

THE CHALLENGE OF STATE-BACKED INTERNAL SECURITY IN NIGERIA: CONSIDERATIONS FOR AMOTEKUN

JENNIFER OBADO-JOEL

COMMUNITY-BASED ARMED GROUPS SERIES

“Accountability mechanisms and the design of a transition program are required to support the success of Amotekun in responding to security threats in the Nigerian Southwest.”

FAST FACTS

- To address tensions, and the potential for conflict or further security challenges resulting from them, a coherent framework of engagement across different levels of governments and stakeholders is necessary.
- The inclusion of civil society in the training of recruits and members of all participating CBAGs and CBAs is the first step in building social accountability mechanisms in the implementation of Amotekun.
- Including CDAs and Joint CDAs in the monitoring and engagement framework for the Amotekun corps will support trust-building with local communities.

Context

Nigeria faces immense internal security challenges, including the Boko-Haram crisis in the northeast and violent farmer-herder conflicts in the southwest and north-central states. Across the Nigerian federation, pockets of violent clashes have sprung and escalated in new locales in the last decade. Community responses to these violent crises have been diverse and included the establishment of armed groups to supplement or act in parallel to the security efforts of the Nigerian state—in some cases with backing from federal or state governments. These local security assemblages, described as “community-based armed groups” in this paper, are on the one hand contributors to local order, and normative conceptions of peace and security.¹ On the other hand, these groups are often a pernicious actor within the broader security

1 Daniel Agbiboa, *Origins of Hybrid Governance and Armed Community* (Washington D.C.: Resolve Network, 2019) <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.2>.

landscape, undermining intercommunal peace and drivers of violence and human rights abuses. The contexts in which these groups thrive, especially when endowed with elements of political or operational support from the state, are clear example of the necessity of governance and oversight mechanisms to limit or constrain malignant acts.²

In the Northeast, for example, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) was launched by Maiduguri's youth in 2013 as a community-led response to counter violent attacks by Boko-Haram insurgents in Borno state, the main theatre of the Boko Haram insurgency. The CJTF has since grown into a community-based armed group (CBAG) backed by the federal government to complement the Joint Military Taskforce (JTF) of the Nigerian Army, to some degree of success.³ The group continues to exist as a Counter Insurgency (COIN) mechanism by the Nigerian government, with the opportunity for its members to become regularized as members of the Nigerian armed forces.⁴

Nigerian CBAGs recognized by the state, including the CJTF, vary in their composition, mandate, and relative operational success—in terms of achieving their primary objective, though perhaps less so in their commitment to rights protections, as will be described later in the paper. This Policy Note focuses on the characteristics, challenges, and opportunities of Amotekun, a recently formed CBAG in Southwest Nigeria. Drawing from the experiences of similar Nigerian groups, the Note details recommendations that may facilitate greater success and lessen potential risk associated with Amotekun's formation. These recommendations are aimed primarily at Nigerian government and civil society actors, and describe areas where external support could potentially improve local capacity to conduct oversight of Amotekun and similar groups.

Amotekun: Origins, Composition, and Controversy

In 2019, with increasing incidents of violence and attacks on farmers and travelers, the governors of Southwestern Nigerian states initiated a campaign to establish Amotekun (“Leopard” in the Yoruba language), or the Western Nigeria Security Network (WSN). Citing concerns about the capacity of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) to provide security to rural and urban residents in the region,⁵ Amotekun was to complement the operations of national security forces, such as the NPF.⁶ In March 2020, Amotekun was established by an act of law, making state governments responsible for its funding and administration. Certain characteristics of Amotekun, however, distinguish it from other similar security providers, such as the CJTF.

First, unlike the CJTF, which functions as a singular body, in its design Amotekun is intended to function as a paramilitary force comprised of an aggregation of existing CBAGs, such as:

- the “hunters association”
- “Agbekoya farmers association,”

2 Moritz Schuberth, *Approaching Community-Based Armed Groups in Sub-Saharan Africa: Lessons Learned & Measures of Success* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019) <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.1>.

3 Daniel Agbiboa, *Origins of Hybrid Governance and Armed Community Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington D.C.: Resolve Network, 2019) <https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.2>.

