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BOKO HARAM – CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

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Abstract

The alarming rate at which Boko Haram gained popular support belies a deeper historical context that created conditions, along with events in more recent history, in which a spark became the flashpoint of an ensuing wildfire which has spread throughout the northern parts of Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin region. The confluence of history, ethnic identity, the interplay of religious and political loyalties, socio-economic hardships, and government corruption have all played a part in the story of Boko Haram.

Any policy to reduce the horrific violence of Boko Haram must address the long-time grievances of political corruption, socio-economical inequalities, and impoverishment just as actively as current military operations. Ignoring these issues will only allow future extremist organizations to rise. Furthermore, the government must initiate robust de-radicalization and re-integration programs to aid both hostages and defectors to return home to an accepting community, rather than suffer estrangement from their communities or suffer disability from the trauma of their indoctrination. Finally, military action needs to preserve human rights and create synergies with Nigerian security agencies; military operations should taper off as police forces take the lead in local policing activities. Collectively, these initiatives represent a whole-of-government approach to dealing with the current extremist threat, Boko Haram, and address underlying issues that could perpetuate the current instability, or enable future extremists to surface.

Nigeria has struggled with the problem of Boko Haram over the past six years. The alarming rate at which the organization gained popular support belies a much deeper historical context that has created conditions, along with events in more recent history, in which a spark to became the flashpoint of an ensuing wildfire which has spread throughout the northern parts of Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin region. The confluence of history, ethnic identity, the interplay of religious and political loyalties, socio-economic hardships, and government corruption have all played a part in the story of Boko Haram. Initial policy prescriptions attempting to counter Boko Haram as a ‘Nigerian’ problem largely failed. However, swift actions in counter-corruption and decisive military commitments have more recently yielded rewards in reversing the territorial gains made by the extremist group. However, military action alone cannot address root causes of this conflict, the conditions that enabled the successful ascension of Boko Haram. Concerted efforts to counter Boko Haram’s narrative, exposing falsehoods, applying a whole-of-government approach to socio-economic conditions, pursuing de-radicalization and re-integration programs, and a diminishing role for the military must all play a role in overcoming Boko Haram and its extremist ideology.

Historical Look at Boko Haram

Boko Haram has gained worldwide attention with its rapid ascent and formidable regional influence in the northeast region of Nigeria. Despite Boko Haram’s seemingly rapid ascent to notoriety, its roots and influences can be found in the centuries of northern Nigeria’s Islamic history as well as its ethno-tribal lines. Furthermore, the additional tensions of competition for regional resources and religion also help explain the context in which Boko Haram gained its prominence and operates in today.

The Caliphate Connection

Islamic culture and tradition in Nigeria date as far back as the 12th century as Muslim scholars followed trade routes from northern Africa across the Sahara desert.¹ Over centuries, several conflicts occurred across the Sahel region, a region that stretches like a belt east-to-west south of the Sahara desert, as armies swept in establishing kingdoms and empires. One such empire was the Kanem-Bornu Empire, which controlled the area around Lake Chad from the 9th to the 19th century. The people of Kanem-Bornu consisted ethnic Kanembu and Bornu that intermarried over time and created a new people and language, the Kanuri. Toward the end of the 11th century, the ruler of the Kanem-Bornu Empire became a Muslim; from that point on Kanem-Bornu was an Islamic state.² Over the centuries, importation of firearms to the region made conflicts more deadly and Kanem-Bornu faced serious threats during the 17th and 18th centuries, especially as the seven Hausa kingdoms of Hausaland grew in the east, diminishing the relative power of Kanem-Bornu.

The ruling elite of Hausaland kingdoms quickly accepted Islam. However, their practice of Islam often mixed with local traditions and religious practices. Usman dan Fodio, a Fulani scholar in Hausaland, teacher of the Sunni Maliki school of law and the Qadiri branch of Sufism, declared a jihad (holy war) against the Hausa states following an incident in Degel where he was attacked.³ Historians suggest several reasons for declaration of jihad, ranging from accusations of polytheism among the Hausa, to a desire for a more orthodox following of Islam, to the fact that the Sultan of Gobir had attacked Muslims and was therefore considered an unbeliever along with anyone who assisted him.⁴ Dan Fodio rallied the Fulani in Hausaland and waged the Fulani Jihad from 1804-1810, after which dan Fodio had successfully won against the Hausaland kingdoms

and established the Sokoto Caliphate, or the Sokoto Sultanate, which consisted of a number of emirates and occupied the territory west of the Bornu Empire.

Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri and British Colonialization

Relations among the Hausa, Fulani, and Kanuri as ethno-linguistic groups has also played a role supporting the Boko Haram context, particularly following British colonialization. The British arrived in Nigeria during the latter part of the 19th century as traders, then as colonial administrators in the early 1900s; both the Kanem-Bornu Empire and the Sokoto Caliphate had already begun to decline in their power and influence by the time the British arrived. The British adopted an indirect method of colonial rule that allowed institutional remnants of the Kanem-Bornu and Sokoto Caliphates to retain some enduring influence.⁵ In this loose, yet resilient, system of governance regional leaders rule traditional Muslim institutions, which continued with Nigerian independence in 1960. At the time of independence Nigeria adopted a constitution that supported regional authority and application of law as opposed to a universally applicable strong central law. The Hausa-Fulani emirates of the former Sokoto Caliphate were ruled by emirs; Nigerian independence allowed the regional authorities to apply Sharia law as an often speedier and less costly form of justice than non-religious venues. Today, the Sultan of Sokoto, a descendent of dan Fodio, retains a largely a ceremonial leadership role, Nigerians still consider him the spiritual leader of Nigeria's 74.6 million Muslims--roughly 50 percent of Nigeria's population.⁶

The Kanuri of the former Kanem-Bornu Empire also constituted an emirate structure, or the Borno Sultanate. Today, the Borno Sultanate region is still led by descendants of the former rulers of the Kanem-Bornu Empire, assuming title of Shehu, or Sultan, of Borno. Despite the various emirate divisions of Kanem-Bornu Empire among competing British, French and

German colonial powers, the geographic boundaries established by the British in Nigeria persisted with Nigerian independence, but divided the Kanuri among neighboring countries. Today, the Shehu of Borno, based in the city of Maidgurai, maintains a ceremonial rule over the Kanuri in Borno and is recognized by the nearly 4 million Kanuri in neighboring countries. The Shehu of Borno is considered Nigeria's second most important traditional Muslim leader after the Sultan of Sokoto.⁷

North & South, Muslims & Christians

Nigeria consists of a patchwork of ethnicities and religions. British colonial rule united all the British Nigerian colonies and protectorates without much consideration for future national demographics. Muslims, mostly Hausa, Fulani, and Kanuri by ethnicity, predominately lived in the northern British protectorate located in the Sahel transition region south of the Saharan desert. The Muslims in the northern region of Nigeria had withstood and forbade Christian missionary efforts over several centuries. The southern and coastal regions of Nigeria, however, had been more exposed to Christian proselytizing, due to their proximity to coastal trade routes. These regions subsequently became predominately Christian. Ethnic Igbo, Ibibio, and Ijaw Christians lived in the southeastern and Niger Delta region of Nigeria, while ethnic Yoruba dominated the southwestern region of Nigeria. The Yoruba region represents a confluence of both Muslim and Christian communities where both exist in relative peace.

The geographic region stretching east to west across Nigeria separating the northern and southern areas of the country, along with their opposing demographics, is known as the Middle Belt. The people of the Middle Belt consists of both Christian and traditional African tribes. Observers commonly describe the religion of the tribal people of the Middle Belt as animistic, or polytheistic. These politically weaker tribal groups live at the cross-roads of Nigeria's Christian

and Muslim populations. The differences among these three regions, each with its own demographic, ethnic, religious, and economic characteristics, create challenging obstacles for national governance as various groups compete for national resources and disagree on civil law versus Sharia law, and how law should be applied to minorities across Nigeria. A combination of complex civil governance challenges and a corrupt national government have led to weakened state structures that have little ability to meet the demands of society.

Chad Lake Region & Resources

One of the most prominent natural resources and geographic features in northeastern Nigeria is Lake Chad—or at least it used to be. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UN FAO), the desiccation of Lake Chad has created an ecological catastrophe in the Lake Chad basin area that will affect some 30 million people in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.⁸ Furthermore, according to Jeremy Weate of *Al Jazeera America*, “Lake Chad has shrunk by 90 percent in the past 40 years, drastically affecting fishing livelihoods and irrigation farming for a surrounding population of 30 million. And desertification claims more than 770 square miles of cropland every year.”⁹ Already one of the poorest regions of Nigeria, the drying up of Lake Chad has made a dire situation worst for those located in the northeast region of Nigeria. This mostly affects the Kanuri and some of the Hausa-Fulani, leading to increased tensions in the region and civil unrest.

Mohammed Yusuf & Origin of Boko Haram

In 2000, the twelve northern states of Nigeria moved to adopt Sharia, not just in the civil domain, but in the corporate and criminal domains as well. Muslims consider Sharia to be the infallible law of God, derived from the Quran, the traditions of the Prophet Mohammed (*Hadith*), and his biography (*Seerah-ul-Nabi*), as codified in classical legal interpretations. By adopting

Sharia law into the state penal code, these twelve northern states of Nigeria, created significant political and religious discord between Christians and Muslims, leading to an outbreak of violence.¹⁰ Furthermore, both Christian agencies and human rights groups asserted that the implementation and application of Sharia constituted a major challenge to Nigerian sovereignty.¹¹ Under these circumstances a young charismatic Sunni cleric in Maiduguri, Borno named Mohammed Yusuf, an ethnic Kanuri from Yobe and a trained Salafist, begins his quest and pursuit of a pure form Islam.

