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Boko Haram and the resilience of militant Islam in northern Nigeria

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Executive summary

Northern Nigeria is coping with a violent underground group, Boko Haram, that has been able to carry out attacks mainly in northern states, but also in Abuja by bombing the United Nations Nigerian headquarters. The targeting of prisons, barracks, security officers and politicians makes the lay population feel unsafe, since violence has become unpredictable. The state apparatus is so visibly challenged that it tends to overreact and actually kills even more civilians than Boko Haram does.

Boko Haram has to be understood in different ways that draw different recommendations on the way to tackle the problems it presents. Firstly, it refers to the long history of the region and the recurrence of radical Islamic movements. Secondly, Boko Haram has deep roots in the social and economic marginalisation of a large section of the northern states' population. A third understanding of Boko Haram emphasises the revenge dimension and questions the behaviour of the law enforcement agencies, their poor respect for the rule of law and the militarisation of any response to challenges to the central state. The fourth vision sees Boko Haram as a tool used by northern Nigerian elites to express their grievances against the lack of interest showed by the central state. Lastly, because of its developing connections with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and possibly al-Shabaab, Boko Haram is changing the scope of its grievances and providing the ground for a lasting confrontation between radicalised Muslims and others in Africa.

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Over the last two years northern Nigeria has been coping with a violent underground group, Boko Haram, that has been able to carry out attacks not only in Nigeria's northern states, but also in the capital, Abuja, with the bombing of the United Nations (UN) headquarters there in August 2011. Although attacks have mainly targeted state institutions such as prisons, barracks, security officers and politicians, the civilian population feels increasingly unsafe as violence has become unpredictable. Moreover, the state security apparatus is so visibly challenged that it has tended to overreact when attempting to deal with the problem and has killed even more civilians than the Boko Haram attacks.

There are several ways to analyse Boko Haram, each drawing different conclusions regarding its impact on national and regional security.[1] The first is to look at the long history of the region and point out the recurrence of radical Islamic movements starting with the jihad of Uthman dan Fodio in the 19th century. In this sense, the emergence of Boko Haram is not unique, but rather a current expression of a long-term dynamic in the region. In this regard, it should be considered a movement of restoration, since its main claim continues to be the enforcement of *sharia*, as Uthman dan Fodio did two centuries earlier.

The second view of Boko Haram is based on the acknowledgment of Osama bin Laden's popularity after the attacks of 9/11 and the strong unpopularity the West faces among a population that is very poor and feels betrayed by its Westernised and/or Western-educated elite. In this sense, Boko Haram is an ultra-violent social movement that has deep roots in the social and economic marginalisation of a large section of Nigeria's northern population. This highlights the issue of the divergent (and largely unequal) economic and social dynamics of northern versus southern states in Nigeria.

A third view of Boko Haram emphasises the revenge dimension. While until 2009 the movement was seen as radical, but not ultra-violent, the killing of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, by the police in a police station and the indiscriminate coercion by law enforcement agencies have provoked a staunch reaction from Boko Haram members who primarily want to settle their scores with the police and army. This view highlights the role and competition of the various law enforcement agencies, their poor respect for the rule of law and the militarisation of any response to challenges to the federal government.

A fourth view starts from and examination of the dynamics of Nigerian state-level politics and puts Boko Haram in the position of being a tool used by northern Nigerian elites to express their grievances regarding the neglect of the federal government. This feeling is fed by several events, including the agreement made by the federal government with the rebel group, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) (which has a significant financial component), the re-election of Goodluck Jonathan for a de facto second mandate and the lack of a strong representation of northern elites in his inner circle.

A further analysis of Boko Haram is articulated by some publications dedicated to security issues and provides the public with the vision of a developing arc of crisis from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa as a result of increasing activity and co-operation between radical Islamist groups. In this view Boko Haram becomes an accidental kind of guerrilla movement, as described by the Australian military anthropologist, David Kilcullen, because of its connections with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Somalia's al-Shabaab. This changes the scope of Boko Haram's grievances and provides the ground for a lasting confrontation between radicalised Muslims and others across the greater region.

Boko Haram today may be understood in these different ways, but the political implications of these views are very different. The next sections review the validity of those arguments, while the conclusion proposes a series of broad points of discussion for policymakers.

1 This text uses a number of points made by Paul Lubeck and Murray Last, two well-known scholars on Nigeria. For background beyond the papers produced by these two leading academics, readers may refer to Abimbola Adesoji, "The Boko Haram uprising and Islamic revivalism in Nigeria", *Africa Spectrum*, vol 45, no. 2, http://www.Africa-spectrum.org.