4 John Campbell, “Buhari Discusses the Future of the Civilian Joint Task Force,” *Africa In Transition*, May 20, 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/buhari-discusses-future-civilian-joint-task-force>.

5 Henry Ojelu, “Constitutional implication of Operation Amotekun,” *Vanguard*, January 10, 2020, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/01/constitutional-implication-of-operation-amotekun/>.

6 “Operation Amotekun: Western Nigeria governors launch security outfit,” *PM News Nigeria*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.pnewsnigeria.com/2020/01/09/operation-amotekun-western-nigeria-governors-launch-security-outfit/>.

- “Oodua People’s Congress” (OPC) in Southwest Nigeria,
- socio-political groups such as the Pan-Yoruba socio-political group “Afenifere,” as well as units of newly recruited corps members.⁷

Given this distinction, for the purposes of this policy note, Amotekun will be referred to as a **state-backed supra-CBAG (SBSC)**. Defining Amotekun as an SBSC underlines its unique character as part of an aggregation of cross-regional CBAGs and community-based associations (CBAs) responsible for the security of rural and urban communities in Southwest Nigeria.

The groups party to Amotekun have a long history of security mobilization in the Nigerian Southwest. These groups, initially formed as a response to political contestation, eventually expanded their mandate into security operations. The Agbekoya Farmers Group launched a successful violent revolt in response to a new tax regime on peasant farmers between 1968 to 1969 against the military administration in Western Nigeria.⁸ Similarly, the Yoruba Council of Leaders formed Afenifere, a powerful socio-cultural and political group in advance of the Fourth Republic in 1999.⁹ Leaders of Afenifere are considered custodians of the socio-cultural and political agenda of the Yoruba ethnic group, one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria.¹⁰

The Oodua Peoples’ Congress (OPC) is also a socio-cultural group with a militia corps committed to the protection and furtherance of the Yoruba ethnic group’s political interest.¹¹ Although OPC had similar ideals to Afenifere, the leadership or membership does not necessarily overlap. Given their history, the groups’ involvement in Amotekun raises questions as to what its political aspirations or objectives may be or evolve into, if not limited by federal, state, or community mechanisms for security provision objectives.

Second, although with a similar mandate, Amotekun has no focal adversary, in contrast to the CJTF’s central mission against Boko Haram insurgents. A critical factor in the community acceptance and success of the CJTF is the clarity of its mission and target opposition. The mandate of Amotekun, however, is vaguely described as supporting internal security forces. This vagueness in mandate lends to fears of the potential for operational overreach and resultant abuses, especially targeting other ethnic groups.

Third, unlike other state-backed CBAGs and paramilitary corps that predate it across Nigeria, Amotekun is the first regional SBSC in the country. Additionally, unlike the CJTF, Amotekun is backed by the governors of Nigerian states, not the federal government of Nigeria or the NPF. There is, as of yet, no framework that delineates operational and administrative jurisdictions related to Amotekun between the NPF and state governments.

7 “Operation Amotekun: South-West to train OPC, hunters, Others,” *Punch*, January 7, 2020, <https://punchng.com/operation-amotekun-south-west-to-train-opc-hunters-others/>.

8 Tunde Adeniran, “The Dynamics of Peasant Revolt: A Conceptual Analysis of the Agbekoya Parapo Uprising in the Western State of Nigeria,” *Journal of Black Studies* 4, no. 4. (1974): 363-375.

9 Mahmud Jega, “A Reflection on 20 Years of Democracy in Nigeria,” *Africa Portal*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/reflection-20-years-democracy-nigeria/>.

10 Charles Kumolu, “Amotekun is tokenism, struggle for real solution continues,” *Vanguard*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/01/amotekun-is-tokenism-struggle-for-real-solution-continues-odumakin-afenifere-spokesman/>.

11 “The O’odua People’s Congress (OPC): Fighting Violence with Violence,” *Human Rights Watch*, January 2003, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2003/02/28/oodua-peoples-congress-opc/fighting-violence-violence>.

