

*Review*

# 'Boko Haram' and terrorism in Nigeria: Exploratory and explanatory notes

A.I. Ajayi

Department of History, Adeyemi College of Education, P.M.B 520, Ondo, Nigeria.  
E-mail: [ajayi\\_gboyega@yahoo.com](mailto:ajayi_gboyega@yahoo.com); Tel.: +2348023771996

Accepted 29 June, 2020

In this study we examined the origin of the Boko Haram movement in Nigeria and how it transformed from a fundamentalist religious group to a terrorist organization. Root causes like poverty, unemployment, politicization of religion and general socio-economic malaise afflicting the nation are focused upon as explanations for the evolution of extremist religious groups. We also discussed foreign links and supports for the Boko Haram movement as well as the manifestations of its terrorist activities. While admitting that it may take some time before the scourge of Boko Haram can be obliterated we feel that in the short run its activities can be curtailed and contained by beefing up security operations while more fundamental remedial measures should be initiated in order to prevent a re-occurrence of acts of terrorism by Boko Haram or any other aggrieved party in the future.

**Keywords:** Boko haram, terrorism, Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

In Hausa language 'Boko' means book (especially Western or foreign) while 'Haram' is an arabic word meaning 'forbidden', 'ungodly' or 'sinful'. If the words are pieced together, 'Boko Haram' literally means 'book is sinful' (Danjibo, 2009:7 and Adesoji, 2010:100). But fundamentally the import is that Western education/civilisation is sinful, sacrilegious or ungodly and should be forbidden. Thus Boko Haram stands for outright rejection of Western education, Western culture and modern science. Rather it advocates the propagation of strict adherence to Islam in its purest form. Boko Haram represents the vision and mission of a fundamentalist Islamic movement in Nigeria. The sect known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (people committed to the propagation of the prophet's teachings and Jihad) seeks to Islamize Nigeria by whatever means at its disposal and at whatever human cost. This brings in the terrorism angle. So far the dastardly activities of this sect have been confined to the Northern states and the Federal Capital Territory but

there are indications that the scope may widen with time and more logistic support. Before we go into the origins of the movement and details of its activities we need to have a proper understanding of "terrorism". This is a value-laden concept that is difficult to capture in a single definition. Therefore, we will prefer to dwell more on descriptions primarily before embracing a working definition. Terrorism is from the word 'terror' which conjures the image of fear and trepidation. It is an act intended to instill fear and submission in the targeted victim(s). It is usually unprovoked, random and unpredictable while its commonest form is bombing. It could also take the form of hijacking of commercial aircraft, kidnapping, assassination, gun attack, arson and frontal assaults on important state institutions. The essential purpose being the desire to draw attention to, and/or gain sympathy for, a cause. The perpetrators are usually religious fundamentalists, extremists of the right and left, governments and underground organizations.

While drawing a distinction between fascism and

terrorism, Walter Laqueur (1996) observe that although violence is common to both, "terrorism is still no synonym for fascism but merely an instrument, a means to an end, and the ends often are very different in character" (Laqueur, 1996: 224). Simply put, terrorism is more all-pervading as it could be employed by virtually any aggrieved person or persons irrespective of ideological persuasions to further a cause (just or unjust). Thus, Scarpitti and Anderson's (1992) definition of terrorism as "the collective mode of politically oriented violence" (p.95) does not represent the total picture. It could also be religiously oriented as in the case under examination in this study. For our purpose in this study and based on the foregoing discourse we prefer to adopt as our working definition that which conceives terrorism as, "the use or threat of violence that is limited in its physical destructiveness but high in psychological impact because it creates fear and shock" (Encyclopedia Americana, Int. Ed.,1998:523). It is against this background that we will discuss the Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, conveniently referred to in this study as "Boko Haram" and its terrorist activities; the pre-disposing factors; root causes; external links/support, manifestations of terrorist activities before suggesting the way out in a concluding section. This shall be undertaken under the following broad categories:

- (i) Politicization of Religion and the Evolution of the Boko Haram Movement;
- (ii) External Links/Support and the Militarization of the Movement;
- (iii) Manifestations of Terrorism by Boko Haram;
- (iv) Concluding Remarks

These shall be addressed in the order in which they are listed above.