Yusuf served in a leadership positions at the mosques in Daggash and Ndimi, Maiduguri, Borno state, but both congregations eventually expelled him by 2002 as his teaching became extreme.¹² Following his expulsion, Yusuf established his own mosque and Islamic school “to serve as a magnet for primary and secondary school pupils who, in response to his teachings, would abandon Westernized schools in the belief that Western education [Boko] is a sin [Haram].”¹³ Yusuf and his followers became known as “*Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad*,” or “people committed to the propagation of the Prophet’s teachings and jihad,” more commonly referred to by its moniker, Boko Haram.¹⁴ In 2004 Yusuf and several thousand of his followers embarked upon a flight for refuge (*hijra*) from Maiduguri to an area near Kanama, Yobe state, less than two miles from the Nigeria/Niger border, where they established a settlement they called ‘Afghanistan.’ Calling this migration a *hijrah* represented an attempt to emulate the Prophet Mohammed’s *hijrah* from Mecca to Medina. This *hijra* became part of the Boko Haram narrative, and the Afghanistan settlement became an opportunity to practice Islam in the ‘pure’ form Yusuf desired.¹⁵

Boko Haram is Salafist in orientation, and likely had its beginnings in the mid-1990s as a religious study group committed to *da’wa* (da’wah), meaning the proselytizing or preaching of

Islam, and “the creation of a micro-society exemplifying ‘pure’ Islam.”¹⁶ Woodward, et al., identify Boko Haram as an offshoot of the *Jama’atu Izalat al-Bid’a wa Iqamat al-Sunna*, founded by al-Shaykh Abubakar Mahmoud Gumi (1922-1992), as a hierarchical Salafi organization engaged in harsh takfiri rhetoric.¹⁷ A takfiri refers to a Sunni Muslim that accuses another Muslim of apostasy or insufficiently pure doctrine or practice. The term derives from the word kafir, meaning ‘unbeliever.’ Yusuf’s extreme Salafi and takfiri approach gradually led to increasingly stronger accusations against politicians and religious leaders.

According to Michel Luntumbue, a specialized researcher on conflict, security and governance in Africa, the internal crisis of Nigeria’s government played an active role in Boko Haram’s beginnings.¹⁸ Luntumbue goes on to explain that Boko Haram initially received its funding from businessmen and politicians in the north eastern states of Nigeria to advance their influence in political elections. The former governor of Nigerian state Borno, Ali Modu Sheriff made promises of arming, financial backing, and a political agenda geared toward adoption of Sharia to Yusuf--if he would communicate voting instructions in Mosques during sermons.¹⁹ However, as Yusuf’s movement gained popularity and other means of revenue, he consolidated his power and became even bolder and more extreme in his views. Yusuf chastised the Sultan of Sokoto, calling him a thief and rejecting his title as the nominal head of all Nigerian Muslims. He accused Nigerian politicians of corruption and harassment without economic benefit, and he accused former British and French colonial powers of weakening Muslims by dividing them into imposed nationalities.²⁰

Yusuf’s burgeoning movement and extreme views began to raise the apprehensions of local religious leaders and security officials as the movement began to obtain weapons for the creation of a militia. The leaders of Boko Haram, however, did not engage in any large

confrontations, contenting themselves to small skirmishes with the Nigerian authorities. Not wanting Boko Haram to escalate further, the Nigerian army offensively dismantled the Boko Haram settlement of Afghanistan in September 2004, killing 27 followers, after which Boko Haram violence subsided for the next five years.²¹ The introduction of new government laws in 2009, however, became the flashpoint for conflict between Boko Haram followers, who refused to follow new motorbike helmet laws, and the police in the Bauchi state.²² According to Roman Loimeier, in the following conflict, after 17 Boko Haram members were killed in battles with police, Boko Haram embarked on a wave of retaliatory attacks leading to the spread of violence and death in “four additional northern Nigeria states, with at least 900 killed in Maiduguri alone.”²³ During this time the police took Mohammed Yusuf into custody and killed him extrajudicially. The collective incidents of 2009 represent a turning point in the evolution of Boko Haram.

Summary

Boko Haram arose with a specific historical context that provides key themes in its ideology. In this context, events from hundreds of years ago, as well as events of the last two decades contribute to its vision of the future of justice and the role of Islam. The general geographic ethnic and religious distribution of Muslims persist today: primarily the Hausa-Fulani descendants of the Sokoto Caliphate retain their religious allegiance to their leader, the Sultan of Sokoto, and the Kanuri descendants of the Kanem-Bornu Empire still support their Shehu of Borno. Colonial rule imposed national boundaries, and forced disparate ethnic and religious groups into one state with an emphasis on self-governance. This state suffers from deep fractures in its foundation caused by competing demands for civil law and a penal system in Christian-dominant southern Nigeria versus demand for Sharia law by the Muslim-dominant northern

Nigeria. Government corruption, weak state institutions, and economic woes coupled with rapidly disappearing natural resources in the Lake Chad region have created the perfect conditions for the seeds of Mohammed Yusuf's extreme salafi rhetoric to take root in northern Nigeria in the form of Boko Haram.