Relevance to Policy and Practice

Concerns about the institutional character of Amotekun provoked reactions from the Inspector General of the NPF. The federal Attorney General issued a letter citing the illegality of Amotekun a few days after its launch.¹² On August 25, 2020, the Nigerian Office of the President issued a statement asserting that the NPF will determine the operational structure of Amotekun.¹³ In a television interview on August 27, 2020, the governor of Ondo state (one of several supporting Amotekun operatives) denied claims that Amotekun would be institutionalized as part of the Ondo state police infrastructure.¹⁴ In reality, the Law establishing Amotekun situates administrative jurisdiction for its operation with state governments and not the Inspector General of Police.

Pro-Amotekun legal practitioners justified the constitutionality of Amotekun by comparing it to the establishment of the Kano State Hisbah Corps (*hisbah*) through legal statute in Kano (Northwestern Nigeria), citing the operationalization of the *hisbah* as setting precedent for Amotekun.¹⁵ Although nominally established as a religious organization in 2003, *hisbah* evolved to include policing activities and direct reporting to the state police in Kano. Supporters of Amotekun also reference the existence of state-backed CBAGs such as the “Kaduna State Neighborhood service” and the Ebonyi State “Neighborhood Watch Group” in Northwestern and Southeastern Nigeria, respectively. The ongoing debates over the jurisdiction and governance of Amotekun highlights the oft-contested boundaries of administrative powers between the national and sub-national governments. The controversy and disparate rulings from the federal judiciary lend to additional concern that intergroup competition will increase over access to security resources and further accentuate pre-existing ethnic and religious tensions.

The creation of Amotekun has also accelerated calls by other ethnic socio-political groups for the formation of their own security forces. Ethnic socio-political groups, such as the Myetti-Allah (based in the north) and the Pan Niger Delta Forum, have agitated for the right to have their own security forces.¹⁶ Myetti-Allah have raised concurrent concerns that Amotekun could become a paramilitary force deployed for private purposes by state governments and politicians in the Southwest.¹⁷

Concerns about Amotekun’s negative potentials are not far-fetched, especially given the histories of the groups party to the coalition (e.g., violence against civilians, extortion, crime). Amotekun

12 Remi Feyisopo and Iwok Iniobong, “Controversy trails attorney-general’s pronouncement of ‘Amotekun’ as illegal,” *Business Day*, January 16, 2020, <https://businessday.ng/politics/article/controversy-trails-attorney-generals-pronouncement-of-amotekun-as-illegal/>.

13 Eniola Akinkuotu, “IG will determine Amotekun’s structure, says Presidency,” *Punch Newspapers Nigeria*, August 25, 2020, https://punchng.com/ig-will-determine-amotekuns-structure-says-presidency/?utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1598364364.

14 Dawn Commission, “Interview with Rotimi Akeredolu (SAN),” Channels Television video on Facebook, August 27, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/dawncommission/videos/758006591714802/?extid=ridqXo5mEeonpyYl>.

15 Femi Falana, “On Volte Face of Attorney-General on Amotekun by Femi Falana,” *Sahara Reporters*, January 23, 2020. <http://saharareporters.com/2020/01/23/volte-face-attorney-general-amotekun-femi-falana>.

16 “23 States Run Local Security Outfits as Groups Demand Decentralised Policing,” *This Day*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2020/01/13/23-states-run-local-security-outfits-as-groups-demand-decentralised-policing/>.

17 Channels Television, “‘We are Afraid of Amotekun’, Miyetti Allah’s Alhassan Disagrees with Olasupo Ojo over Initiative, YouTube video, January 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekWAQSR9gjc>.

appears more as an armed social movement backed by sub-national governments than a hyper-locally generated and supported CBAG. Opponents to the establishment of Amotekun consider it a social movement due to aggregation of recruits from preexisting CBAGs and CBAs. Furthermore, the strength of Amotekun is perhaps its main weakness. Amotekun's power derives from the strong collective cultural identity between states in the Southwest and the shared grievance over attacks and killings committed by the nomadic herdsmen from Northern Nigeria.¹⁸ The strength of the collective identity underpinning Amotekun could be a force for good or destruction.

