



Women march at a rally held in Lagos, Nigeria calling for the return of over 200 Nigerian secondary schoolgirls abducted by the extremist group Boko Haram between 14 and 15 April 2014

# Policy & Practice Brief

Knowledge for durable peace

## Nigeria's Boko Haram: Beyond the rhetoric

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## Executive Summary

As the world remains focused on the fate of more than 200 Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped by members of the militant Islamist group Boko Haram from the town of Chibok, Borno State in mid-April, it is clear that this terrorist organisation is rapidly reinforcing its position as a regional menace. In late May, the group staged an attack in northern Cameroon where a Chinese worker was killed and 10 others kidnapped.<sup>2</sup> Remaining unmoved by the opprobrium levelled against them via social media Boko Haram's leader, Abubaker Shekau, and his followers staged more violent attacks across northern Nigeria that stretched into June 2014. This Policy & Practice Brief (PPB) examines who, or what, Boko Haram is, and offers suggestions on some important factors to be considered when designing and implementing interventions aimed at ending the group's acts of terrorism.

## Introduction

Boko Haram was ostensibly established by Muslim cleric Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri in north-eastern Nigeria in 2002.<sup>3</sup> The name 'Boko Haram' is derived from the Hausa word for book – 'boko' and the Arabic word for forbidden – 'haram'. Literally therefore, Boko Haram means the 'book is forbidden'. In this context, however, it means that Western education is sinful and therefore prohibited.<sup>4</sup> With this background, the repeated attacks on schools and scholars by Nigeria's Islamists are hardly surprising. It should be stressed here that the group has not given itself this name, but rather that local populations have awarded this label on account of Boko Haram's antipathy to Western civilisation.

The group is not new to Nigeria. Analysts have noted that the movement may have been around for much longer – from as far back as 15 years ago – under various other names, including *Al Sunna wal Jamma*<sup>5</sup>, *Muhajirun*, the Nigerian Taliban, the *Yusufiyya* Islamic Movement<sup>6</sup>, and *Ahlusunna wal Jamma Hijra*.<sup>7</sup> Starting in 2002 the group called itself *Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad* or 'People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad'.<sup>8</sup> As the movement is known throughout the world as Boko Haram, this PPB will use this popular name in discussions about the security challenges in the north of Nigeria.

Discussions in this brief are premised on the understanding that a key shortcoming of counter-terrorism responses to Boko Haram can be found in the ahistorical approaches adopted – viewing Boko Haram as a recent occurrence and without adequate reflection on the structural conditions which give rise to and support radicalised Islamist movements such as this one. Indeed, historical precedents to Boko Haram go all the way back to 1802 when Uthman dan Fodio<sup>9</sup>, a religious teacher and ethnic Fulani herder, declared his jihad to purify Islam<sup>10</sup> – in the process establishing the Sokoto

caliphate which exists to this day. More recently, the *Maitatsine* uprisings of 1980 in Kano (1982), Kaduna and Bulumkutu (1984), Yola (1984) and Bauchi (1985) represent efforts to impose religious ideology on a secular Nigerian state,<sup>11</sup> in much the same way that Boko Haram is attempting to force Abuja to accept Sharia Law across all 36 states of the Nigerian polity. Indeed, between 1999 and 2008, 28 religious conflicts were reported – the most prominent being the recurrent violence between Muslims and Christians in Jos, Plateau State, in 2001, 2002, 2004 and 2008.<sup>12</sup> Religions, however, do not exist in a historical vacuum. They are interconnected by issues such as ethnicity, politics, economics, migration and violence. To understand the recurring outbreaks of religious violence in northern Nigeria, there is need to explore the context within which Islamist fundamentalism thrives. As Hall eloquently observed, 'Religious violence is embedded in moments of history and structures of culture'.<sup>13</sup>

## Exploring structural conditions that influence Islamist violence

Appalled as the world is at the terrorist violence committed by Boko Haram, it is important to acknowledge that there are genuine local grievances that drive Boko Haram's actions. Failing to recognise this simple truism can only result in the perpetuation of the violence engulfing much of northern Nigeria and, as illustrated by the attacks on Abuja and Cameroon, its spread further south and across West Africa. Socio-economic variables and issues of ethnic identity are two important structural conditions to consider.

