Boko Haram's Persistent Threat in Nigeria

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Summary

A series of bombing attacks occurred in Kano and Bauchi states of Nigeria between January 20 and 24, 2012, in which nearly 200 people were killed. The Nigerian radical Islamist group, Boko Haram, claimed responsibility for these attacks, which brought to the surface several problems associated with Nigerian society and polity. Beginning with its involvement in simple attacks by employing crude weapons to create sectarian violence, Boko Haram has grown over time in terms of the number of targets and effects of its attacks. It had killed around 510 people in various attacks in 2011. However, the latest attacks signify proper planning, particularly targeting the symbols of state as well as places of worship like police stations, government buildings, and churches. Further, the violent activities undertaken by the Islamist group signify uncertainty as well as increased insecurity, not just for Nigeria but for the region and the broader international community given Nigeria's vast oil resources, its porous borders, Boko Haram's linkages with foreign extremist groups, and selection of international targets like the UN building in Abuja; hence, the call for collaborated action.

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Evolution of Boko Haram

The radical Islamist group of Boko Haram was formed in 2002 in Maiduguri, capital of Borno state. It is officially called *Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad* (Arabic for "People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad")'. But it has become popular by the name Boko Haram, which means 'Western education is sinful' in the Hausa language'.[1] However, it is not Nigeria's first extremist Islamic movement that has resorted to violence to challenge the established state machinery; in fact, extremist Islamic movements in Nigeria appeared as early as the nineteenth century with differing motives and approaches.[2] Nevertheless, the various radical Islamic movements in Nigeria share some commonality in terms of their criticism of the government for its inability to deal with socio-economic problems, especially in the northern areas of the country. They also tend to reject Western education and values for their supposed negative influence on the tenets of Islam by encouraging secularism. One such group was the *Muhajirun*, out of which Boko Haram actually emerged. Not satisfied with the introduction of *Sharia* law at the state-level only in the north, the group demands the adoption of Islamic rule across the country.[3]

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[1]   Stewart, Scott (2012), "Nigeria's Boko Haram Militants Remain a Regional Threat", Security Weekly, January 26, 2012, available at http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/nigerias-boko-haram-militants-remain-regional-threat, accessed on January 28, 2012.

[2]   For details of these movements, see "Boko Haram: Nigeria's Growing New Headache", IISS Strategic Comments, Volume 17, Comment 42, November 2011, pp.1-2.

[3]   The Iranian Revolution of 1979 encouraged the demand for adoption of Sharia law across Nigeria. The Nigerian Islamist groups were also influenced by Saudi-sponsored missionaries from Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Libya, Pakistan, and other countries which began promoting Wahhabi doctrine and orthodoxy during the 1990s. This led to the adoption of Sharia law in 12 northern states between

Although Boko Haram draws its inspiration from the broader Islamist agenda, it is also motivated by localised socio-economic and politico-religious grievances. Nigeria is a highly polarised country with nearly 350 ethnic groups speaking 250 languages.[4] About 50 per cent of the country's population is Muslim, mostly settled in the north, and 40 per cent Christian, settled in the south. The traditional, pastoral, and nomadic northerners could not perform well economically as compared to the advanced, farming southern communities. Nearly 75 per cent of northerners live in poverty, compared to 27 per cent of southerners. This division between the Muslim north and the Christian south is often cited as the reason for the rise of Boko Haram, which has exploited these economic inequalities to its benefit.[5] There is also rampant corruption in Nigeria which has made the administrative system defunct. Quoting from an August 2011 Human Rights Watch report, Toni Johnson has noted that "corruption is so pervasive in Nigeria that it has turned public service into a kind of criminal enterprise. Graft has fuelled political violence, denied millions of Nigerians access to even the most basic health and education services, and reinforced police abuses and other patterns of human rights violations."[6]