To address these issues, it is important to implement appropriate organizing and administrative frameworks and to draw on lessons learned from the operations and transformations of other state-backed CBAGs, including the CJTF and OPC (the latter of which is included within Amotekun) in the ongoing implementation of Amotekun.

Recommendations

Accountability mechanisms and the design of a transition program are required to support the success of Amotekun in responding to security threats in the Nigerian Southwest. The launch of Amotekun has created concern about the possibility of ethnic-based attacks by non-indigenous residents—ostensibly in reaction to the asymmetry in representative security actors—and proposals of similar groups by other ethnic groups. Given the relative absence of successfully implemented accountability and transition programs in the CBAGs context, the success of the Amotekun as a positive contributor in community security rests on the delicate balance of protecting rural and urban communities in the Nigerian Southwest without simultaneously escalating already heightened ethnic tensions in Nigeria, and managing the competition between federal and state administrative bodies.

The recommendations below detail strategies to ensure Amotekun's effectiveness, legitimacy, and accountability to citizens, state governments, and the Inspector General of Police. Ensuring Amotekun remains a positive actor in local security provision will require a comprehensive engagement process by the Nigerian federal government, state governments, and civil society actors such as the media and advocacy groups.

Codify a coherent, operational, and administrative framework for Amotekun

As noted earlier, unlike the CJTF, Amotekun is administered by the governments of Southwestern Nigerian states, not the federal government of Nigeria or the NPF. Operations by state governments has already led to tensions on the convergence of the operational and administrative jurisdictions between the NPF and state governments. To address these tensions, and the potential for conflict or further security challenges resulting from them, a coherent framework of engagement across different levels of governments and stakeholders is necessary.

The transformation of the Oodua People' Congress (OPC) provides a cautionary tale on the importance of designing a coherent operational and administrative framework for Amotekun. The

18 Dayo Johnson and Dapo Akinrefon, "HERDSMEN: Tension, anger in South West," *Vanguard*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/05/herdsmen-tension-anger-in-south-west/>.

OPC was a socio-political group formed in 1993, towards the end of Nigeria’s military dictatorship. However, with the re-emergence of democracy in 1999 and a change in the political environment, the OPC’s youth arm launched a vigilante corps to provide security for rural and urban communities in response to rising crime rates in the Southwest.

With minimal operational and administrative oversight, some OPC members undertook arrests, prosecution, and extra-judicial killings of suspected criminals.¹⁹ OPC members would arrest suspected criminals, take them to their homes, and burn them in the presence of their families.²⁰ While residents and the Lagos state government in Southwest Nigeria first hailed their efforts at controlling crime, their activities soon escalated to indiscriminate acts of violence targeting locals, especially traders from other ethnic groups in major markets.²¹ Increases in violent attacks on citizens culminated in the announcement of a ban of the OPC by President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2002. However, the OPC led by Ganiyu Adams still exists in some form today.

Devise a merit-based recruitment process for Amotekun corps members.

The recruitment calls by state governments for Amotekun corps members are already available online.²² Required qualifications include a minimum of primary school education and documentation submission to prove the applicant’s indigeneity.²³ By its indigeneity requirement, applicants for the Amotekun corps must show documentation proving their ethnicity to the Yoruba tribe or other ethnic groups in the Southwest. Therefore, non-ethnic residents or migrants will not qualify as a recruit, creating a polarization potential between the Amotekun corps and non-ethnic residents in the Nigerian Southwest. The indigeneity requirement will likely escalate preexisting ethnic tensions in southwestern states.

The question of indigeneity vis-a-vis citizenship is a challenging discussion in the Nigerian context, as it focuses on the ethnic group of the applicant rather than Nigerian citizenship. Therefore, a focus on merit-based rather than an ethnic-based recruitment process will likely alleviate concerns of Amotekun becoming a tribe-based armed group. Furthermore, selected applicants should show strong ties to the local communities they are assigned to. Examples of strong community ties may include applicants’ birth in the neighborhood and/or a minimum of 10 years of residence in the community, rather than their membership of an ethnic group in the Nigerian Southwest.

