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## The Rise of Boko Haram: An Analysis of Failed Governance

Andrew Pichette '18

Illinois Wesleyan University, [apichett@iwu.edu](mailto:apichett@iwu.edu)

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Andrew Pichette

Instructor: Nawragh Chaulagain

### The Rise of Boko Haram: An Analysis of Failed Governance

*Abstract: The Boko Haram threat in Nigeria has been the subject of constant review as of the last few years. Underlying causes as well as the organizational ideology have consistently been the subject of investigation. While popularly considered to be an Islamic extremist group, academic thought has proposed that Islam is used as a means of legitimization rather than motivation, and that socio-economic and political realities are far more relevant to explaining the activities of Boko Haram. The purpose of this essay is to examine the origins of Boko Haram, how the government has reacted, and propose solutions to the deeply rooted issues in northern Nigeria.*

Global terrorism is an extremely dangerous new threat in human history. Beginning in the mid-late twentieth century, the phenomenon of terrorism has been steadily on the rise, particularly in unstable regions such as Africa and the Middle East. These illicit organizations have dozens of motives, ranging from state secession to religious sectarianism to governmental overthrow. Boko Haram is one of the latest groups to burst onto the scene in Africa, where they have become a destabilizing force in Nigeria and the surrounding countries to a lesser extent. The rise of Boko Haram has been a violent, turbulent blur as they have expanded their membership and operations drastically since 2009, the year which marks the beginning of their terrorist operations. Many theories circulate regarding the societal causes for Boko Haram activity, ranging from the relative deprivation theory to religious extremism or failure of democratic governance. The organization has rapidly accelerated since 2009, even going so far as to attack a UN embassy in the capital of Nigeria. While the full extent of Boko Haram's

resources, manpower, and motivations are unknown, it is clear that the group must be dealt with. Terrorism is a major threat anywhere, but the Nigerian case is all the more dangerous due to Nigeria's massive proven oil reserves. In order to restore security, promote peace and prosperity, and insure the rights of Nigerians are protected, the Nigerian government must take a stronger role in eliminating the Boko Haram threat.

### **Synopsis of Boko Haram:**

Boko Haram, more formally known as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad*, originated in 2001 as the Yusufiyya, led by Mohammed Yusuf. Yusuf was a Nigerian Islamic radical who studied in Chad and the Niger Republic before returning to Nigeria to form the Yusufiyya.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of eight years of fairly peaceful activity and the gathering of some 280,000 members, the Yusufiyya developed into what is known today as Boko Haram. July 2009 saw the violent radicalization of the sect, when Boko Haram members participated in a riot against a new law requiring motorcyclists to wear helmets. During this riot, police forces cracked down, arresting several Boko Haram members including Yusuf. By the end of the day, Yusuf and several other Boko Haram members had been killed extra-judicially.<sup>2</sup> The riot and its violent resolution are credited with the increase in Boko Haram violence across Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> Ideologically speaking, Boko Haram is violently anti-Western, as explained by their name alone, which roughly translates to "Western culture/education is forbidden/sinful." This ideology is underscored by Islamic extremism adopted from Al-Qaeda as a result of the alliance between the two groups.<sup>4</sup> It must also be understood that Boko Haram is violently opposed to the current

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<sup>1</sup> Femi Adegbulu "From Guerilla Tactics to Outright Terrorism: A Study of Boko Haram's Synergy with Al-Qaeda Terrorist Network." *IUP Journal of International Relations* 7, no.2 (2013), 69.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Maiangwa, " "Baptism by Fire": Boko Haram and the Reign of Terror in Nigeria." *Africa Today* no. 2 (2012), 47.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Adegbulu "From Guerilla Tactics to Outright Terrorism" 76.

Nigerian state, which is founded on essentially secular and Western principles of state due to earlier British colonialism. The extremist group promotes Sharia law as an alternative to the current state, claiming it would end governmental corruption as well as better promote the needs of the people. While moderate Sharia law has been enacted in some parts of northern Nigeria, Boko Haram seeks to completely displace secular law and install strict, fundamentalist Sharia courts in Nigeria.<sup>5</sup> This goal necessitates complete overthrow of the state at all levels of government, making Boko Haram a threat to national security as well as the lives of endangered Nigerians.

Since the 2009 riot, Boko Haram has become significantly more militant in their actions. The estimated loss of life since 2009 is in the range of multiple thousands, with high estimates claiming some 6,000 deaths in 2014 alone. While most of these deaths are focused in the north, against other Muslims, all of Nigeria feels close to the issue. Most of these deaths are accounted for by bombs, suicide attacks, and gun attacks on or near government institutions, such as police or military bases, although attacks on civilians have become more frequent.<sup>6</sup> Attacks on civilians are either raids on villages with the intent to destabilize the state, or attacks on Muslim mosques to discourage pacifist clerics from attacking Boko Haram ideology.<sup>7</sup> Not included in casualty reports are the massive population displacements or kidnappings that have occurred during Boko Haram's reign of terror. A conservative estimate would put the displaced population in the hundreds of thousands, if not much greater than one million. Accurate statistics regarding kidnappings are difficult to acquire, as there is much uncertainty in the matter. However, the Chibok school incident, in which almost 300 girls were kidnapped, paints a disturbing possibility

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<sup>5</sup> Oladipo Faseke, "The Battle for Hearts and Minds: Religious Peacebuilding as an Alternative Solution to Boko Haram Terrorist Threat." *IUP Journal Of International Relations* 7, no. 4 (2013), 46.