Adding to the distress is the political discrimination of the north by way of the power shifting from the Muslim-dominated north to the Christian-dominated south since independence in 1960. For instance, a dispute over the 2011 election results, which led to the death of over 800 people, also played a role in Boko Haram's escalating violence as many northern Nigerians view the presidency of Goodluck Jonathan as illegitimate, arguing that he ignored an informal power-rotation agreement under which a Muslim should have assumed the presidency.[7] Therefore, Boko Haram's attacks were seen as an attempt, possibly funded by the northern elites, to make the country ungovernable.[8] Thus, high levels of poverty, unemployment, corruption and political discrimination in northern

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1999 and 2001. See Sam Makinda "Get to the Root Cause of Country Chaos", Business Day, January 12, 2012, available at http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Opinion+++Analysis/Get+to+the+root+cause+of+Nigeria+chaos+/-/539548/1304622/-/n6khsxz/-/index.html, accessed on January 28, 2012.

[4]   Christopher Bartolotta, "Terrorism in Nigeria: The Rise of Boko Haram", World Policy Institute, September 19, 2011, available at http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2011/09/19/terrorism-nigeria-rise-boko-haram, accessed on March 14, 2012.

[5]   According to former Nigerian Federal Minister, Nasir Ahmad El-Rufai, "...most of the apparent ethnic and religious crises in the north, and the youth violence and criminality in the south, can be linked to increasing economic inequality." See "Boko Haram: Nigeria's Growing New Headache", IISS Strategic Comments, No. 2.

[6]   Toni Johnson "Boko Haram", Council on Foreign Relations, December 27, 2011, available at http://www.cfr.org/africa/boko-haram/p25739, accessed on January 28, 2012.

[7]   Ibid.

[8]   Gbenga Omokhunu, "Boko Haram's Plan Has Failed, Says Minister", The Nation, August 15, 2011, available at http://www.thenationonlineng.net/2011/index.php/news/15915-boko-haram's-plan-has-failed,-says-minister.htm, accessed on January 28, 2012.

Nigeria, combined with population increase, has turned the north into an ideal recruitment ground for Boko Haram, which has exploited the long-term neglect of the north to recruit unemployed and marginalised youth to its cadres.

The group was led by Mohammmed Yusuf, a radical Islamist cleric who was associated with the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) and who had been part of the committee implementing *Sharia* law in Borno state.[9] Yusuf was arrested in 2009 on charges of incitement to violence and support of terrorism. His arrest led to violent clashes between his followers (also called Yusuffiya) and the police. After Yusuf's death under suspicious circumstances while in police custody, his deputy, Abubakar bin Muhammad Shekau (also known as Abu Muhammad) is currently leading the group.[10]

To begin with, Boko Haram was mainly engaged in simple attacks against government and security establishments in the North as well as Christians in order to foment sectarian violence. Its first major attack was in July 2009 in Maiduguri against "Westernised" clerics and elites, which left more than 700 people dead and forced 5,000 to flee.[11] The extent of violence unleashed through these attacks showed that "Boko Haram was capable of mobilising thousands of people and was better trained and armed than the government forces had thought."[12] The government responded with military force by either killing or arresting the main leaders of the sect and claimed victory. However, the government intervention was only moderately successful in controlling the group, which resurfaced in 2011 two years after its supposed defeat. The year 2011 also saw an escalation in the group's attacks as evident from a series of incidents such as the assassination of a candidate in the race to become governor of Borno state in January, burning down a hotel in Maiduguri in April, bombing of the national police headquarters in Abuja in June, suicide car-bombing of the United Nations (UN) building in Abuja in August, and attacks in the north-eastern states of Yobe and Borno in November-December in which more than 100 people died.[13] The attack against the UN compound also marked a departure from Boko Haram's traditional target set of government and Christian facilities. Further, bombings

9   According to Paul Lubeck, Yusuf was a Salafist (a school of thought often associated with jihad), and was influenced by Ibn Taymiyyah, a 14th century legal scholar who preached Islamic fundamentalism and is considered a "major theorist" for radical groups in the Middle East. Quoted in Johnson, "Boko Haram", Council on Foreign Relations, No. 6.

