AN ASSESMENT OF THE BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper will be based on a field research conducted in Nigeria about the Boko Haram crisis. The paper will provide an understanding of the Boko Haram phenomenon, especially from the perspective of its socioeconomic, political and social determinants. It will focus mainly on the Root Cause (RC) theoretical approaches and the relationship between social, economic, political, and demographic changes and Boko Haram terrorist activity that has plagued the country, especially the northern region for more than a decade. Since its emergence in 2002, Boko Haram has perpetrated a series of deadly attacks on key governmental agencies, market areas, schools, religious centers, including Mosques and Churches, kidnappings of politicians, foreigners and young boys and girls, and extension of violence in the neighboring countries of Cameroon, Chad and the Republic of Niger. The philosophy and activities of the group have been subjected to various interpretations alongside ethnic, regional, cultural and religious bifurcation amongst the Nigerian populace. However, this article argues that Nigeria`s longstanding political schism, socioeconomic division, corruption and mismanagement of its resources, from independence to the present, has played an immense role in fueling the conflict. The high population in these areas coupled with lack of education or skilled training has led to a high demand for the country`s resources and increased youth unemployment. Consequently, the inhabitants of the north have become resentful against the government and also on Western influence whom they blamed for their economic plight. The results of such resentment was the formation of the Boko Haram Sect. Factors such as poverty, population explosion, social inequality and exclusion, dispossession and political

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grievance as well as oppression, security force brutality and human rights abuse are considered as the independent variables on which the emergence of terrorist organizations is dependent.

Keywords: *Boko Haram, Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Niger, terrorism, religious cleavages, socioeconomic and political grievance, poverty, unemployment, income inequality, corruption, oppression, police force brutality*

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has the largest population in Africa and is economically considered as the giant of Africa, with its oil wealth which ranka the country 13th largest oil producing nation of the world. Despite its oil wealth and vast human resource, successive Nigerian government has mismanaged the country`s resources, which have left, especially the northern part of the country economically marginalized, destitute, and disillusioned. This unequal distribution of resources is believed to be responsible for the emergence of Boko Haram. Thus, the mere mention of Nigeria in other parts of the world brings images of crime, corruption, ethnic or regional conflict and terrorism. Indeed, the undying Boko Haram insurgency, which has resulted in the death of thousands of civilians and displaced people, serves as a storm that threatens the very fabric of the nation. The group claimed to be fighting for its stated goal, that is to restore Sharia`ah law in Nigeria and overthrow the Nigerian government which it sees as Westernized and corrupt. But its tactics, which include suicide bombings and targets of all and sundry has only further brought misery and suffering to the people, especially northern Nigeria. Thus, this article assesses the insurgency in terms of its goal, tactics and targets since its violent eruption in 2009. The question that this article attempts to answer is, has Boko Haram succeeded in its goal to restore Sharia`ah law in Nigeria?

Boko Haram has used various tactics to achieve its goal of inciting fear in the general public. Due to its disadvantage in military might compared to the Nigerian security forces, the sect has adopted a hit and run tactics instead of man to man or arm to arm confrontation with the military. Despite its weakness, the sect has managed to dictate the pace in the fight

exploiting the weaknesses of the state. The first step the group adopted in its fight was to recruit and send members to train with other factions in the Sahara Desert. The group believed that its members have the right to protect themselves from violent actions; that God will grant victory to those who have been driven away from their homes. Some of the cells established are believed to have no direct contact with the top leaders and can freely take their own independent decisions free from the interference of the top leadership. Members were also sent for military training and the making and use of improvised explosive devices. The sect made extensive use of communication strategies, both verbal, through YouTube and telephone interviews, and non-verbal or violent attacks to attract attention to their struggle and set the agenda for the press. Lacking the military might and financial resources, the sect used psychological warfare by embarking on guerilla tactics of hit and run making the Nigerian forces a reactive opponent rather than a proactive one.

MARX ABRAHMS SEVEN PUZZLING TENDENCIES

In order to assess the activities of the insurgency, I will look at Marx Abrahms "seven puzzling tendencies of terrorist organizations". Abrahms analyzed the claim that "terrorists are rational people" to categorize terrorists as "organization" and came to the conclusion that building social ties is the main motive to form such an organization. In short, what seems to be a political or religious purpose hides the real reason to form such a terrorist organization. The seven puzzling tendencies are:

- Terrorist organizations fail to achieve their stated goals because they attack civilians;

- Terrorist organizations do not usually make use of other nonviolent means to achieve their goals, instead they resort first to the use of terrorism, which should have been the last resort;

- Terrorist organizations usually refuse to negotiate and compromise with their target government;

- Terrorist organizations usually have protean political platforms or can change into many different forms;

- Terrorist organizations, attack anonymously, making it difficult for target government to make informed policy concessions;

- Terrorist organizations usually attack each other rather than the common enemy, they claim to fight; and

- Terrorist organizations do not disband even though they may fail constantly to achieve their goals or even if their political and economic grievances are met.