<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Onah, "The Nigerian State as an equilibrium of violence: An explanation of the Boko Haram insurgency in Northern Nigeria." *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 14, no. 2 (2014), 64.

<sup>7</sup> Maiangwa, "Baptism by Fire" 48.

regarding Boko Haram's tactics. Videos released afterwards by Boko Haram representatives joyfully proclaimed that the girls had been either sold into slavery or forced into marriage with Boko Haram fighters, and that they would continue this practice at every given opportunity.

### **Causes and Concerns of Boko Haram:**

The factors concerning the rise of Boko Haram are many and diverse. The two main theories will be discussed here, then arranged accordingly to present a viable explanation for Boko Haram as an entity.

*Relative Deprivation Theory:* The deprivation theory is a simple, widely recognized explanation for terror. The fundamental belief underlying this idea is that people who are not having their basic needs fulfilled are more likely to resort to violence, and that poverty is a key factor in explaining terrorism in less developed parts of the world. In Nigeria, the numbers do correlate with this explanation to some degree, as the northern regions associated with Boko Haram activity are, in fact, the poorest of Nigeria. Poverty rates as well as the HDI testify to the poor quality and safety of life in these areas.<sup>8</sup> Also important to the deprivation theory is the way people in these areas view themselves.<sup>9</sup> In this context, it is important to review the ideology of Boko Haram. The government has done little to resolve issues of poverty in the north, nor has it displayed much interest in doing so.<sup>10</sup> This apparent indifference, according to relative deprivation theory, would then imply that the root cause of Boko Haram activity is the poor economic conditions in Nigeria coupled with the state's failure to rectify these conditions. Before lending too much weight to this explanation, some key details must be accounted for. First, this

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel Agbibo and Benjamin Maiangwa, "Nigeria united in grief; divided in response: Religious terrorism, Boko Haram, and the dynamics of state response." *African Journal On Conflict Resolution* 14, no. 1 (2014), 76.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 77.

<sup>10</sup> Raymond Okoro, "Terrorism and governance crisis: The Boko Haram experience in Nigeria." *African Journal On Conflict Resolution* 14, no. 2 (2014), 117.

theory fails to compensate for the overwhelming numbers of the impoverished who do not resort to violence to solve their problems. It also provides no compelling justification for recent studies concerning the origins of individual terrorists. These studies generally point to one conclusion; economic and educational backgrounds are uncorrelated with terrorism.<sup>11</sup> Accounting for these two contradictions to relative deprivation theory, it is still important to note that Boko Haram activity is focused in the most impoverished areas of Nigeria, which implies poverty in itself is likely a part of the problem, though not the whole solution.

*State Failure Theory:* A second outlook regarding Boko Haram's origin is the state failure explanation. This theory, applied to Nigeria, relies on the notion that the state has failed to complete the tasks required of it. This theory borrows heavily from the same evidence espoused in the relative deprivation theory, which focuses on socio-economic circumstances. Prosperity is determined as one of the key factors of successful government, and as referenced earlier, northern Nigeria is brutally impoverished. This theory also relies on political moods to explain the rise of terror, and the primary piece of evidence fails in the case of Boko Haram. Most often cited is the 2011 election of Goodluck Jonathan, a member of the Christian South. Due to Nigeria's tradition of political zoning, the presidency typically shifts from north to south every two terms. To simplify, this puts a northern Muslim in office, then a southern Christian. In 2010, however, the Muslim president passed away, putting Goodluck Jonathan into power. According to the political zoning tradition, he would not run for reelection in 2011 to allow the north one more presidential term. Contrary to tradition, however, he ran for reelection and won the 2011 presidency, much to the chagrin of northern party members. Popular theory proposes that this abandonment of party politics caused radicals in the north to take up arms to attack the state. This all sounds well and good in theory, until the chronology is taken into account; Boko Haram

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<sup>11</sup> Adegbulu "From Guerilla Tactics to Outright Terrorism" 67.

became violent during the Muslim presidency.<sup>12</sup> While this breaking of political tradition may have caused more people to feel politically disenfranchised and rush into the arms of Boko Haram, it was only a major step in bolstering the organization, not starting it.