Recent Counter-Boko Haram Activities

Since 2009, Boko Haram has rapidly become the most dangerous extremist organization in Africa. While Boko Haram can't be easily categorized as an insurgency or terrorist organization, it can be understood that it results from "grievances over poor governance and sharp inequality in Nigerian society."²⁴ According to Charlotte Alfred, under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf's successor, Abubakar Shekau, the conflicts instigated by Boko Haram have claimed more than 30,000 lives and internally displaced more than 1.6 million people in northeast Nigeria.²⁵ Counter-Boko Haram efforts can be found in the form of a Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and initiatives made by Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari.

Boko Haram Post-Yusuf

Yusuf's death in 2009 revealed that he did not have complete control over all of Boko Haram, which the government believes splintered into at least five factions.²⁶ The death of Yusuf had a catalytic effect on all Boko Haram factions, moving them from a quietist movement of only occasional small-scale skirmishes to an activist movement able to carry out large-scale operations. In 2011, David Cook of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point categorized Boko Haram operations into the following categories: military; police; teachers/university; banks and markets; promotion of virtue and prohibition of vice (*al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf*) attacks on beer drinkers, card players, etc.; attacks on Christian preachers and churches; and targeted assassinations.²⁷ Early in its evolution following Yusuf's death, Boko Haram continued to

conduct attacks in drive-by motorcycle, or auto, shootings and bombings. A core group, known as the Yusufiyyas, or “those who want to preserve the philosophy and doctrine of Boko Haram’s founder, Mohammed Yusuf,” represent Boko Haram’s ‘old guard.’²⁸ Under new leadership and changing allegiances, however, Boko Haram significantly evolved in practices and focus.

Estimates of Boko Haram’s factions and ties have become clearer with time. The Council on Foreign Relations argues that Boko Haram actually splintered into two factions: “one that is focused on local grievances and another that is seeking regional expansion.”²⁹ Internally, Boko Haram suffers from ethnic divisions, but these do not yet impede operations. Regardless of local grievances stemming from perceived inequalities and injustices, or ambitions for regional expansion, Boko Haram has clearly increased the capacity and sophistication of its attacks, as well as evolved in its tactics. As early as 2011 the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and the Intelligence Committee on Homeland Security reported collaboration between Boko Haram, al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and al Shabaab. The committee concluded that “the rapid evolution of Boko Haram may point to the sharing of weapons and expertise among various terrorist organizations across the African continent.”³⁰

Boko Haram has been following an opportunistic trend under Shekau’s leadership, evolving in its modus operandi of attacks and methodology along the way. Boko Haram initially became affiliated with al-Qaeda in 2011, with its attack against the United Nations Headquarters in Abuja. According to Martin Ewi, the al-Qaeda period was marked by “simultaneous attacks and suicide bombings, kidnapping foreigners, threatening the United States of America and other western countries, as well as participating in other jihadist operations.”³¹ In March 2015 Shekau pledged Boko Haram’s allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, “the self-proclaimed ‘caliph’ and

leader of the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS or ISIL).”³² With Boko Haram’s new allegiance came the desire for a new name: Islamic State’s West African Province, or ISWAP.³³ After teaming up with ISIS, Boko Haram’s tactics became even more violent. Boko Haram has adopted ISIS trademarks of suicide bombings, a desire to establish an Islamic Caliphate by conquering territories, and brutal and dramatic public executions.³⁴ Some reports have suggested that Boko Haram has become divided between the Shekau hardliners that represent the more violent pro-ISIS faction and the Yusufiyyas, being the less violent and pro-al-Qaeda faction.³⁵

Nigeria’s Approach to Boko Haram

Recently elected Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari has pursued a focused agenda countering government corruption as well as fighting the Boko Haram. As an ethnic Fulani Muslim from the northern state of Katsina, a former military General, and a former Nigerian Head of State (following a military coup), President Buhari is no stranger to the challenges his country faces. Buhari campaigned for president on promises to fix Nigeria’s corruption problem as well as put an end to Boko Haram; the two issues being connected in complex ways. Setting aside the competing historical legacies of the northeastern region of Nigeria (Empire vs Caliphate, Kanuri vs Hausa-Fulani, Shehu vs Sultan, Salafi vs Sufi, sharia law vs civil law), it is clear that economic and political corruption have fueled Boko Haram’s emergence. Northeast Nigeria is the poorest part of the country, where “71.5 percent of the population lives in absolute poverty and more than half are malnourished.”³⁶ For Buhari to succeed in any economic or government action, to include military action, he must make counter-corruption policies his top priority.

Aggressively pursuing an anti-corruption agenda, Buhari quickly set to the task of ridding his government of corrupt leadership and promised the end of Boko Haram by the end of 2015.

Heading into his presidency, Transparency International (TI) ranked Nigeria's government 136/176 on their Corruption Perception Index, and received the second lowest ranking on TI's Government Defence Anti-Corruption Index.³⁷ Buhari sacked a string of senior civil and military officials shortly after taking office. It was important, however, for Buhari to balance amnesty programs for former militants, and removing corrupt generals from his military force, without hollowing out the urgently needed military forces needed to counter Boko Haram.³⁸ As part of Buhari's counter-Boko Haram strategy, he moved his military's command center right into the city where Boko Haram originated, Maiduguri, Borno state, sending a strategic message to Boko Haram fighters.