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There is a socio-economic basis for Boko Haram's resurgence. Increasing impoverishment of citizens, declining economic opportunities, and limited educational opportunities have swelled the ranks of the unemployed. Despite Nigeria receiving oil revenue in excess of US\$ 74 billion per annum<sup>14</sup>, more than half of Nigerians live on less than US\$ 1 a day and four out of 10 are unemployed.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, even though the country is endowed with some of the world's richest oil reserves, the proceeds from its sale do not adequately trickle down to the populace. In many regions, the state offers no water, electricity or education. Indeed, Boko Haram's founder, Mohammed Yusuf, first started attracting followers by railing against deteriorating living standards and state corruption.<sup>16</sup>

It is also no coincidence that northern Nigeria has been so prone to radical Islamist uprisings – this is the poorest part of the country.<sup>17</sup> Whilst 27% of the population in the south live in poverty, this figure is at 72% in the north.<sup>18</sup> The north's precarious economic situation has been further undermined by desert encroachment, recurrent drought and a rinderpest pandemic.<sup>19</sup> The effects of globalisation have also worsened the north-south economic divide. Whilst soaring oil prices have benefited the south, the few industries in the north – largely textile mills – have failed to compete with cheaper Asian imports.<sup>20</sup> To illustrate, where a Nigerian-made fabric wrap costs 1500 Naira (US\$ 10), a similar one imported from China costs just 550 Naira. Under these circumstances, the number of factories in the main northern city of Kano has fallen from 350 in 1987 to 103 in 2014.<sup>21</sup>

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The growing impoverishment of the citizenry is in sharp contrast to the increasing wealth of the political elite. Since the end of military rule in 1999, Nigerian politicians have reportedly embezzled between US\$ 4 billion and US\$ 8 billion per annum.<sup>22</sup> This rampant corruption further alienates citizens from the state and supports perceptions that the government is an illegitimate one. Further undermining the legitimacy of the government is the election-related violence which marred the vote in 1999, 2003 and 2007. During the April 2011 elections, hundreds of people were killed as political candidates hired armed gangs

to instigate political violence against rivals.<sup>23</sup> Under these circumstances one can understand how Boko Haram's discourse that the Nigerian state is *taghut*, or evil, would resonate with some. It would take one small step to further argue that the Western secular state in its totality has failed.

It is also easy to understand why Boko Haram's message of social justice can be so appealing to the most economically vulnerable. Whilst the sect's membership cuts across a broad spectrum of society, most of its members originate from amongst the poorest.<sup>24</sup> The group's fight to instil Sharia Law across Nigeria<sup>25</sup> must, therefore, be viewed as a struggle for social justice and inclusion first, with religion being used as a vehicle for mass mobilisation. This approach, too, has historical precedence. The Islamist Yan Tatsine Millenarian Movement of December 1980 which was led by Mohammed Marawa has been described as '... an overt critique of materialism and inequality that has accompanied the petroleum boom in Nigeria.'<sup>26</sup> Under these circumstances, Adogame<sup>27</sup> cogently argues that, '... socio-economic and political imperatives cater to both the politicisation of religion and the religionisation of politics in Nigeria.' The emergence of armed movements in reaction to economic marginalisation and poor governance is not a uniquely northern phenomenon. In the Niger Delta region, insurgencies like that of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta have thrived on the back of dire poverty and high unemployment.<sup>28</sup>

The second variable driving the conflict is ethnicity. Whilst popular media has portrayed the conflict as a Muslim versus Christian issue there is another, ethnic, dimension within which the conflict is being waged – a case of reinforcing fault lines. Whilst the Islamist Boko Haram may be targeting Christians living in the north, the view is that the Hausa-Fulani Boko Haram are targeting the Igbo ethnic group, resulting in perceptions among the Igbo that they are faced with 'systematic ethnic cleansing' and that the 'Igbos should just secede'.<sup>29</sup> The desire to break away is linked to the fact that since the Biafran War of the 1960s the Igbos have not felt that they are part of the Nigerian nation. Understandably, being targeted by Boko Haram and receiving little protection from Nigeria's security services did not enamour the Igbos to the state. In response to Boko Haram targeting Christians in the north, in 2012 the Igbo group *Ogbunigwe Ndigbo* gave all northern Muslims living in the south two weeks to leave, or face death. In Lokpanta, the Muslim Hausa community, people who had lived among the Igbo for decades, took the warning to heart and were

