a dogged "we have no choice" but to keep it alive.

**There is a more fundamental question: does de-radicalisation actually work?** Certainly the de-rad wing in Kuje does not feel threatening, which is in the interests of both staff and detainees. The treatment team wear civilian clothes and mix and talk freely with the "clients", a novelty for some used to jails where inmates must squat before they can address an officer.

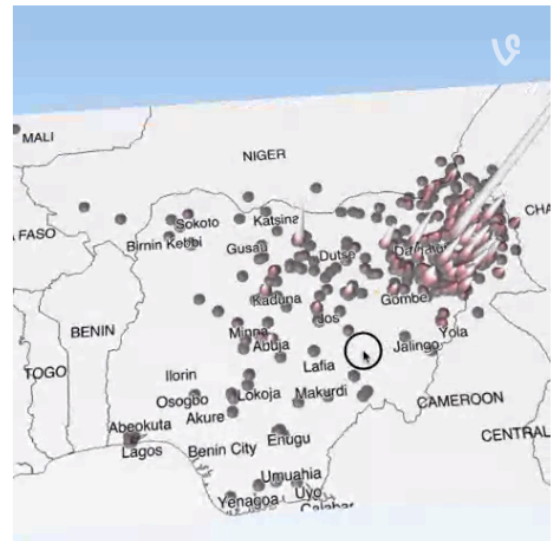
"The challenge has been to enter the hearts and minds of the extremists," says Ekpeme Udom, in charge of all prison-based CVE. "This is a first in Africa, and we're having exceptional results." But as a senior prison manager, she is shrewdly aware a battle of wits plays out daily between "clients" and treatment staff inside Kuje, with both sides looking to advance their interests.

Udom is part of a new generation of reform-minded prison officers. She was "given a clean sheet" to develop the Kuje programme on behalf of ONSA, drawing on and adapting CVE approaches used in Asia and the Middle East.

De-radicalisation requires huge investment, from training staff to upgrading facilities and funding post-release programmes. But the literature is unclear on recidivism rates, and whether indeed they are the right gauge. Part of the problem, is that "it's too early to tell," says Udom. "CVE has only been going for something like 10 years in the rest of the world."



But Ikwang worries about a more systemic problem, rooted in Nigeria's appalling record of governance that Boko Haram – and other simmering conflicts across the country – has fed on. “All extremism is an ideology that has to be dealt with at the grassroots, starting even in kindergarten, with the government being far more responsive and responsible to its citizenry,” he warns, pausing in reflection.



*3D map of violent incidents involving Boko Haram 2009-2015*  
*Data: ACLED, map: IRIN*

“How have we lost this generation of children?”