10   Leela Jacinto, "Can Talking to Boko Haram Give Peace a Chance?", France 24, January 28, 2012, available at http://www.france24.com/en/20120127-nigerians-puzzle-over-goodluck-jonathan-challenge-boko-haram-islamist-youtube, accessed on January 28, 2012.

11   Makinda, "Get to the Root Cause of Country Chaos", Business Day, No.3.

12   "Boko Haram: Nigeria's Growing New Headache", IISS Strategic Comments, No. 2.

13   Drew Hinshaw, "Islamists Kill Dozens in Nigeria", The Wall Street Journal, November 7, 2011, available at http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204190704577021773278006642.html, accessed on March 15, 2012.

on Christmas Day in Abuja, targeting churches and killing dozens, raised fears about the possibility of another spate of religious violence between Muslims and Christians.[14]

As recently as January 2012, the militant group carried out a series of bombing attacks and armed assaults. On January 20, it used two suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) to attack Kano, Nigeria's second-largest city and the capital of Kano state, in which nearly 200 people were killed.[15] It carried out a second attack in Bauchi state on January 22, bombing two churches in the Bauchi metropolitan area and attacking a police station in the Tafawa Balewa local government area. In a third attack, Boko Haram militants attacked a police sub-station in Kano on January 24 in an attempt to release some of their cadres who had been arrested following the January 20 and 22 attacks. These attacks indicate that the group has become more sophisticated, its confidence has grown given its capability to coordinate multiple strikes, and it is no longer a local problem but a threat to Nigeria's national security.

External Linkages

The increased sophistication in Boko Haram's attacks can be linked to growing foreign support to the group. There has been speculation about Boko Haram's interaction with two al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in other African countries – al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in northwest Africa and al-Shabaab in Somalia – for possible training of Nigerians to fight for the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in Nigeria. In August 2011, General Carter Ham, Commander of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), said it was likely that Boko Haram had established contacts with AQIM and al-Shabaab."[16] In a similar vein, the Algerian Deputy Foreign Minister, Abdelkader Messahel, said he had "no doubts that coordination exists between Boko Haram and al-Qaeda", citing intelligence reports and similar operating methods.[17]

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[14] "Pope Condemns Christmas Bombing in Nigeria", The Times of India, December 26, 2011, available at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/europe/Pope-condemns-Christmas-bombing-in-Nigeria/articleshow/11257252.cms, accessed on March 15, 2012.

[15] The Kano attacks specially targeted the regional police headquarters that directs police operations in Kano, Katsina, and Jigawa states as well as the State Security Service office and the Nigerian Immigration Service office. See Stewart, "Nigeria's Boko Haram Militants Remain a Regional Threat", Security Weekly, No. 1.

[16] Jon Gambrell "AP Interview: US General Sees Nigeria Terror Link", Associated Press, August 17, 2011, available at http://news.yahoo.com/ap-interview-us-general-sees-nigeria-terror-145747780.html, accessed on January 28, 2012.

[17] Lamine Chikhi, "Algeria Says Nigeria's Boko Haram Tied to al Qaeda", Reuters, November 13, 2011, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/13/us-nigeria-sect-algeria-idUSTRE7AC0SV20111113, accessed on March 15, 2012.

Response of the Government

Boko Haram is believed to consist of 300 fighters with a network of supporters. Currently, the radical group is more violent than ever, putting greater pressure on Nigeria's security forces to deal decisively with the group and prevent further attacks. Attacks in the Nigerian capital also demonstrated that the militant group is now capable of carrying out operations far from its usual areas of operation. Boko Haram has also changed its position over time. Its earlier demands were the release of followers in captivity; justice for those killed; withdrawal of the army from Maiduguri; and the nationwide imposition of *Sharia* law. Now, the group wants the Christians expelled from the Muslim-majority north.[18] Faced with its call for an Islamic caliphate and increasingly sophisticated guerrilla tactics, Nigerian Defence Minister, Bello Halliru Mohammed, has compared Nigeria's current position to that of the United States after 9/11.[19]