Military Action

Prior to Buhari's anti-corruption campaign geared toward civil and military leaders, Nigeria primarily conducted a military effort to counter Boko Haram. Buhari's predecessor, Goodluck Jonathan, president from 2010-2015, had little success preventing the growth of Boko Haram as he attempted to keep Boko Haram a Nigerian problem. Recognizing Nigeria's inability to handle Boko Haram alone, member states of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC)--Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad--requested authorization from the African Union (AU) to form a Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to counter Boko Haram's alarming gains in the region.³⁹ The 8,700 person strong MNJTF would consist of personnel from the LCBC countries augmented by those from Benin. According to Lori-Anne Thérroux-Bénoni, under Jonathan's administration two variables limited the effectiveness of Nigeria's military measures against Boko Haram: domestic politics "either diplomatically boycotted the initiative or maneuvered to ensure it would remain in the driver's seat of any military endeavor."⁴⁰ Furthermore, claims of human rights abuses by the Nigerian military deterred U.S. assistance to Nigerian efforts.⁴¹

Buhari's election to president was the harbinger for swift and decisive military action against Boko Haram. Buhari's no-nonsense approach to anti-corruption, and promise to put an end to Boko Haram by the end of 2015 gave renewed momentum to domestic and international counter-Boko Haram strategies. In a bold move against Boko Haram, Buhari's decision to move the military command center to Borno's state capital empowered commanders in the field with the ability to make timelier decisions, thereby increasing military effectiveness.⁴² Additionally, Buhari leveraged organic military knowledge and expertise by appointing "officers who are from north-eastern Nigeria and know the local dynamics of the insurgency to leading positions in the military, including Chief of Army Staff Tukur Buratai, which has also increased the morale of troops."⁴³ Nigeria's new military momentum and transparency-oriented administration motivated the U.S. to commit forces to aid in the effort.

In October 2015, the United States deployed 300 troops to Cameroon to provide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations in the region.⁴⁴ Vast forests in the northeast Nigeria, such as the Sambisa Forest, have benefited Boko Haram as a refuge and safe-haven from Nigerian ground forces--a diminishing advantage with the advent of U.S ISR capabilities.⁴⁵ The October 2015 installment of U.S. troops represents the second time the United States has provided forces to counter Boko Haram; in the first instance the United States sent 80 troops in 2014, after Boko Haram kidnapped 276 schoolgirls in Chibok.⁴⁶ U.S. drone operators have become more directly involved in operations to bolster MNJTF efforts; stationed at a military base in Garoua, Cameroon, operators provide ISR imagery to African troops that have helped friendly forces avoid major Boko Haram ambushes in the vegetation-dense Nigerian terrain.⁴⁷ According to February 2016 reports, the U.S. is ready to increase its effort against

Boko Haram by “send[ing] dozens of Special Operations advisers to the front lines of Nigeria’s fight.”⁴⁸

Resolve and increased capability have resulted in great success for Nigeria’s military fight against Boko Haram. The successes against Boko Haram however, come with a cost. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, “over 11,000 people were killed in Boko Haram-related violence in 2015 -- some 6,800 of them in direct attacks and the remainder in clashes with Nigerian security forces.”⁴⁹ At the end of 2015, President Buhari announced that Boko Haram had ‘technically’ been beaten as it had “lost almost all the territories it occupied in the ‘Islamic State’ that [Boko Haram’s] leader Shekau declared in 2014” and no longer had the means to “take towns.”⁵⁰ However, any revelry over recent successes against Boko Haram would be premature. According to U.S. director of national intelligence, James R. Clapper, “Despite losing territory in 2015, Boko Haram will probably remain a threat to Nigeria throughout 2016 and will continue its terror campaign within the country and in neighboring Cameroon, Niger and Chad.”⁵¹ The swift military actions taken against Boko Haram since Buhari’s election only represents a military approach in dealing with an existential threat, but does not address the root of the problem, nor residual problems.

Addressing the Root Problems

The fight against Boko Haram has largely taken a military visage with little regard to addressing the ideologies that motivate Boko Haram, nor the de-radicalization and reintegration of Boko Haram fighters, nor the rehabilitation of former captives of Boko Haram. While politicians eagerly declare the defeat of an adversary to keep campaign promises, in reality a long struggle remains ahead. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, “The Boko Haram insurgency has raged for over six years, claiming some 30,000 lives. The group's ability to keep

fighting for so many years, to hold hundreds of captives, and to continue to stage regular attacks are all evidence of that the group is far from defeated.”⁵² Furthermore, aid workers and human rights groups have warned against pursuing unrealistic goals, such as rushing 1.6 million displaced persons back to their homes.⁵³ Additionally, a Nigerian senator claimed that of the 20 districts in Borno, only three are safe from Boko Haram and only because security forces were present.⁵⁴ The current strategy still suffers from some residual problems, while it still fails to address the root causes of the uprising.

