

THE BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY IN NIGERIA: A NATIONAL SECURITY THREAT TO THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT: Activities of violent non-state actors like the Boko Haram sect in Nigeria have greatly affected the national security of the United States. The methods employed by non-state actors enable some groups to be able to take on much stronger entities by waging asymmetric warfare. For instance, "The hijacking of airplanes was common in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The seizing of embassies was popular in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the blowing up of mid-flight airplanes took center stage in the late 1980s. Other tactics include hostage taking, the assassination of prominent individuals and detonating bombs in government or public buildings. These methods have changed over time, but history has also shown that various non-state actors use different tactics no matter what the time period. The 9/11 attacks showed the deadly combination of a mid-air hijacking, suicide mission, and the targeting of public/government/military buildings. More importantly, it showed how a non-state group could adapt their tactics to defeat Western security apparatuses in order to carry out a massive strike. The second factor is communications technology. Innovations like the Internet and cell phones have enabled groups to communicate quickly and effectively. Because the diffusion of these two innovations is so vast, it presents a great challenge to Western security agencies, particularly if the group is operating in a weak or failed state. This study highlights the activities of the Boko Haram insurgency group, as a Violent Non-State Actor (VNSA) and its implications for the United States national security, and proposes a solution that may reduce the activities of the group.

KEYWORDS: Hijack, violent, warfare, hostage, and security.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Northern region of Nigeria over the past decades has continued to experience a steady rise in terrorist's activities and violence instigated by the dreaded sectarian group called the Boko Haram. While some observers have traced the cause of these extremists violence to poverty, economic disparity, and socio-political differences within the Nigerian state, the complication and complexity of the situation has led many to believe that Boko Haram's violent extremism is beyond domestic agenda (Adejumo 2011; Dambazu 2007). The use of suicide attacks on civilian populations presents a pattern that is typical of international terrorists that is alien to Nigeria. Further, the groups' ability to garner support from the grassroots, especially from the rank and file of impoverished and the uneducated in northern Nigeria has become of great concern to the government of Nigeria (Egburonu 2012).

The group, Boko Haram, has laid a siege to the North East part of Nigeria and appears to be expanding its territory by the day. In addition to the mindless killings of defenseless and innocent Nigerians, members of the group also carry out wanton destruction of property so as to make people in the zone embrace their ideological views on Islamic religious code (Emezi 1997). To state the fact, the fear of Boko Haram in Northern part of Nigeria is the beginning of wisdom (Oshodi 2011). The group, whose agenda is to push for the enthronement of Sharia in favor of western education, has always sent fears down

the spines of young and old in the North Eastern states of Borno, Bauchi, Yobe, Adamawa, Gombe and Taraba. Wherever the group operates, it often leaves behind indelible marks of sad stories and scary scenes of destruction, maiming and death. In Borno, the stronghold of the group, many lives and property have been lost to guerrilla-like attacks unleashed on the residents of the ancient town of Maiduguri by the sect since it began its operations a few years ago.

How to respond to these domestic terrorists groups in Nigeria has become a major challenge to both the government and security officers. In April, 2014, the Boko Haram group captured international attention following the kidnap of about 270 school girls in the small town of Chibok, Borno State. Besides, over 5,000 people have been estimated to have died from the attacks by the group which has generated international outrage against the government for its slow approach in dealing with the situation (Dapo 2012; Egburonu 2012). Certainly, this is not the best of times for the Federal Government of Nigeria. Not with the colossal loss of human lives and kidnapping of the school girls. Given the timeline of Boko Haram since its operation to date is to say the least, wiping away thousands of lives. And with the failure of intelligence on the part of the security personnel, one then wonder how the insurgency can be curtailed.

2 BACKGROUND AND HISTORY OF THE GROUP

The Boko Haram terrorists group which means “Western education is forbidden” is a controversial Islamic extremists group whose sole aim is to Islamize the Northern part of Nigeria through the imposition of Sharia laws in all the states that make up Northern Nigeria. The group which started relatively unknown in 2001 has today, become a source of concern to both the Nigerian government and the international community, forcing the United States of America to formally designate it as a terrorists organization in November 2013 (Kirk 2014). Membership of this organization has been estimated to between 20, 000 to 40,000 members (U.S. Bureau of Counterterrorism 2014). Boko Haram has killed more than 5,000 civilians since 2009 to date, including at least over 2,000 in the first half of 2014 (Farouk 2014). Additionally, the group has abducted more than 500 women and children since 2009, including the kidnapping of 276 school girls from Chibok, Borno State of Nigeria in April 2014. Moreover, at least over half a million people have either fled their residences or displaced by the conflict perpetuated by the group forcing the government of Nigeria to declare a state of emergency in the three Northern states of Adamawa, Yobe, and Borno respectively in 2012 (Council on Foreign Relations 2014).