The Nigerian government has employed a mix of solutions ranging from crackdowns to outreach programmes to amnesty offers to deal with Boko Haram. Since 2004, it has deployed troops to the regions where the group is active. This is by far the largest military deployment since the 1967–70 Civil War. President Goodluck Jonathan has stated that his government would not relax its posture until the terrorists are "wiped out". Following repeated outbreaks of violence in north and central Nigeria, troops have been stationed in around ten states, including Borno, Kaduna, Plateau, and Bauchi. House-to-house armed searches by the Joint Task Force (JTF) of police and military in Maiduguri has prompted Boko Haram to relocate its base to Damaturu, capital of Yobo state, to which, in turn, additional government forces have been deployed. Further, the federal government approved the establishment of permanent operational bases for JTFs in the states of Bauchi, Yobe, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Adamawa. On January 27, 2012, the Nigerian military shot dead 11 Boko Haram members in Maiduguri.

Britain and Israel have already offered anti-terror assistance to Nigeria and there have been unconfirmed reports that some 300 Nigerian soldiers were sent to the United States as part of the Nigerian Army's long-standing relationship with its American counterparts to receive training in counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism and bomb-disposal specifically aimed at fighting Boko Haram. However, the Nigerian Army has denied this.[20] Meanwhile, the Nigerian immigration authorities, in conjunction with a military task force, have tightened control along the country's international borders with Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, because of suspicion that some Boko Haram members come from neighbouring

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18   "Nigeria Under Siege", The Hindu, January 25, 2012.

19   "Boko Haram: Nigeria's Growing New Headache", IISS Strategic Comments, No. 2.

20   Fidelis Soriwei et al, "Army Deploys US-Trained Nigerian Commandos in the North", The Punch, November 13, 2011, available at http://odili.net/news/source/2011/nov/13/806.html, accessed on March 15, 2012.

countries taking advantage of porous borders. Recently, President Jonathan asked the group to state its demands so that negotiations could be conducted to end the fighting. However, Boko Haram rejected the offer saying it was impossible for the group to surrender weapons while its members were being killed by government forces.[21]

Why Does the Problem Persist?

However, the use of force has not yielded the desired results. In fact, President Goodluck Jonathan admitted that the current security situation in Nigeria is more complex as compared with the civil war. He also admitted that Boko Haram sympathisers are in his government and security agencies, thus adding to the complexity of the situation.[22]

Nigeria's failure to contain the Boko Haram can be attributed to many reasons. First, Nigerian officials did not at first pay due attention to the militant group, considered it as an insignificant localised problem, and hoped that it would fade away in the course of time. For example, former Nigerian President, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, went ahead with a scheduled state visit to Brazil in 2009 right in the middle of Boko Haram's uprising, despite the fact that the revolt was intensifying in four states and, eventually, left more than 700 people dead and destroyed numerous public buildings.[23]

Second, the worsening socio-economic conditions of northern Nigeria, including economic stagnation, unemployment, lack of education, corruption, and political marginalisation, have tempted the ignorant, destitute, and disillusioned citizens to either take recourse to violence to get their genuine demands fulfilled or sympathise with the groups that are fighting for the same. These issues were also highlighted by governors like Kashim Shettima of Borno State, who spoke quite bluntly about the North's economic stagnation and political isolation. This condition in the north has also worked as a fertile ground for recruits for movements promising a radical transformation of Nigerian society like Boko Haram.

Third, as former US Ambassador to Nigeria, John Campbell, noted, the military and the police in Nigeria are national forces, not local. This indicates that troops operating in the north are unlikely to share ethnic and cultural ties with the local population and, therefore, are lees sympathetic to the cause of the northerners. As a result, human rights abuses have been reported wherein the security forces engaged in torturing, shooting civilians

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21   "Nigeria Army Kills 11 Boko Haram Islamists", BBC News, January 28, 2012, available at http:// www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16777008, accessed on January 28, 2012.

22   "Boko Haram No Longer a Purely Nigerian Problem", Zee News, January 15, 2012, available at http://zeenews.india.com/news/exclusive/boko-haram-no-longer-a-purely-nigerian-problem_752678.html, accessed on January 28, 2012.