Military action alone will not solve the radicalized ideologies or the social problems which have fueled Boko Haram’s recruiting effort in Nigeria. Absolute poverty in the predominantly Muslim and now war-torn north represents a deep and difficult problem. Boko Haram’s complaint about Nigerian inequality and official neglect of welfare in the north continues to garner listening ears. The government must find a way to resolve conflicts between the federal laws and sharia law. The government must gain the trust and support of religious teachers and leaders to counter the religious narrative that Boko Haram propagates. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) suffering hardship are ripe for recruitment to Boko Haram’s cause should their needs not be met in camps for IDPs and refugees. Those who have been taken hostage, as well as defecting fighters, face unique challenges in de-radicalization and/or reintegration upon their return home. All these difficulties demonstrate that the road to victory against Boko Haram remains very long, and requires a comprehensive whole-of-government approach, which currently doesn’t appear to exist and can’t be delayed until all the fighting is done.

Summary

Since the death of its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram has undergone several evolutions. First assumed to have fractured into five factions, and later believed to have only split in two, Boko Haram has experienced moderate ethnic divisions and in-fighting. Under Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram has aligned itself in tactics and rhetoric first with al Qaeda and later with ISIS; the less violent Yusufiyya constituting a core group of pro-al Qaeda members that have friction with Shekau hard-liners. Shekau pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2015 and changed the group's name to ISWAP. The more violent tactics adopted after aligning with ISIS enabled Boko Haram to make major territorial claims that President Jonathan could not prevent or resist. President Buhari has worked to root out corruption among his civil and military leadership and has pursued an aggressive military campaign against Boko Haram, with the goal of defeating them by the end of 2015.

Buhari's military successes, in coordination with the LCBC-led MNJTF and U.S. support include the recapturing of almost all the territory Boko Haram had occupied. After six years of conflict, 30,000 dead, and 1.6 million displaced persons, much remains to be done. Nigeria's approach has been military-focused to address existential threats, but it has not done much to address some of the root causes that fueled Boko Haram's growth in the northeast region of Nigeria. Such root causes can be found in political and economic inequalities, disparity in executing the law, countering Boko Haram's message that attacks Nigeria as a state, and the issue of de-radicalization and reintegration of former fighters and/or prisoners of Boko Haram, to name a few. Although the major flames of conflict have been stamped out through military action, red-hot coals of grievances still burn in the socio-economic and religious spheres. If left unaddressed, despair can once again flare into anger and violence.

Future Boko Haram Strategy

As Nigeria continues to counter Boko Haram and address the root causes that have allowed this movement to gain so much traction in the northeastern region of Nigeria, the government must take a multi-faceted approach. Paramount in this counter-Boko Haram effort, the government must ‘change the narrative’ that Boko Haram has used to deceive so many Nigerians into giving their support. Additionally, the government must use all of its policy tools and programs to address the socio-economic factors contributing to societal discontent. Due to the mass support and impact of Boko Haram’s initiatives, the government must organize national social re-integration efforts to rehabilitate defectors and victims of Boko Haram’s movement. Lastly, the military should continue to play a role, but it should take a lesser role and support local law enforcement institutions. Any future improvements in security will require a shift in mindset so that both citizens and soldiers work to view one another as Nigerians, rather than as terrorists, combatants and victims.

Changing the Narrative

Many terrorist organizations utilize a similar tactic of manipulating history and religion in order to craft a message and purpose that evokes strong emotional responses from their recruiting base. The leaders of Boko Haram have successfully accomplished this as they manipulate some of the well-known histories of northeastern Nigeria. In order to craft a message that would attract followers, Boko Haram has insidiously morphed the story of Dan Fodio, challenged what it is to be Salafi, and engaged in a wide-range of religious assassinations. President Buhari correctly addressed the problem at its core when he stated: “The fraud called Boko Haram can be defeated by denying it a recruitment base. No religion allows for the killing of children in school dormitories, in markets and places of worship. They have nothing to do with religion. They are

terrorists and we are going to deal with them as we deal with terrorists.”⁵⁵ This analysis highlights the imperative for the government, working with religious leaders, teachers, and social activists, counter Boko Haram’s message with the truth.

Boko Haram has claimed the valuable symbol of Dan Fodio’s journey to establish the Sokoto Caliphate as the model for their declaring caliphate in northern Nigeria. Although Boko Haram can claim a similarity in its actions, the comparison ultimately fails. The Kanuri tribe, which is dominant in the northeast, constitutes the largest part of Boko Haram’s membership, but the Kanuri opposed and resisted Dan Fodio in his journey to establish a caliphate.⁵⁶

Salafi organizations do not universally accept Boko Haram’s extreme violence. According to Woodward, et al, “*Boko Haram* is the only *Salafi* organisation to employ violence as a strategy for spreading *Salafi* teachings and practices....It espouses a radical anti-western and anti-modern ideology that defines modern western education and government employment as religiously unacceptable.”⁵⁷ Not all Salafi organizations accept these extreme views. Salafi movements contain a complex variety of philosophical approaches and doctrine. Islamic discourse doesn’t support a simple dichotomy between moderate Sufis and extremist Salafis, because a wide-range of groups take intermediate positions between these two poles.⁵⁸ Some Salafi groups have isolated themselves from mainstream society, based on similar teachings and the perception of a corrupt society, but they accept certain ideas of western civilization otherwise shunned by Boko Haram. More specifically, among Salafists the *Izala* factions strongly oppose the violence being used by Boko Haram to propagate religious extremism.⁵⁹