The Nigerian senate is already proposing a law that confers indigeneity on Nigerian citizens who have resided in a locality for at least ten years.²⁴ By reframing what it means to be “indigenous” to a

19 Insa Nolte, “Ethnic Vigilantes and the State: The Oodua People’s Congress in South-Western Nigeria,” *International Relations* 21, no. 2 (June 1, 2007): 217-235, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0047117807077005>

20 “The O’odua People’s Congress (OPC): Fighting Violence with Violence,” *Human Rights Watch*, January 2003, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2003/02/28/oodua-peoples-congress-opc/fighting-violence-violence>.

21 Ibid.

22 “Amotekun Recruitment 2020/2021—Application Form & Portal,” Hotjobsng, September 8, 2020, <https://hotjobsng.com/amotekun-corps-recruitment/>

23 Tosan Olajide, “Amotekun Ekiti recruitment form portal,” *Financial Watch Nigeria*, July 11, 2020, <https://www.financial-watchngr.com/2020/07/11/amotekun-ekiti-recruitment-form-portal-www-amotekun-ekitistate-gov-ng/>.

24 Sunday Aborishade, “Resident of a state for 10 years should become indigene –Senate,” *Punch*, March 8, 2020, <https://punchng.com/resident-of-a-state-for-10-years-should-become-indigene-senate/>.

local community, the law will support a decrease in restrictions on non-indigenes to purchase lands, qualification for local government and state government elections, bursaries, and scholarships for students among other benefits. The new law may also incite fresh inter-ethnic clashes due to fears of economic or demographic domination. Therefore, within the design and implementation of Amotekun are possible instigators of internal security challenges, as well as potential solutions to sources of local inter-ethnic tensions .

Build Social Accountability Mechanisms.

State governments serving as civilian principals of Amotekun must monitor its recruits' and participating CBAGs/CBAs' actions and activities. Monitoring activities and operations of the Amotekun corps will require mechanisms that allow state governments and civil society groups to observe the group directly. The inclusion of civil society in the training of recruits and members of all participating CBAGs and CBAs is the first step in building social accountability mechanisms in the implementation of Amotekun. Effective monitoring mechanisms for Amotekun should include early warning signals that indicate when Amotekun operatives are neglecting their duties or undertaking activities beyond their institutional mandates. To counteract opportunities of elected officials for using Amotekun to villainize political opponents or victimize an ethnic group, civil society groups should establish monitoring programs for Amotekun.

Civil society groups should partner with landlord associations and community development associations (CDAs) in local areas to monitor and report incidences of victimization by Amotekun recruits. An example of such monitoring programs by civil society organizations is the "Follow the Money" champions campaign by Connected Development (CODE), a civil society group empowering residents of local communities to track the implementation of public projects in their neighborhoods.²⁵ Furthermore, public engagement in the fiscal administration of Amotekun will foster trust between the Amotekun operation and the public. An example of such participation in budget administration is Budg.IT, a tech-based civil society group that monitors and tracks national and sub-national public spending in Nigeria.²⁶ Moreover, civic engagement in the budgetary process will clarify funding sources for Amotekun, which might prevent its capture by political entrepreneurs for private gains.

Amotekun should use social media platforms for engagement and public accountability, similar to the Nigerian Police Force. Similarly, advocacy coalitions and groups can also leverage social network platforms' extensive usage for non-violent accountability campaigns. One such movement is the #EndSars campaign on Twitter, through which citizens report human rights abuses of citizens by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police Force.²⁷ The active role of Twitter in mobilizing citizens and groups to protest against police brutality, social media platforms can also serve as a feedback mechanism for Amotekun as a means of gauging public perceptions of the efficacy and legitimacy of its operations. However, to avoid competition with the NPF, federal and sub-national coordination frameworks for the implementation of Amotekun should include modalities on public engagements for all collaborating security agencies. Media reportage on the activities of Amotekun could also serve as another form of checks and balances on Amotekun.

25 Connected Development (CODE), accessed August 27, 2020, <https://www.connecteddevelopment.org/>.

26 Budg.IT Nigeria, accessed August 27, 2020, <https://yourbudgit.com/>.

27 At the time of writing this policy note, the nationwide #EndSARs protests had not kicked off.

Include Community Development Associations (CDAs) in the monitoring and engagement framework for Amotekun.