23   Interview of Zee News' Kamna Arora with Dr J. Peter Pham, Director of the Michael S Ansari Africa Center at the Atlantic Council, ibid.

and burning their homes. Boko Haram has specifically stated that some of its attacks have been carried out in response to these actions of government forces.[24] President Jonathan's call for peace is an admission that the use of force has proven to be ineffective in the north.

Fourth, Boko Haram has links with foreign extremist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Shabaab, which have influenced the militant group with both tactical knowledge and ideological affinity. This has also raised fears that due to its rapidly expanding attack capability, Boko Haram is on a trajectory to become the next international jihadist franchise group in the region. This has transformed Boko Haram into a regional problem, one that requires a response not only from the Nigerian government, but also from the country's neighbours.

Finally, attempts at reforming and secularising the Nigerian society by way of de-radicalisation under the "Perception Management" programme of the State Security Service (SSS) have not yielded the desired results. For example, a 2008 diplomatic cable from the American embassy in Abuja, published by Wikileaks, highlighted that it was common practice in Nigeria that Islamist terrorist suspects who have espoused or otherwise participated in extremist-cum-terrorist activities are released from jail on the condition that they would be handed over to "sureties" or imams for re-education. However, the imams have "contended that the so-called de-radicalisation efforts of the SSS were not only ill-conceived, but also ineffective, counter-productive, and unimpressive."[25]

Possible Options

While Boko Haram is essentially treated as a security issue, Nigeria needs to find effective ways of addressing the root causes for its emergence; these lie in socio-economic and political developments in the country. Therefore, some kind of federal intervention is needed, especially in education and healthcare, and greater pressure needs to be exerted on the northern elites to develop the region. The Government needs to advance employment programmes to deal with social and political grievances in the north. It also needs to ensure that Nigeria's vast natural and political resources are used to fuel growth and development for the benefit of all, rather than consumed in a "downward spiral of corruption, internal conflict, and violence."[26]

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[24] "Muslim Group Claims Nigeria Blasts, Nigerian Officials Skeptical", Sahara Reporters, December 28, 2010, available at http://saharareporters.com/news-page/muslim-group-claims-nigeria-blasts-nigerian-officials-sceptical-al-jazeera, accessed on March 14, 2012.

[25] "Nigeria: Terrorism Suspects Granted Bail", US Embassy Cable - 08ABUJA538 (Wikileaks), March 20, 2008, available at http://cables.mrkva.eu/cable.php?id=146747, accessed on March 14, 2012.

[26] J. Peter Pham, "Goodluck's Win—and Nigeria's", New Atlanticist, April 19, 2011, available at http://www.acus.org/new_atlanticist/goodluck's-win—and-nigeria's, accessed on March 15, 2012.

At the same time, there are internal differences within the Islamic movement which can be positively exploited by the government. For example, there have been rumours of splits within the movement since 2009, with one among the three factions increasingly willing to kill as it maintains contact with terror groups in North Africa and Somalia. In 2011, internal differences became more evident as some elements, including the Yusufiyya Islamic Movement (YIM), condemned the targeting of civilians and distanced themselves from attacks against places of worship.

Further, there are some qualities of Nigerian society which can be leveraged into an effective political weapon against Boko Haram's deadly violence. For example, the bulk of the terrorist attacks have been in the northern states, with Muslims being the main victims. Moreover, the north stands to lose much more than the south if the country were to split because Nigeria's greatest asset and foreign exchange earner, oil, lies in the southern states. Above all, the overwhelming majority of Nigerians do not take religious differences to extremes.

In short, there is no purely military solution to the problem of Boko Haram. What is essential to incapacitate the group is not Nigerian military prowess but a long-term response to address the issue in all its complexity, including the root causes of radicalisation. The solution to the problem should be a mix of security and development. At the same time, Boko Haram has the intent and ability to become a transnational challenge. Therefore, the international community should be prepared to assist Nigeria, while refraining from exacerbating the situation through undue pressure or alarmism.