A long-term history of radicalism

The Sokoto Caliphate established by Uthman dan Fodio ruled parts of what is now northern Nigeria, Niger and northern Cameroon in the late 19th century. Ever since it fell under British control in 1903, there has been resistance among the area's Muslims to Western education.

Boko Haram was conceived on the basis of previous Islamic revivalist experiences in Nigeria. Its main affiliation is to the Jama't Izalat al Bid'a Wa Iqamat as Sunna (Society of Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna), known as Izala or Yan Izal. This movement is a Wahhabi, anti-Sufi movement established in 1978 in Jos by Sheikh Ismaila Idris (1937-2000). It was one of the fast-growing Islamic reform movements in Nigeria. The movement was very much shaped by the teachings of Sheikh Abubakar Gumi (1922-1992), a leading Islamist pioneer of reform in 20th-century Nigeria. Sheikh Gumi campaigned against sorcery and witchcraft and promoted Islamic education for women. Upon his death in 1992, Izala suffered an acrimonious split between two factions within the movement (Jos based and Kaduna based) and as a result appears to have lost most of its authority and credibility among Nigerian Muslims. The two factions eventually reconciled in 2011.

The Boko Haram uprising was not the first forceful attempt to impose a religious agenda in Nigeria. Violence based on religion in Nigeria is indeed neither new nor confined to Muslims. Over the last 30 years what has changed is that religious dissent is based in cities and not, as before, in the countryside. Moreover, dissent is increasingly violent, in part because it is urban and therefore in closer proximity to the urban-centred authorities. What makes Boko Haram an original phenomenon in Nigerian history is neither targeted assassinations nor car bombings against official buildings, but a sustained campaign of terror attacks over several months.

In the last 30 years, one may quote several precedents:[2] the Maitatsine uprisings of 1980 in Kano, 1982 in Kaduna and Bulumkutu, 1984 in Yola and 1985 in Bauchi are often compared to the present situation. Following the Maitatsine crises or interspersing them were several other major clashes. These include the Kano metropolitan riot of October 1982; the Ilorin riot of March 1986; the University of Ibadan crisis of May 1986; the Kafanchan/Kaduna/Zaria/Funtua religious riots of March 1987; the Kaduna Polytechnic riot of March 1988; the Bayero University crisis of 1989; the Bauchi/Katsina riots of March/April 1991; the Kano riots of October 1991; the Zangon-Kataf riot of May 1992; the Kano civil disturbance of December 1991; and the Jos crisis of April 1994. Similarly, between 1999 and 2008, 28 other conflicts were reported, the most prominent being the recurrent crises in Jos of 2001, 2002, 2004 and 2008.

Mohammed Yusuf (January 29th 1970-July 30th), the founder of Boko Haram, was born in Yobe State. As a student of Sheikh Gumi he was a dedicated Salafi and was also deeply influenced by Ibn Taymiyyah.[3] Yusuf's movement developed after 2002 and was successful enough to invest in educational infrastructure and other facilities in a neighbourhood of Maiduguri. In 2009 the army surrounded and attacked the movement's facilities, crushing it (using tanks) and killing Yusuf later in a police cell. This major blow pushed the movement to transform itself into a network of underground cells with a hidden leadership – a situation that today makes any military solution illusory.

Boko Haram is actually the nickname for Jama'atul Alhul Sunnah Lidda'wati wal Jihad, or "People committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and jihad". Boko Haram is often translated as, "Western education is sin", but this should be understood in context. What its late leader, Mohamed Yusuf, meant is that any aspect of Western education that contradicts the teaching of the Holy Koran should be opposed. Yusuf was not against Western progress, but wanted it shaped within an Islamic framework.

2 See ibid. for a nearly complete list of these troubles.

3 Taqi ad-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah is an Islamic scholar (1263-1328) well known in Islamist circles for his views on jihad (among other things).

The West as a symbol of failure

Boko Haram is rooted in the strong resistance shown in northern Nigeria against Western education and, more importantly, Western-educated elites. This stance has strong resonance among marginalised Muslims and makes the appeal of the movement quite successful beyond the charisma (even cult) of its founder.