Another facet of the state failure theory credits the failure of the Nigerian state to be inclusive as the cause of insurgent activity.<sup>13</sup> Troublingly, the Nigerian government for the last one hundred years has been founded on violence.<sup>14</sup> Nigeria had formerly been a colonial holding of the British, and experienced multiple military coups once the British withdrew. Violence has been the favored instrument of successive governments based on coercion rather than cooperation.<sup>15</sup> Note that, while failing to improve conditions in Nigeria, the government has also made itself distant from the people by becoming the home of a privileged, inaccessible political elite. This elite, more often than not, has failed to resolve national problems, and when it makes an attempt, it is often through the medium of violence. As discussed later, the government is remarkably inept even in this field. Unfortunately for the Nigerian people, this ineptitude has increased Boko Haram activity as well as significantly worsened the conditions for citizens in areas known to be in Boko Haram's operational zone.

When taken separately, these two theories cannot suffice to fully explain the phenomena of Boko Haram's reign of terror. Put together, the evidence appears more convincing, although only moderately so. The Nigerian government has certainly failed to provide economic security to the Muslim north, where the violence originated. It also has failed to provide basic rule of law, any form of transparency, fair elections, or fair government.<sup>16</sup> Historically, Nigeria has been plagued by violence under the rule of military dictatorships as well as a general lack of effective

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<sup>12</sup> Okoro "Terrorism and governance crisis" 114.

<sup>13</sup> Onah, "Nigerian State as an equilibrium of violence" 72.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 117.

security within the nation. This atmosphere of violence has bred particularly fertile grounds for armed revolt and opposition to the state. In the north, the federal government is seen as both corrupt and indifferent toward the needs of the people. This, coupled with increasing poverty and no apparent hope of reforming the system from within, has made radicals in Nigeria feel outside the system to a degree which mandates replacing it. As seen before 2009, this started as political protest, but the July riot provoked Boko Haram to begin its campaign of violence. Violent, unregulated state intervention can be seen as the catalyst for the ongoing cycle of violence in Nigeria.

### **Crisis Resolution:**

The Nigerian government has failed to handle Boko Haram adequately from day one. Warnings from early in the rise of Boko Haram were ignored by the government.<sup>17</sup> Worse, when the government finally did react by deploying the Joint Security Force to engage the Islamic fundamentalists in 2005, the threat was seriously mishandled. Information gathered by police and military assets reports that members of the organization had been sent to hotbeds of terrorism like Pakistan to receive training in the manufacture of explosive ordinance as well as tactical training.<sup>18</sup> Despite clear knowledge of the threat, little more action was taken to follow up on this potential danger. Now that prevention is completely out of the picture, the government has resorted to violent crackdowns in hopes of eliminating the terrorist threat.

Even this strategy, however, has been massively flawed in its implementation. Instead of targeting selectively with the intent of removing Boko Haram assets, the Joint Security Force has earned itself a reputation for brutality almost equal to that of their enemy. Nigerian security forces have reportedly caused massive damage to private property, killed citizens, performed

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<sup>17</sup> Adegbulu "From Guerilla Tactics to Outright Terrorism" 72.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 73.

numerous extra-judicial killings, failed to follow proper investigatory measures, performed torture, and utilized dragnet arrests.<sup>19</sup> Instead of resolving the problem, the government has instead alienated the people even more. This is especially dangerous when operating a counter-terrorist plan, which requires the support of the people to help locate and eliminate Boko Haram assets. Instead of encouraging public support, the Joint Security Force has driven more aggravated youth into the arms of Boko Haram, further fueling the fire.

The first policy reform necessary to bring about peace in Nigeria is readily apparent; resolve the crisis of government. Restoring faith in government is necessary to legitimize attacks on Boko Haram and any incidental damage that may be caused. Democratic reform will undoubtedly play a major role in this process, as fighting political corruption has become a major selling point of Boko Haram's ideology. Providing free and fair elections, preferably with international oversight to lend legitimacy to the process, will bring in new political actors capable of improving the system and supporting citizens needs. Installing an independent agency, again with the possibility of international support, and tasking it to investigate cases of corruption within the state apparatus would also significantly improve approval of the government.

Second, the inadequacies of the security response must be addressed. The Joint Security Force has acted with complete and utter disregard for the constitutional rights of the Nigerian people, and in doing so, has offended and radicalized them. War criminals must be brought to court for their crimes, and officers must be better equipped to control their troops in the field. This means a complete reform of the military administration, which also mandates a replacement of leadership. For the time it takes to institute this revamping of the system, an international

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<sup>19</sup> Okoro, "Terrorism and governance crisis" 120.

security force may be required to continue assaults on Boko Haram assets to maintain security in Nigeria.

**Conclusion:**

The rise of Boko Haram terrorism has been a slow and painful process in Nigeria. Despite having had the opportunity to quell the threat, the Nigerian government has failed time and time again to properly respond. While the factors playing into the birth of this particular extremist group are not completely clear as of yet, it is obvious that many problems have aggravated the youth of northern Nigeria to the point of violence. In order to resolve the violence attributed to Boko Haram, the state must legitimize itself democratically. Corruption must be combated, and economic aid programs must be utilized to improve conditions in the volatile North. Until economic recovery is accomplished, the government must regulate its military more effectively so as to avoid antagonizing Nigerians and driving them into the arms of Boko Haram.

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