Boko Haram’s religiously focused violence included the assassination of a number of highly respected religious leaders in Nigeria as it pursues political power. Boko Haram’s violence has moved beyond the mere pursuit of the purification of a lax Muslim community to

the elimination of any who oppose their agenda. For example, Boko Haram killed Sheikh Ibrahim Birkuti, a prominent cleric that criticized the violence of Boko Haram.⁶⁰ Hearings before the U.S. House of Representatives document the murders of other prominent religious leaders: “Bashir Kashara, a well-known Wahhabi cleric; and Ibrahim Ahmad Abdullahi, a non-violent preacher; the brother of one of the most important traditional Islamic rulers in northeast Nigeria, the Shehu of Borno.”⁶¹ Terje Østebø notes the assassination of “at least six Salafi *‘ulamā’* who openly criticized Boko Haram.”⁶² Non-militant Salafis that oppose the violence and endorse the values of liberal democracy and secular education deserve support to counter Boko Haram’s vision and message of a “virtuous Islamic state and society.”⁶³

Government Approach & Social Integration

Nigeria’s campaign to address root causes of social grievances will need to incorporate a whole-of-government approach as well address the social integration issues associated with former militants, those traumatized by extremists, and the general acceptance of Nigerian’s toward one another. Buhari’s anti-corruption campaign reflects positive steps in addressing societal equalities and fiscal corruption. Nigerian Air Force’s (NAF) Air Marshall Amosu described the relationship between government corruption and civil discord as follows:

Nigerian politicians are associated with acquisition of wealth and property through corruption.... this flagrant and wanton display of ill gotten wealth relatively induces some citizens to take to criminality and violence as a means of survival in a society that does not have any plan for them. As a result, at any slightest provocation, people resort to violence as alternative means of complaint.⁶⁴

Furthermore, Nigeria must overcome the legacy of its previously heavy-handed conduct in responding to Boko Haram and must take measures to avoid any future human rights violations that could spur on further societal discontent.⁶⁵

General reconciliation between the state and the population requires addressing economic and social issues. Buhari has already expressed a willingness to engage in discussions with Boko Haram, but continued efforts of maintaining lines of communication open will become increasingly more important as major conflict subsides.⁶⁶ Any remedy to the conditions of absolute poverty in the northeast region of Nigeria will require socioeconomic development.⁶⁷ Boko Haram's recruitment among northern Muslims has succeeded because the people had already been conditioned with poverty and a sense that the federal government had failed them.⁶⁸ In addition to the socioeconomic efforts, the government must create de-radicalization and re-integration programs to assist individuals effectively assimilate back into society.

Preventative measures and programs with the aim of social integration can utilize several courses of action to counter radicalization. According to NAF Air Marshall Amosu, integration and prevention policy goals should focus on: strengthening social ties and civil society; promoting cultural understanding; fostering labor market participation; strengthening local infrastructure; and, increasing young people's knowledge of Islam.⁶⁹ The Air Marshall goes on to highlight that "Nigeria has not been following this line of counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism campaign especially in early dialogue with and deradicalisation of a radicalized group."⁷⁰ Governments benefit from early and continuous dialogue as an essential de-radicalization tool because it creates exit opportunities for members of radical groups and becomes a forum for incentivizing defection. Other demographics that require attention are those who have been abducted, abused, or otherwise psychologically traumatized by radical groups.

Throughout the conflict, Boko Haram has abducted several hundred captives, leaving a trail of trauma along the way. Boko Haram has used captives to bolster its ranks through conscription, to forcibly marry, to rape, to indoctrinate, and more. Minors and women obviously

suffer the most from Boko Haram's indoctrination methods. Journalists estimate that Boko Haram has abducted from 500 to 2,000 minors since 2013, but many more that likely go unreported among the 1.6 million persons displaced by the conflict.⁷¹ Not only do abducted youth lose any chance for a decent life and education, they lack the psychological resources to resist indoctrination and some even begin to believe in the group's cause. When security forces release successfully indoctrinated youth, or they escape, they present a challenge to society. Latent criminal ideas resulting from indoctrination may result in anti-social behavior, or later burgeon into criminal acts, thus necessitating a robust education and reintegration program.

Furthermore, kidnapped Nigerian women who seek to return to their homes also face rejection, presenting a complex social re-integration challenge. Researchers have found that "communities were concerned the girls and women had been radicalised since their kidnap, and might attempt to convert others. They are being labelled 'Boko Haram wives' and 'annoba' - meaning epidemics."⁷² These reports only represent the tip of the proverbial iceberg as Nigerian government and military continue to help return freed captives to their homes. International Alert and UNICEF estimate that at least 2,000 women and girls have been abducted since 2012.⁷³ Those released from Boko Haram thus far do not include any of the 276 kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls, suggesting that the extremist group still holds many more captives.