The sociology of recruitment, from what can be known, explains Boko Haram's success well. Boko Haram recruits first among migrants who are in a precarious economic situation because of the collapse of the industrial sector and commercial farming due to the liberalisation programmes enforced under the advice of the Bretton Woods institutions from the 1980s. Boko Haram also gets a strong constituency from the *almajeri* (pupils and students learning the Koran) by treating with contempt and derision all those who attended schools providing Western education. Another potential recruitment base is made up of the school leavers who have been unable to find employment and are attracted by the messages of the charismatic Mohammed Yusuf.

While these dimensions capture the socioeconomic profile of the movement, the political component is the constituency that staunch criticisms of the political elites could generate in northern Nigeria. The call for *sharia* implementation was made against these elites and their corrupt behaviour. However, despite the adoption of *sharia* in northern states, inequalities have increased and the corruption of the elites has not diminished. Boko Haram's appeal is based on the need to address these failures and assassinate politicians perceived by the lay population as corrupted. The defeat of General Buhari, who stood for a different moral order (at least in the youth's minds), in the last elections has only fuelled this fierce dissent. Buhari built his popular support on a call for Islamic modesty (and therefore honesty) and a need for Muslims to be fairly represented, since President Jonathan is commonly accused of having rigged the elections.

The Muslim-Christian conflict as framed by Boko Haram is primarily political. It relies on many different aspects. One is the staunch competition between evangelical churches and Islam in central Nigeria (Jos being the epicentre). Another is the impact that decentralisation has had in the region, often increasing differences between communities: resentment is rooted in the perception that other communities get more than they deserve.

This hostility has been reinforced by the 2011 elections outcome, which was criticised by many experts. The success of Goodluck Jonathan (after two terms of Olusegun Obasanjo – a Christian – and the death of Umaru Yar'Adua – a Muslim) and the domination of his People's Democratic Party generated bitterness in the northern population for whom those victories threatened increased marginalisation. This feeling is reinforced by the arrangements of the peace settlement with the rebel group MEND that allocated, in the northern view, disproportionate resources to an under-populated, but Christian area of the south. The independence of South Sudan is also evoked as proof of a grand conspiracy to marginalise Islam and Muslims in Africa.

Against the state law enforcement agencies

One clear aspect of Boko Haram's appeal is its struggle with the police and army. Complaints and cases citing the brutality and corruption within Nigeria's security services elicit little, if any, reaction from the political elites, reinforcing a sense of helplessness among an often-victimised general population. Mohammed Yusuf's killing at the hands of the police (as well as hundreds of Boko Haram members) is a crucial driver in the current wave of assassinations and attacks carried out by Boko Haram against security personnel and infrastructure.

In Nigeria, the police are controlled at the federal ("central") level, not by the various states of the Nigerian federation. Therefore, police forces are not deployed in their local areas and often are unable to build the long-term grassroots connections required to maintain law and order without excessive direct interventions. This policy results in less-effective policing practices, while boosting animosity between the police and local populations.

The army takes over the policing whenever the breakdown of public order exceeds the police force's ability to contain it. But the army is not trained in urban riot control and so often employs overly heavy-handed tactics that antagonise local populations. As a consequence, Boko Haram's sympathisers grow with each violent army incursion, while people who may not fully endorse Boko Haram become increasingly unwilling to provide the army with the local help it needs to neutralise the movement.

There are other aspects of this problem. For thugs in Nigeria, the best protection is to belong to one of the law enforcement agencies. Once in uniform, these individuals have access to weapons, transportation and a degree of immunity from counter-attack, allowing them to engage in criminal activities unmolested.

A successful counter-insurgency in northern Nigeria would require the police and the army to win a hearts-and-minds campaign among the local population. Over the last two years, despite the insecurity created by Boko Haram's targeted assassinations, the state security forces have dramatically failed to make progress in this respect. As a result, Boko Haram convincingly raises a sense of injustice that needs to be addressed if local populations are to be supportive of the security forces' attempts to dismantle the movement. To date, there has been no condemnation by the federal government of the police officers involved in the killing of Mohammed Yusuf while in police custody. Such failures to address abuses by security services continue to reinforce the feeling of neglect by the central government and the impunity of its security organs. Until the state improves its own law enforcement agencies and proves that the rule of law also applies to them, there is little hope for an accommodation between them and the general population.

Going global?

As usual, it did not take long to hear claims that Boko Haram was connected with AQIM and Somalia's al-Shabaab. These alleged links would create a new trans-Saharan threat and justify, retrospectively, the policy of some Western countries to support national armies and launch a clandestine war against radical Islamism across much of northern Africa and the Sahel. Rumours (some true, others baseless) allege that up to 100 Nigerians went to be trained within the two al-Qaeda affiliates in the areas of terror bombing, targeted killings and even the identification of suicide bombers (a new practice in radical movements).