Another strategy for checks and balances is the inclusion of Community Development Associations (CDAs) and Joint Community Development Associations in the monitoring framework for Amotekun. The membership of CDAs consists of all adult residents of a given community, who meet regularly to discuss and collaborate to address challenges and development projects. Likewise, the Joint CDA membership includes the leadership of all CDAs in a Local Government Area (LGA) within a state. Often, CDAs and Joint CDAs represent the voice of the communities they serve.

Already, CDAs monitor activities of local vigilantes and also support LGA administrators in enforcing movement restrictions during the monthly sanitation exercises in many states. Therefore, including CDAs and Joint CDAs in the monitoring and engagement framework for the Amotekun corps will support trust-building with local communities, which could also serve as sources of security information.

Strengthen responsiveness to changing threat environments.

The institutionalization of Amotekun would support the legitimacy of its mandate. However, changes in the threat environment may necessitate the demobilization of Amotekun or transition to an informal group supporting the maintenance of law and order in communities. Moreover, the availability of transition plans will reduce the likelihood of the emergence of Amotekun corps members' grievances who will face job loss if the threat environment changes. This recommendation is similar to the proposed integration of the CJTF into the Nigerian armed forces and police force at the end of the Boko-Haram COIN operations.

Any framework accounting for the possibility that Amotekun will at some point need to be adapted or dismantled should take into consideration similar challenges facing the CJTF. The CJTF, in this regard, should also serve as a caution to state governments on the implementation of Amotekun. Even with its success, policy analysts are concerned about the demobilization, disarmament, settlement, and reintegration of CJTF members post the Boko-Haram crisis.²⁸ With their military training and access to weaponry, the CJTF may become a new security threat to the local populace after their primary adversary is defeated.

Concerns about the possibility of future predation on local communities by the CJTF resonate with current worries of the NPF and other ethnic socio-political groups about the proposed access of Amotekun recruits to weaponry. As Amotekun begins its operations, it is important that governors in the Nigerian Southwest work with the Nigerian Police Force to design an exit strategy for Amotekun. Such exit strategy may include their absorption into the Nigerian Security and Civil Defense Corps (NSCDC), or a gradual phaseout of Amotekun corps within a stipulated number of years supported by a re-orientation of its recruits into civilian life.

28 Chitra Nagarajan, *Civilian Perceptions of the Yan Gora (CJTF) in Borno State, Nigeria* (Center for Civilians in Conflict, June 22, 2018) <https://civiliansinconflict.org/publications/research/cjtf-yan-gora/>.

Conclusion

The rapid proliferation of community-based, state supported hybrid security forces shows no sign of slowing as conflict and insecurity continue to wreak havoc across West Africa. It is imperative that state security and governance strategies around these groups take into account the local politics that shape these groups, include transparent social accountability mechanisms, and acknowledge that efforts to increase internal security capacity in the short term must be married with plans for eventual off-ramps in the long term. Operation Amotekun presents the Nigerian state an opportunity to lay the foundation to transform community security provision and the relationships between civilians and security actors, for better or for worse.

Suggested Further Reading

Understanding social movements, CBAGs and Vigilantes

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About the Note

Author: Jennifer Obado-Joel

Jennifer Obado-Joel is a doctoral researcher at the Ph.D. Security Studies Program at the University of Central Florida, Orlando. Previously, she was a Visiting Scholar and Professorial Lecturer at the Institute for African Studies at the Elliot School of International Affairs, George Washington University. Jennifer regularly briefs policymakers and international agencies on the security effects of local economic and social upheavals. Jennifer has given lectures to the West Africa study group at the Department of State Foreign Service Institute (FSI). In February 2020, she was the luncheon guest speaker for the 5th US-Nigeria Bilateral Trade Commission meeting. The National Intelligence University, Washington D.C, awarded Jennifer a certificate of appreciation for her support of Lagos Nigeria's urban poverty research. Jennifer led the gender analysis of the National Social Safety Nets Project (NASSP) implemented by the National Social Investment Office under the Nigerian President's office. She also serves as the President of Enyenaweh, a think-tank based in Abuja, Nigeria..

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