1. COERCIVE INEFFECTIVENESS

Boko Haram has used terrorism for almost a decade, but this strategy has not helped it achieve its goals. Sharia law was established in Northern Nigeria in 1999, even before Boko Haram started using violence. Since then, Nigeria, Northern Nigeria included, have not evolved towards a "pure" Islamic State the way the sect conceptualizes it. Western elements have not been erased from the country and the government has not been overthrown and replaced by an orthodox one. Rather, the sect's activities have driven it even further away from the society. The government is now heavily fighting it, while most Nigerians consider it as a criminal organization. The more Boko Haram uses violence against civilians, the thinner becomes the opportunity to find an agreement with the government. If the sect was a rational organization, it would have shifted to another strategy. The fact that it is still targeting civilians and using terrorism, despite this strategy's lack of success, shows that it is rather an irrational group.

2. TERRORISM AS THE FIRST RESORT AND 3. REFLEXIVELY UNCOMPROMISING TERRORISTS

According to the Strategic Model, rational organizations weigh their political options and choose terrorism only as a last-resort strategy, because they do not have other political alternatives. So many attempts have been made by the Nigerian government through negotiation strategies to bring the crisis to an end. However, these negotiations have only yielded few positive results. Usually, Boko Haram leaders are willing to negotiate with government only in a situation where the negotiation would lead to the release of their senior members captured by the Nigerian military or security forces. The sect still does not show any willingness to compromise with governmental authorities and stop fighting altogether.

4. PROTEAN POLITICAL PLATFORMS

Boko Haram is typically a protean organization, both in term of activities and goals. At first, it was a rather peaceful organization trying to uphold the Prophet's teachings. It then became violent in 2002 and started using widespread terrorism in 2009. As such, its activities have been evolving. During its first stage of development, the sect refrained from using violence, but in recent times it has now become the most violent organization in the world. Its goals have also been unstable. Even though it has always tried to uphold rigorous Islamic values, it did not try to establish an Islamic State and Sharia law in Nigeria from the beginning. And its targets have been various: Muslim clerics, Christian churches and people, State symbols and offices. There is no consistency with regard to its activities, goals and targets, which tends to characterize Boko Haram as an irrational organization.

5. ANONYMOUS ATTACKS

Boko Haram is a rather secret organization. It is very difficult to understand its origin and identify its members, which come from different layers of society. There are individuals who join the sect secretly, without the knowledge of their family or close acquaintances. More importantly, most attacks are not re-vindicated by the sect. It is sometimes difficult to understand whether it comes from Boko Haram, from criminal gangs or from other violent actors. As such, Boko Haram is not trying to achieve its religious goal when using violence and killing civilians.

6. TERRORIST FRATRICIDE AND 7. NEVER-ENDING TERRORISM

Boko Haram has never been a monolithic group. It has been made up of several factions which has affected its modus operandi. Recently, these divisions have grown sharper, especially between the factions of Abubakar Shekau and Abu Musab al-Barnawi, who pledged allegiance to the now moribund Islamic State group in Iraq. Abubakar Shekau accused Al-Barnawi of polytheism and claimed that he is the only true leader of the movement. Apart from the rift between Shekau and Al-Barnawi, several other factions have emerged. Notable among them is the Ansaru group led

by Mamman Nur. The division between these factions and the leadership struggle led to a fierce fighting that left hundreds of Boko Haram fighters dead.[2]

Boko Haram fulfills the criterion of "never-ending terrorism". Despite its lack of success during the last decade, the sect has not disappeared, though it has grown weaker. Its inability to impose Sharia law in Nigeria has not led to its disappearance, which would happen if it were a rational organization.

CONCLUSION

What these seven puzzles show are that Boko Haram is an irrational organization. Its official rhetoric states that the sect's purpose is to establish a "pure" Islamic State in Nigeria, impose Sharia law and reject all Western references. However, the strategy it uses (terrorism), its targets (civilians), its refusal to use normal settings to advance its claims and its inconsistency shows that Boko Haram's religious rhetoric is nothing but words. Following Abrahms' theory, we can thus affirm that the organization's members are pursuing other goals. They did not join Boko Haram because they had a strong belief in the necessity of establishing an Islamic State in Nigeria and rejecting Western symbols, but because they were eager to develop strong social and economic ties. Most of the sect members are socially alienated and isolated. By joining such an organization, they can make up for this alienation. According to Abrahms, "terrorist organizations are particularly attractive outlets."[3]

But religious organizations are also very attractive because of the particular values they uphold. It is not about sharing a hobby; it is about life-related values. Boko Haram combines these two characteristics. It can now be affirmed, once again, that religion is not the primary cause of Boko Haram's terrorism and not the real reason why its members joined it in the first place.

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[2] Jacob Zenn, Making sense of Boko Haram's different factions: Who, how and why? 2016.
[3] Abrahms Max, op.cit. p.100

Notwithstanding the modest achievement made by the government, Boko Haram remains the biggest security challenge facing Nigeria today. To win the fight against Boko Haram there is the need for Nigeria to evolve and implement a clear, comprehensive and robust counter terrorism strategy that addresses the grievances and feelings of marginalization that the extremists exploit in their recruitment drive, rationalization of their anti-secular ideologies and staging of violent attacks in Nigeria.

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