### **Politicization of Religion and the Evolution of the Boko Haram Movement**

The Northern region of Nigeria has always been a very fertile ground for religious activism, beginning with the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, partly because of the inability or unwillingness of the ruling elite to separate politics from religion (Ajayi, 1990:55-65). Since they often derived legitimacy from religion and not the people they frequently employ religion as a political weapon for self preservation, mass mobilization, perpetuation in office and diversion of attention from their ineptitude, corruption and incompetence. This is not peculiar to the North for as Yusuf Bala Usman (1979) has rightly observed.

*The intermediary bourgeois (the ruling elite-ours) cannot claim political leadership openly on the grounds that he is, or wants to be, an exporter, shareholder, rentier or rich bureaucrat. He has to take over as a Muslim or Christian. He has to take over as an Ibo (sic), Hausa, Idoma*

*or Efik... The manipulation of religion in Nigeria today is essentially a means of creating the context for this fancy dress ball, for this charade of disguises. This game of masks (pp. 88-89).*

Thus, while the ruling elites in the Southern region of Nigeria, which is predominantly Christian, have been patronizing Christianity for selfish political gains their Northern counterparts have also been manipulating Islam for the same purpose. But the situation in the North is more manifest because of its relatively monolithic character; a situation brought about first by the Jihad and later by colonialism. Ever since many fundamentalist religious groups, the most prominent being the Maitatsine sect, evolved to confront the pretentious ruling elites through several religious uprisings (Oyovbaire, 1980:20-21). The Maitatsine movement under the leadership of Alhaji Marwa Maitatsine, an immigrant, was made up of a bunch of religious fanatics. Their modus operandi was assault and murder of both the rich and the poor, irrespective of religious learning, who in their reckoning were not conducting themselves according to the dictates of the Quoran. The half-hearted implementation of the sharia laws, especially the double standard or duplicity involved, in the Northern states of Sokoto, Kano and Borno elicited the "justifiable" anger of the "puritanic" Maitatsine group which proceeded to spearhead religious uprisings in Kano (twice in 1980) which later spread to Yola and Maiduguri in 1982 and 1983 respectively. Evidently, Boko Haram had its roots in and drew inspiration from the Maitatsine uprisings of the early 1980s, in terms of objectives but its organizational planning, armed resistance and modus operandi are more in tune with Taliban (Danyibo, 2009) as we shall show later. The actual date when the extremist sect evolved is still a subject of controversy. The years, 1995, 1999, 2000, 2002 and 2003 have been freely ascribed to it at different quarters. However, a group known as Shabaab Muslim Youth Organization evolved in 1995, was said to have progressively metamorphosed to become Boko Haram by year 2000 (Danyibo, 2009). This position has been reinforced by a report in the Sunday Tribune of 12th February, 2012 which stated that information at the disposal of the different security agencies indicated that contrary to the widely held believe that the Boko Haram started around 2003, the group has been existing since 1995. It probably maintained a shadowy existence until around 1999 when Mustapha Modu Jon, commonly called Mohammed Yusuf, assumed the leadership of the group. Mallam Mohammed Yusuf, who was to be extrajudicially executed in 2009 while in police detention, was said to have successfully radicalized the group and opened it to foreign collaboration, especially with the Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Under him the group stepped up its activism and intensified the propagation of an extreme Islamic doctrine which sees Western education and democracy as corruptive and immoral (Sunday

Tribune, 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2012). He soon established his own mosque in Maiduguri which in effect became the headquarters of the group as well as the dispersal centre for its doctrine. Contrary to the belief in official circles the death of Mohammed Yusuf in police custody in 2009, unlike that of Maitatsine, did not lead to the eclipse of the group. Instead his followers not only multiplied but they spread to other parts of the region to establish Boko Haram presence. These were largely illiterate youths some of whom were school dropouts or petty itinerant traders, who with the ready made army of jobless drifters, especially the Almajiri, soon bonded and made their presence felt in Borno, Yobe and Bauchi States.

