



How are U.S. Arms Sales and Civilian Casualties in Nigeria Connected?

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Key point: Either way, the United States helped make it happen.

The Reuters news service reported Wednesday that the Nigerian Air Force bombed a fish market, murdering more than fifty civilians. At best, this incident was the latest example of the Nigerian military's lethal disregard for civilians as it pursues its campaign against the terrorist group, Boko Haram. At worst, this might have been another case of the government targeting supporters of its political opposition. Last month, Nigerian security forces killed 115 people in a fight against separatist agitators who were peacefully protesting the government's lack of progress against SARS.

Either way, the United States helped make it happen. Nigeria recently took delivery of six A-29 Super Tucano light attack aircrafts from the United States. Even if those specific aircraft were not the ones that dropped the bombs yesterday, there is no question that American weapons sales have only made episodes like this more likely.

Thanks to the continuing American obsession with terrorism, the United States has provided Nigeria with significant amounts of security assistance to counter the rise of Boko Haram. Since 2009, the United States has sold Nigeria \$130 million in weapons, provided another \$155 million in security assistance (including aircraft, fire control, lasers, imaging and guidance equipment, military electronics, and naval ships), and has trained over 31,000 members of the Nigerian military.

Nothing about this incident should have been a surprise to the United States. As we illustrated in the 2020 Arms Sales Risk index last year, Nigeria's risk score was 79, suggesting that the likelihood of negative consequences from arms sales are extremely high. The index, based on metrics of state stability and behavior, provides every nation a score from 1 (lowest risk) to 100 (highest risk) assessing the prospects for coups, the misuse of weapons by the government, the theft or sale of weapons on the black market, etc. Nigeria ranks near the bottom of the world in metrics like state fragility, conflict, the impact of terrorism, and has a troubling record of state-sponsored violence against civilians. It would be surprising for arms sales to Nigeria not to lead to unintended consequences. In fact, Nigeria is a risk for every possible negative consequence associated with arms sales.

Rather than a shocking outlier, however, the tragedy in Nigeria represents business as usual in the war on terror. Aggressive military means have failed to dampen political violence in the Middle East and Africa for two decades. Despite this, the United States keeps funding, training, and fueling the Nigerian military – and militaries in other risky countries – regardless of the likely negative consequences.

Sadly, as long as the civilian casualties are Nigerian, or Afghan, or anyone but Americans, the political and financial costs of this “light footprint” strategy are low. As a result, the national

security establishment in Washington will continue to use arms sales and security assistance to conduct counterterrorism on the cheap even though the results are dismal and the costs to other nations is high.

American security assistance is well-intended. But the reality is that the military side of the war on terror has been counterproductive. In Nigeria, U.S. military assistance is strengthening radical groups rather than weakening them. The Islamic State now has stronger outreach in Africa than ever before and Boko Haram remains as strong as ever and is now working with ISIS. Instead of advancing American interests, U.S. arms sales to Nigeria are fueling violence and risk creating a new generation of Nigerians with anti-American sentiments.

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