Many women taken captive and raped by Boko Haram have now born children. Communities have rejected these children, worried that the children will inherit the 'Bad Blood' of their Boko Haram fathers, "placing them at risk of discrimination, rejection and potential violence in the future."⁷⁴ Additionally, the mothers of these children find themselves being ostracized in their own communities. Social isolation in northern Nigeria creates conditions where single mothers are driven from absolute poverty to dire poverty, resorting to prostitution

in order to feed their children.⁷⁵ These examples demonstrate the urgent need for improved social reintegration efforts.

Role of the Military

Recent military successes in Nigeria have assisted in addressing the more urgent needs of containing and reversing the advances made by Boko Haram in the past few years. The military focus has come somewhat at the expense of a broader, integrated approach, whole-of-government approach to addressing Boko Haram's root causes. In discussion the fight against terrorist organizations, NAF Air Marshall said that, "Victory against such groups rarely comes from destruction of their troops on battlefield....Moreover, [the] current wave of terrorism has ideological colouration, therefore requiring change of mindset."⁷⁶ This sage insight of a senior military leader in Nigeria provides a positive sign that the highest echelons of the Nigerian military do understand that reducing the damage caused by Boko Haram requires something more than military action.

Nigeria's military forces will need to transition command and control of military-led counter-terrorist operations to Nigerian police forces that will assume security functions at the local level. Nigeria does not lack counter-terrorism institutions or law enforcement agencies, but Amy Pate argues that Nigeria needs a more balanced and coordinated approach among Nigerian agencies.⁷⁷ Adesola Amosu looks toward an ideal world in which the government fosters synergy among security agencies and mobilization of the people in total defence.⁷⁸ As major military combat operations decline, counter-terrorist operations will need to take on a new tone under the auspices of Nigerian police actions.

Nigeria's operations against Boko Haram have emphasized the distinction between insurgents and terrorists. The military employs lethal tactics when conducting operations against

Boko Haram, treating them as terrorists, enemy combatants, and enemies of the state.⁷⁹ Military operations against politically motivated insurgents, considered fellow-countrymen, constitute a much more complicated problem, which requires a more restrained approach. While future military and policing actions will continue, activists and international organizations must hold government security agencies responsible for the humane treatment of innocent citizens.

Summary

As the fight against Boko Haram and its extremist ideology wages on into the future, several efforts that can, and should be made to engage this adversary on more than just a military front. Tactics to undermine Boko Haram's ideology can include countering Boko Haram's historical parallel to Dan Fodio's fight to establish the Sokoto Caliphate and highlighting how brutish violence violates the principles promoted by other Salafi organizations. Leveraging factions within Boko Haram will help weaken the organization while supporting other competing Muslim organizations that have experienced targeted assassinations will reduce the potential recruitment base. The government must continue efforts to end corruption and promote transparency to regain the trust of the people. The government must make genuine efforts to address the socio-economic situation in northeastern Nigeria, raising the people out of absolute poverty and ending social inequality. Nigerian society needs civic education programs to educate the population on Islam and in understanding what constitutes radicalization. Both government and non-government organizations must take urgent action to facilitate the de-radicalization and re-integration of Boko Haram fighters, those they have abducted or conscripted, and the children born of Boko Haram fathers to prevent ostracizing a new group of persons that could result in future conflict for perceived disparity and inequality. Lastly, as military operations lessen, the state must transition its security operations to policing actions. The state must protect the human

rights of its citizens while conducting operations against terrorist organizations to avoid creating further grievances which lead to rebellion.

Conclusion

Given the complexity of the security situation in Nigeria, blended with the economic, political and social strife, projects and programmes designed to counter terrorism should be built around community resilience against terrorism, enhance cooperation among law enforcement agencies and strengthening judicial institutions. Hence, strategy and the importance of collective efforts to counter terrorism in an increasingly interdependent and interconnected Nigeria have become imperative.⁸⁰ - Nigerian Air Force Air Marshall Adesola Nunayon Amosu

The diverse issues that contributed to the rise of Boko Haram create a multitude of options to pursue as part of a countering strategy. Changing the ideological narrative Boko Haram tries to propagate requires first understanding the history of the northern region of Nigeria, along with the disparate, yet intertwining variables of the social context there. Additionally, any action taken to address long-time grievances of political corruption, socio-economical inequalities, and impoverishment should be pursued with the same intensity as current military operations. Ignoring these issues will only allow future extremist organizations to rise in influence and conduct acts of violence as a type of civil complaint against government neglect and/or ineptitude. Victims and defectors need robust de-radicalization and re-integration programs to enable them to return home without suffering rejection from their own communities and to heal the suffering of their own lingering ideas following traumatic indoctrination. Allowing pockets of society to become alienated and suffer in dire poverty will only lead to the rise of more extremists in the future. Lastly, military action needs to preserve human rights and create synergies with Nigerian security agencies: military operations should taper as police forces take the lead in local policing activities. Collectively, these initiatives represent a whole-of-government approach to dealing with the current extremist threat, Boko Haram, and address

underlying issues that could perpetuate the current Boko Haram threat, or enable future extremists to surface.

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