Without doubt many Muslims were not satisfied by the adoption of Sharia Law in 12 Northern States between 1999 and 2001, because they felt it was either too watered down and discriminatory in favour of the rich and highly-placed or that the whole of Nigerian State should have been Islamized (Dearn, 2011). The killing of Mohammed Yusuf in police custody added the angle of vendetta to the struggle. Little wonder therefore that the police and other security agencies have been focused upon chiefly by this terrorist sect for reprisal.

### **External Links/Support and the Militarization of the Movement**

It has been established that by 2004 the sect leaders had established links with the Algerian Salafist Group, now known as Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which gave some of their members training in combat, weapons handling and use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDS). From trainings acquired in AQIM, it was gathered that members of Boko Haram were able to show dexterity in handling of weapons and manufacture of "dirty bombs" through IEDS (Dearn, 2011). It has also been revealed by the government that an Algerian terrorist group transferred 40 million Naira to Boko Haram in Nigeria. But the government source failed to reveal the bank(s) involved and the receivers (i.e. the contact links) perhaps for security or political reasons (Adepoju, 2012). Some powerful figures and sophisticated guerrilla fighter strategists are behind the group given "the evidence of economic power and strategic sophistication in Boko Haram... their total method of war, from the economic value of their weapons and vehicles, to the deadly refinement of their combat strategy and the effective combination of propaganda of obfuscation and terror in line with deadly military attacks" (Adepoju, 2012).

Accusing fingers have also been pointed at some political 'heavyweights' in the North as well as the Northern Summit Group as covert backers of the terrorist group (Adepoju, 2012). But there is no hard fact linking such individuals and group to the sect. Nonchalance, ambivalence and even empathy are not sufficient grounds to establish collaboration or complicity. But

implicitly the manipulation of religion, poverty, and political intrigues are strong factors in stoking the embers of terrorism; seen in this context as a war unleashed by the oppressed against an oppressor (real or imagined). Unfortunately the greatest casualties in this deadly war are the innocent impoverished masses that do not have the wherewithal to secure themselves and their properties. This and the unprovoked attacks on churches and Christians by the terrorists, ostensibly to actualize the complete islamisation of the North, makes Boko Haram's terrorist activities unjustifiable and criminal given the secular status of Nigeria. Poverty and vagrancy have no religious boundaries just as the oppressors too cut across ethnic or religious divides.

The extent of chaos and instability that would ensue if every religious persuasions decides to drive their vision and mission through violence is better imagined.

### **Manifestations of Terrorism by Boko Haram**

The dastardly terrorist activities of Boko Haram have manifested profoundly in the various bomb/gun attacks on police stations, army barracks, prisons, churches as well as some other public institutions, and prominent personalities. The major incidents, especially as from 2009, are highlighted in a tabular form below.

The incidents listed in the table below are neither exhaustive nor terminal. There are some other incidents that are either under-reported or not verifiable that are not captured. Even at that the table paints a gory picture of the effects of Boko Haram's dastardly activities and the state of security in the land. It can be seen from the table that the group's terrorist activities have been expanding (in terms of scope and severity) progressively since 2009. Even, in spite of the clamp down on the group by security agencies and some efforts at dialogue between representatives of the group and the federal government, the situation has not changed appreciably. In fact it seems to be getting worse.

The surreptitious nature of terrorism makes it very difficult to control. When desperate forces, like Boko Haram, are determined to unleash terror on an unsuspecting people there is little that anybody or group can do in the short run to counter such moves, since in most cases the deed would have been done before comprehension sets in. The situation is further compounded by the fact that some of the perpetrators of the evil act are often prepared to lay down their lives in the process (the suicide bombers, for example) believing that the end justifies the means as they would be adequately rewarded in heaven. To such persons acts of terrorism are to be seen as Jihads. This partially explains why many terrorists always invoke Islamic injunctions to justify their actions.