Mamman Nur, who was arrested in connection with the August 2011 UN headquarters bombing in Abuja, reportedly has al-Qaeda connections and travelled to Somalia, where al-Shabaab is based, shortly before the attack, according to Nigerian officials. A blog dedicated to Boko Haram's *fatwas* and other messages posted a photo claiming to depict group members training in Somalia. Nur's exact position in Boko Haram was unclear, but the authorities had issued a reward of $175,000 for his capture.

Although it continues to carry out smaller-scale ambushes on security personnel, Boko Haram has demonstrated a capacity to also coordinate large-scale actions. It orchestrated a massive prison break in September 2010, freeing 750 inmates, more than 100 of whom were Boko Haram members who had been detained. Boko Haram undertook its first suicide bombing on June 16th 2011, killing six at the Nigerian police headquarters in Abuja and raising the group's international profile. Just two months later a Boko Haram suicide bombing at the UN headquarters in Abuja on August 26th 2011 left at least 25 dead and more than 110 wounded. There is every indication that Boko Haram has the capacity for further large-scale attacks in the future.

In a video message released in conjunction with the bombing, Abubakr Shekau, who had served as Mohammed Yusuf's deputy and emerged from hiding in 2010 after being believed to have been killed in the 2009 crackdown, asserted that the UN is the "forum of all global evil" and that the bombing was meant to convey a warning to Western powers, whom he described as "infidels". Another Boko Haram spokesman said that the group views the UN as a proxy for the U.S. and that it was targeted because of the U.S.'s role in supporting the Nigerian government in its efforts to suppress the group. The video was partly in

Arabic in addition to the local Hausa language, further demonstrating Boko Haram's growing international focus.

Both the Nigerian government and Boko Haram have a vested interest in making this narrative credible. Its is clear that individual Nigerians have travelled abroad to gain terrorism expertise and offered their services to the Boko Haram leadership back home. The (relative) sophistication of the UN Abuja bombing has not been seen again in other later attacks. Ideologically, Boko Haram is articulating a discourse that is apparently in agreement with other al-Qaeda affiliates, but there is a long way between the claim for an Islamic state or *sharia* implementation and global jihad. Religious practices among those various groups are strikingly different, as are the relations with the lay population in the areas where they operate.

These remarks should make clear that claims by journalists or political actors on the ground that Boko Haram is present in Timbuktu or Jowhar may be an over-statement at present. This may change in the future, but this is only one of the many scenarios that the international community should address.

Conclusion

If the analysis drawn here has any value, it should be clear that three sets of policies should be designed to counter the rising level of violence committed by Boko Haram in Nigeria sooner rather than later.

The first is a drastic improvement of the security sector in Nigeria. Boko Haram is sustained primarily by the heavy-handed and repressive tactics of the police and army, not by its own arguments or visions. The killing of Mohammed Yusuf and many other members (sometimes put on YouTube) is not an exception, but is now a part of the routine of the law enforcement agencies. Strongly worded statements by leading national police officers without concrete actions to improve discipline within their ranks do not help to cool down a tense situation and in fact have the opposite effect.

The second is that although there is no short cut to peace, negotiations are necessary and eventually need to become more prominent than the mere security enforcement that is currently being pursued. A first attempt to engage Boko Haram was stopped when the discussions came into the public domain. The leaks orchestrated by one of the main (Igbo) Nigerian newspapers, *Vanguard,* are proof that some on the government side are not interested in any compromise and want to promote war as the only solution. The solution envisioned by the federal government is still unclear. Eventually, the stakeholders should decide whether buying back a moderate wing and eradicating the extremist one could be called a (good) solution.

The third point is crucial: peace requires economic progress for the most destitute sections of northern Nigeria's population. Nigeria's northern states face a daunting economic situation. Their demographic growth is well above the national rate and the industrial sector is estimated to have been reduced by up to 80% as a result of economic policy reforms. Farming and agribusiness investments may still be an area of productive investments that could also generate substantial employment opportunities for the local populace. The central and regional states should not be the main channels for this economic growth plan, since what is needed is a broader and less-corrupt mobilisation of cadres and elites. Also important is the need to avoid the kind of demonstration effect that the peace agreement between the government and MEND gave to Boko Haram. If this happens, the resolution of the Boko Haram conflict would only create the premises for a new fight elsewhere.