3 IDEOLOGY AND MOTIVATION

The terrorist group, Boko Haram was founded based on the Sunni Islamic sect championing the imposition of strict Sharia laws in the Northern part of Nigeria as influenced by the Wahhabi movement that seeks for an Islamic Nigeria state, while at the same time opposing western education (Bartolotta 2011). Observers believed that the Islamic Sharia law imposed by the Zamfara state government of Nigeria in January 2000 may have facilitated and promoted the activities of the group in Nigeria, Africa’s biggest economy with a population of about 170 million (Neumann 2008). During the first few years of its operation, the group conducted its activities peacefully, making people to believe that it stood for the good of the common man in society. However, Boko Haram has repeatedly attacked schools, churches, mosques and markets. Further, state institutions such as police stations and military facilities have also remained primary targets. Following a public outcry, the Nigerian government declared a state of emergency in three states – Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, and launched a military offensive against the group. The Nigerian military claims to be making major strides in defeating Boko Haram, but attacks from the group continue. There is scant opportunity to verify military claims or investigate some of the human-rights abuses purportedly committed by the army in the course of fighting the group.

Little is known about Boko Haram and its motivations, and information about the group's activities remains under a tight control. However, political observers have traced the root cause of the group’s activities to the following: great amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria by the British colonial masters in 1914, the role of ethnicity, Systemic Corruption and leadership failure, poverty, and culture of impunity (Otite 1990; Onyemaizu 2006; Ikime 1987). Since the group started its offensive, it has followed the doctrine that Western education is haram - prohibited and against the teachings of Islam. Targeting schools has become a Boko Haram trademark. This has resulted in thousands of parents across the region withdrawing their children from institutions where Western education is taught, fearing attacks. In this way, Boko Haram has succeeded in creating an environment where children are taken out of classes and schools are forced to shut down. Following the declaration of a state of emergency, the security services set out to disconnect all communication, from mobile phones to satellite phones, making it difficult to contact people to verify what is happening on the ground (Onuoh 2014). The military have, on a day-to-day basis, put out information to the public giving the impression it is succeeding in the war against Boko Haram. However, it is difficult to cross-check the military's version of events because the media have been seriously restricted from working in areas affected by the crisis (Cocks 2014).

4 THREAT ASSESSMENT FROM THE UNITED STATES

Citing several reasons which includes links to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda in AfPak, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Ansar al-Din, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, and the thousands of deaths, as well as the 2013 kidnapping and execution of seven international construction workers in the Northern part of Nigeria, the United States designated Boko Haram and the Ansaru as a terrorists organization (Onu 2014). Furthermore, the killings of about 500 people by the group in Nigeria on June 3, 2014, couple with the kidnap of over 200 girls from their school in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria this year provided an assessment of the dangers posed by the group to the Nigerian government and the international community.

Terrorism in Nigeria has revealed the current powerlessness of the West Africa regional leaders in defeating Boko Haram and other terrorists' group in the region. An assessment of the threats posed by the group to Nigeria and the world community by Henry Jackson Society showed the following:

4.1 WEAK INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL RESPONSE

The group Boko Haram, as a terrorist's organization remains a threat to the Nigeria government and the international community whose huge investment in the region is at stake. Boko Haram's threat is not just to Nigeria, but also to its neighbors such as Cameroon, Mali, Algeria, Niger, Chad, and Benin republic where its members are currently engaged in the attacks of innocent civilians. Even though the West Africa regional leaders have resolved to confront this terror group, their resolve has been marred by the lack of commitment from these leaders in the area of intelligence sharing, border control, and surveillance. Cameroon, for example remains a fertile ground for the recruitment and training ground for Boko Haram, while the infiltration of the Islamic Jihadists from the neighboring Niger republic pose a growing threat to innocent population and regional security.

4.2 BOKO HARAM'S TIES TO AL-QAEDA

The nexus between Boko Haram and the al-Qaeda group have been established and goes back a decade (Henry Jackson Society 2014). Boko Haram is known to be affiliated to at least six al-Qaeda groups like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda in AfPak, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Ansar al-Din and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa. Boko Haram's ties to al-Qaeda exist because of its affiliations to AQIM (Henry Jackson Society 2014). Also, there has been allegations that some of elements of Boko Haram have been known to have responded to the AQIM leadership in the kidnapping of foreigners in the region.