This, therefore, presents a fundamental problem of being anti-terrorist without appearing to be anti-Islam.

**Table.** Instances of Boko Haram Attacks: July 2009 to April 2012.

Serial No	Date	Incidents (Nature and Location)	Casualty Figures
1	July 26, 2009	Boko Haram (BH) launched attack on Police Station in Bauchi triggering a five day uprising that spread to Maiduguri	Not Available (NA)
2.	September 7, 2010	BH attacked a prison in Bauchi and freed 700 inmates former sect members inclusive	5 guards killed
3.	October 11, 2010	Bomb/Gun attack on a Police Station in Maiduguri by the group	3 persons injured
4.	December 24, 2010	Bomb attack in Jos	8 people killed instantly
5.	December 28, 2010	BH claims responsibility for the Christmas eve bombing in Jos	38 people died in all
6.	December 31, 2010	Attack on Mammy market at Army Mogadishu Barracks, Abuja	11 people died
7.	April 11, 2011	BH attacked Police Station in Bauchi	N.A
8.	April 9, 2011	BH bombed a Polling Centre in Maiduguri	N.A
9.	April 20, 2011	Bombing in Maiduguri	1 Policeman killed
10.	April 22, 2011	BH attacked a Prison in Yola and freed 14 prisoners	N.A
11.	April 24, 2011	Four bombs detonated in Maiduguri	3 people killed
12.	May 29, 2011	Bombing of Army Barracks in Bauchi and Maiduguri	15 people killed
13.	May 31, 2011	Assassination of Abba Anas Ibn Umar Garbai, brother of the Shehu of Borno in Maiduguri	1 person killed
14.	June 1, 2011	Assassination of Abba El-Kanenu-Shehu of Borno's brother in Maiduguri	1 person killed
15.	June 7, 2011	Parallel Gun and bomb attacks on a church and police stations in Maiduguri	5 people killed
16.	June 16, 2011	BH bombed Police Headquarters in Abuja	Casualty reports vary
17.	June 26, 2011	Bomb attack on a Bar in Maiduguri	25 people killed
18.	August 16, 2011	Bombing of United Nations Office Complex in Abuja	Over 34 people killed
19.	December 25, 2011	Bombing of St. Theresa Catholic Church, Madalla	Over 46 people killed
20.	January 6, 2012	BH attacked some Southerners in Mubi	13 people killed
21	January 21, 2012	Multiple bomb blasts rocked Kano city	Over 185 people killed
22.	January 29, 2012	Bombing of a Police Station at Naibawa area of Yakatabo, Kano State	N.A
23.	February 8, 2012	Bomb blast rocked Army Headquarters in Kaduna	N.A
24.	February 15, 2012	Attack on Koton Karfe Prison, Kogi State in which 119 prisoners were freed	1 Warder killed
25.	February 19, 2012	Bomb blast near Christ Embassy Church, in Suleija, Niger State	5 people injured
26.	February 26, 2012	Bombing of Church of Christ in Nigeria, Jos	2 people killed and 38 injured
27.	March 8, 2012	An Italian – Franco Lamolinara; and a Briton Christopher McManus expatriate staff of Stabilim Visioni Construction Company abducted since mid-2011 were killed by a splinter group of BH.	2 people killed
28.	March 11, 2012	Bombing of St. Finbarr's Catholic Church Rayfield, Jos	11 people killed and many injured
29.	April 26, 2012	Bombing of three media Houses: (a) This Day, Abuja,  (b) This Day; The Sun and The Moments in Kaduna	5 people killed and 13 injured Abuja. 3 people killed and many injured in Kaduna.
30.	April 29, 2012	Attack on Bayero University, Kano	16 people killed and many injured
31.	April 30, 2012	Bomb explosion in Jalingo	11 people killed and several others wounded

**Source:** Collated from: Punch, 17, June 2011; Punch, 23 February, 2012; Punch, 27 February, 2012; Guardian, 20 February, 2012, Guardian, 12 March, 2012; Nigerian Tribune 30, January 2012; Punch, 27 April, 2012; Punch 30, April 2012; and, Guardian, 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2012.