soon leaving the area by the truckload.<sup>30</sup> Following extensive research involving victims of Boko Haram, Corinne Dufka, a senior researcher focusing on West Africa at Human Rights Watch, came to the conclusion that ‘Boko Haram is targeting and killing people in northern Nigeria based on their religion *and ethnicity*’ (emphasis mine).<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, whilst the recurrent conflict in Jos has been portrayed as Muslim-Christian violence, it is fundamentally a land dispute between ethnic groups who happen to also belong to different faiths. Residents of Jos are more aware of the complexity of the conflict than analysts. Commenting on the origins of the struggle, Mohamed Yakuba explained that ‘It is the Berom [people] who cause the problem, trying to get their land back.’<sup>32</sup> Another Jos resident, Toma Davou (from the opposing side), argued ‘The Hausas want to push us out, and although it is about land occupation, they say it is religious so that they can get the sympathy of Saudi Arabia and Al Qaeda. Christians should arm to the teeth to meet this threat from them and Boko Haram.’<sup>33</sup>

Despite the religious overtones of the conflict which Boko Haram has encouraged in Jos the reality is that the dispute is primarily one over land. The argument between the Berom and Hausa-Fulani is a long-standing one, dating back several decades. Boko Haram, however, managed to add religion into the volatile ethnic mix by supporting the Hausa-Fulani in Jos, resulting in various Christian groups supporting the Berom. For social scientists, this line of thinking urges for care to be taken when labelling a conflict as religious merely on the basis of its religious overtones. Despite Boko Haram’s operations in Jos, no amount of counter-terrorism instruments will resolve the religious tensions generated in the absence of a settlement on the land issue.

## Responding to Boko Haram: Between dialogue and violent suppression

In responding to Boko Haram, often two rather simplistic and mutually exclusive courses of action are suggested: dialogue and entering into a political settlement with the Islamists, or violent suppression of the movement. Put in such a binary both are problematic.

### Dialogue

Dialogue with the group has been tried before and failed. In a media interview in January 2012 Nigeria’s President Goodluck Jonathan urged the sect to enter into dialogue with the government. However, the Boko Haram spokesman, Abul Qaqa,

told journalists that the group intended to continue fighting and that Jonathan’s calls for talks were ‘not sincere’.<sup>34</sup> There is no reason to believe that the group’s position has since changed. Indeed, its growing ties with international jihadists might well increase its reluctance to engage in dialogue.

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In this regard General Carter Ham, former head of US military operations in Africa, recently noted, ‘What is most worrying at present is, at least in my view, a clearly stated intent by Boko Haram and by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to coordinate and synchronise their efforts.’<sup>35</sup> Indeed, there is good reason to believe that the world is witnessing the internationalisation of yet another Islamist militant grouping. First, Boko Haram deliberately fashioned itself after the Taliban in Afghanistan, including taking the names ‘Nigerian Taliban’ and ‘Black Taliban.’<sup>36</sup> The sect’s founder, Mohammed Yusuf, has been accused of receiving money from Al Qaeda.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, key figures in Boko Haram are understood to have met with AQIM leadership in neighbouring Niger<sup>38</sup> and the group has claimed that it sent its members for military training in Afghanistan<sup>39</sup>, Algeria<sup>40</sup>, Iraq, Lebanon, Mauritania and Pakistan. There is also emerging evidence that Boko Haram has ties with the Somali Al-Shabaab militant group.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, an Al-Shabaab spokesman claimed that Boko Haram fighters were sent to Somalia and Yemen for further training.<sup>42</sup> Boko Haram’s spokesman went on to state, ‘We want to make it known that our jihadists have arrived in Nigeria from Somalia where they received real training on warfare from those who made that country ungovernable ... This time round, our attacks will be fiercer and wider than they have even been.’<sup>43</sup> There is further evidence that at least 100 Boko Haram fighters are part of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa. This group split from AQIM in order to focus on the jihad in West Africa and the Sahel. In jihadi training camps in Gao in northern Mali, Boko Haram recruits make up the majority of trainees.<sup>44</sup>