4.3 DIFFICULT MILITARY AND INTELLIGENCE SHARING

Another threat assessment of the danger posed by Boko Haram to the international community is the difficult military and intelligence sharing terrain. Because of the sheer size of the terrain to cover, coupled with the inability of the Nigeria government intelligence agency to gather adequate intelligence about the group, the use of satellites and drones by the United States government against the group is extremely difficult. Besides, by merging into the civilian population to hide their presence, the group has made it difficult for the security forces to obtain information about them. To be successful in any counter-insurgency against the group, there must be a reliable Human Intelligence network (HUMINT), which is currently lacking between the Nigeria public and the security agencies. Even with the best intelligence available, the group still thrives due to its supporters' seeming penetration of the Nigerian political and security agents (Bovard 2003).

While the Boko Haram group, as perceived by the United States and other international community is seen as less of a threat than the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or al-Shabaab in Somalia, it has killed on a scale greater than both groups. This is likely to change, especially if the group launches attacks against oil facilities in the South which could raise the stakes because of the economic interests and investments involved (Conklin 2007).

5 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no doubt that Boko Haram has posed a national security challenges to the Nigeria government. There is need for the government, with the help of other advanced nations like the United States and Great Britain to help modernize her security agencies (U.S. Department of State 2013). This will aid the government in the area of training and intelligence sharing and gathering. Further, the government must carry out some major economic and political reform that would address the economic and socio-political deprivation and the wealth inequality among the masses. Specifically, the U.S.

intelligence community should assist by playing a major role in its intelligence collection on the group using the human intelligence (HUMINT) and the signal intelligence (SIGINT) to help complement the efforts of the Nigeria security agencies. The United States intelligence could also liaise with their Nigerian counterparts by helping them build their capability to confront the threats posed by Boko Haram to Nigeria on one hand, and to the United States interests on the other (Myers 2008).

The second way the U.S. can help the Nigeria government to combat the dangers posed by the Boko Haram terror sect is for the U.S. government to form a relationship with Nigerians in diaspora, especially those living in the United States so as to learn more about the group, the driving factors, intents, sources of funding, and their sponsors so as to develop plan to target their economic life line and financial buoyancy. Moreover, the U.S. government should increase intelligence sharing with their Nigerian counterparts so as to in the words of President W. H. Bush "Anti-Terrorism Strategy' Defeat, Deny, Defend, and Diminish Boko Haram's capability. The strategy outlined by President W.H. Bush, if applied to the Nigeria situation could go a long way in the fight against terrorism in Nigeria in the area of denying the group a safe haven to operate financially, sponsorship, training, and plans to execute their attacks. Given the fact that without money, terrorists' organizations cannot operate successfully, stopping their flow of income is one of the ways of destabilizing and defeating Boko Haram in Nigeria.

The third policy recommendation for the defeat of the Boko Haram terror group is for the government of Nigeria to put in place social and economic structures that could help alleviate and diminish conditions such as poverty, unemployment, as well as educational empowerment of the youths who are vulnerable to the group's exploitation. Additionally, the government of Nigeria should remain focus in its resolve to root out religious bigots such as Boko Haram who hide under the guise of religion to inflict pain on innocent Nigerians. There should be no compromise in the war against Boko Haram because the integrity, unity, and national security of Nigeria are at stake.

6 CONCLUSION

History has shown that there is religious fanatical movement in Nigeria, as well as in the Sahel region of the continent of Africa (Johnson 2009; Henry Jackson Society 2014). In 1980, there was the appearance of the Maitatsine religious sect that killed hundreds of innocent citizens in the North East of Nigeria until they were defeated following government decisive response that quickly saw the group disappear and fled into the neighboring Chad and Niger republics respectively. Some observers believe that the Boko Haram group may have been nurtured to maturity from outside of Nigeria and received financial support from the Salafist groups in Saudi Arabia and their training from the rebel groups in the Sahel region (Henry Jackson Society 2014). The group has succeeded in exploiting many national issues such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, extra-judicial killings by the police, and the general poverty in the Northern states, as well as lack of education to boost their hold in the North Eastern states of Nigeria. While it is true that insecurity is a global issue, the strange thing is that the government of Nigeria has not been able to deal with the challenges posed by the Boko Haram's terror organizations. Most importantly, the United States should pursue a policy that could lead to the identification of Boko Haram sponsors so as to freeze their accounts here in the U.S. Further, the government of the United States should also pursue a policy that can help Nigeria diversify its economy and reduce its over-dependence on oil. Specifically, programs aimed at boosting the agricultural sector could help provide employment among the restive youths in the north, as well as in other parts of Nigeria.

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