One way of divesting terrorism of religious coloration is through well packaged information and mass education about the subject with particular attention being focused

on the fact that no known religion endorses terrorism overtly or tacitly. But for as long as acts of terrorism are glorified by indiscreet mass media coverage it will be very

difficult to curtail them. It should be noted that capturing headlines gives psychological boost to the perpetrators for as Scarpetti and Andersen (1992) have rightly observed, acts of terrorism usually includes the quest for publicity (Scarpetti and Anderson, 1992:96-97). This is especially so in this new age when improved communication has reduced the world into a global village. The mass media, therefore, have a responsibility not to sensationalize acts of terrorism but to condemn them in unmistakable terms.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have attempted to explore the origins of the Boko Haram movement; its link with foreign religious fundamentalist groups and its transformation into a terrorist group. In the process, the internal socio-political environment of Nigeria (especially the Northern part) was examined for the purpose of establishing root causes and pre-disposing factors of religious extremism. Some instances of the group's terrorist activities are also highlighted. It could be seen from these that the country is facing serious problem of insecurity and instability which could reach a breaking point in no time if concrete remedial actions are not quickly taken. Without doubt, there are constraints for government action such as the problem of how to be anti-terrorist without being considered anti-Islam and the counter-productive nature of the mass media's over glorification of terrorist acts, among others. However, it is our belief that these are surmountable with proper information dissemination, mass education, resourceful intelligence gathering and improved security operations.

Fundamentally government must address the problems of mass unemployment, poverty and illiteracy concretely in order to deplete the ranks of malcontents who constitute a ready pool of foot soldiers for criminal

activities. Without doubt all these will take some time to accomplish and so in the short run security agencies must be beefed up to enhance their operational efficiency. Along side with this, government must also give positive consideration to the increasingly popular demand for a national conference as a credible platform for ascertaining prevalent grievances of the diverse ethno-religious groups for possible remediation. We consider this to be very important because even if Boko Haram threat is obliterated somehow now, there are several other groups and peoples who are bidding their time before venting their anger and frustration on the nation and other hapless people.

## REFERENCES

- Adepoju O (2012). "What is the Source of Boko Haram's Sophisticated Military and Propaganda Strategy" in [yorubaaffairs@googlegroups.com](mailto:yorubaaffairs@googlegroups.com)
- Adesoji A (2010); "The Boko Haram Uprising and Islamic Revivalism in Nigeria", in *Africa Spectrum*, 45(2): 95-108
- Ajayi 'G (1990). "Government and Religious Patronage in Contemporary Nigeria (1980-1989); Implications for the Stability of the Nation", in *Zeitschrift fur Afrika Studies (ZAST)* 7/8:55-65.
- Danjibo ND (2009). *Islamic Fundamentalism and Sectarian Violence: The 'Maitatsine' and 'Boko Haram' Crises in Northern Nigeria – Peace and Conflict Studies Paper Series*, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, pp. 1 – 21.
- Dearn, M (2011). "Boko Haram: Nigeria's Terrorist Insurgency Evolves", in *Codewit World News*.
- Laqueur W (1996). *Fascism: Past, Present, Future*, New York, Oxford University Press. P. 224.
- Oyovbaire SE (1980). "The Atlantic Ocean, Gaddafi, Maitatsine and Rice-On National Security and Nigeria's African Policy" in *Niger. J. Int. Stud.*4: 1 and 2.
- Scarpitti FR, Andersen ML (1992); *Social Problems*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), New York, Harper Collins Publisher Inc.) p.95
- Sunday Tribune, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2012
- "Terrorism," in *Encyclopedia Americana International Edition* Vol. 26 (Connecticut, Grolier Incorporated, 1998) P. 523.
- Usman YB (1979). *For the Liberation of Nigeria*, London, New Beacon Books Ltd.