The instruction received at such camps could well account for the growing sophistication of Boko

Haram's attacks. While in initial offensives militants made use of knives, machetes, bows, arrows and petrol bombs<sup>45</sup> later attacks were characterised by suicide car bombings<sup>46</sup>, detonation of improvised explosive devices<sup>47</sup> (which have been used with dramatic effects in Afghanistan and Iraq), and synchronised assaults as witnessed in Mumbai, India, in November 2008.<sup>48</sup> The quality of explosives used also demonstrates Boko Haram's growing complexity. Increasingly, powerful explosives like pentaerythritol tetranitrate and triacetone triperoxide are used in shaped charges which are designed to magnify the impact of blasts.<sup>49</sup>

### ***Violent suppression: What impact on citizens?***

If dialogue is not possible, can military suppression curb the activities of the Islamists? This approach, too, has been tried before. On 26 July 2009, a joint security team launched a raid on Boko Haram's hideout in the Dutsen Tanshi area of Bauchi State. During the raid, nine members of the sect were arrested; they were in possession of bomb-making materials, arms and ammunition.<sup>50</sup> The result was violent riots across the four states of Bauchi, Kano, Yobe and Borno.<sup>51</sup> Running battles between Boko Haram members and security forces over the ensuing four days resulted in police stations, prisons, government offices, schools and churches being destroyed. Over 700 people were killed and thousands others injured. Violence only abated after the capture and execution of the sect's then leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in police custody on 31 July 2009<sup>52</sup> and the death of its most prominent financial sponsor, Alhaji Buji Foi.<sup>53</sup> The events of July 2009 set the tone for how the Nigerian state would respond to Boko Haram – meeting violence with violence.

The more important lesson, that despite the violent security response and in spite of the decapitation of the group's leadership the sect could rebound with such force, seems to not have been learned. Since then, states of emergency and curfews have been declared, a joint taskforce created and borders with neighbouring countries closed. Unfortunately, none of this resulted in the indiscriminate violence perpetrated by Boko Haram abating. The key reason for this failure has little to do with the measures themselves – but rather with the decrepit and corrupt nature of Nigeria's under-resourced security services themselves.

In attempting to achieve some degree of peace and security in northern Nigeria, a far more holistic approach is needed. Given the international attention and goodwill existing in the aftermath of the kidnapping of the schoolgirls, President

Jonathan should utilise foreign offers of assistance, not only to secure the release of the girls, but to also revitalise his own moribund security services. This would include beefing up the intelligence, police and armed forces. An intelligence-led military operation against the militants could then begin in earnest. Similar operations could also be launched in neighbouring countries to ensure that Boko Haram cannot flee across borders with impunity to avoid the crackdown, as members have done in the past.

At the same time, military operations will not resolve the underlying structural conditions which have fuelled the rise of militant Islamist movements in the north during the past two centuries. The economic divide between the north and south of the country needs to be bridged. Various development initiatives which directly benefit people on the ground (as opposed to northern political elites) need to be embarked upon so the trust and confidence of northerners can be regained. It is also hoped that such projects would serve to inoculate ordinary citizens from radicalisation by Boko Haram. The combined impact of military offensives and denying the group popular support could then possibly drive the Islamists to the negotiating table. It would also provide the government with a strong position from which to address local grievances, whilst compelling the group to abandon its involvement with international jihadi networks.

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### **Conclusion**

Adopting quick-fix solutions to the scourge of Boko Haram will not provide lasting relief or alleviate the suffering of citizens in northern Nigeria. The success of any intervention largely depends on the presence of a more professional and efficient security service in Nigeria. It will take time before development initiatives and interventions start to deliver tangible benefits to the long-suffering people of Africa's largest economy. However, adopting an approach that takes into consideration the multi-faceted reasons for the conflicts, factors influencing support for Boko Haram at community level and

the changing nature of the attacks in Nigeria is the only sustainable approach to take when mounting a response capable of providing citizens with some relief from the scourge of militant Islamists.

## Endnotes

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