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BRIEFING
Why Boko Haram Exists: The Relative Deprivation Perspective

Daniel Egigeba Agbibo

ABSTRACT: Since 2009, Boko Haram, a radical Islamist group from northeastern Nigeria, has been responsible for major attacks that have caused many deaths and destruction in Nigeria. In 2011, the group was responsible for at least 450 deaths, and up to 900 deaths in the first six months of 2012 according to the Human Rights Watch. This briefing paper provides an account of Boko Haram’s origin, ideology, demands, and modus operandi. Specifically, the paper draws on the relative deprivation theory to explain why Boko Haram exists. The answer provides a clue to resolving the current problem.

KEYWORDS: Boko Haram, Relative Deprivation, Northern Nigeria

I. INTRODUCTION

Radical Islam is not a new phenomenon in northern Nigeria. Following independence in October 1960, the violent confrontations that took place between a sect of Muslim fanatics (popularly known as the Maitatsine uprisings) and the Nigerian Police Force in Kano (December 1980) and Maiduguri (October 1982) did not come as a surprise to those who understand the complexity of the religious situation in northern Nigeria. According to Raymond Hickey (1984: 251), the Maitatsine uprisings had its roots in the “deeply conservative practice
of Islam,” which has been dominant in the region as far back as the highly successful jihad of Sheik Usman dan Fodio of Sokoto in the first decade of the nineteenth century. What began as a search for religious purification soon became a search for a political kingdom (Crowder 1978: 71), with the outcome that “Islam has remained the focal veneer for the legitimacy of the northern ruling class, and consequently, its politicians have always prided themselves as soldiers for the defence of the faith” (Ekot 2009: 52; see also Udoidem 1997: 156).

While the conservative practice of Islam is not unrelated to the rise of militant religiosity in northern Nigeria since 1960, there has been less scholarly attention devoted to the socioeconomic embeddedness of religious extremists groups in the region. This briefing paper draws on the relative deprivation theory to explain why the current problem of Boko Haram exists and how it can be resolved.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY

Since 2009, Boko Haram has spearheaded many violent attacks in Nigeria. The attacks, which show evidence of increasing sophistication and coordination, are strategically targeted at Nigeria’s ethnoreligious fault lines as well as national security forces in a bid to hurt the nation’s stability (Onuah and Eboh 2011). In particular, a spate of attacks against churches from December 2011 through July 2012 suggests “a strategy of provocation” through which the group seeks to “spark a large scale of sectarian conflict that will destabilize the country” (Forest 2012: 15). But what is Boko Haram? Why does the group exist?

The term Boko Haram is derived from a combination of the Hausa word for “book,” boko, and the Arabic word for “forbidden,” haram. Put together, Boko Haram literally means “Western education is forbidden.” However, the group has rejected this designation. Instead, it prefers “Western culture is forbidden.” The difference, as one of the senior members of Boko Haram noted, is that “while the first gives the impression that we are opposed to formal education coming from the West . . . which is not true, the second affirms our belief in the supremacy of Islamic culture (not education), for culture is broader, it includes education but not determined by Western education” (Onuoha 2012: 1–2). Boko Haram officially calls itself Jama’atul Alhul Sunnah Lidda’wati wal Jihad / “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad” (US Department of State June 21, 2012).
Across northern Nigeria, Western education continues to be associated with attempts by evangelical Christians to convert Muslims, and fears of southern economic and political domination. As Muhammad Isa (2010:322) notes, the term Boko Haram implies a sense of rejection and “resistance to imposition of Western education and its system of colonial social organisation, which replaced and degraded the earlier Islamic order of the jihadist state.” Isa further argues that Islamic scholars and clerics who once held sway in the caliphate state and courts assigned the name boko to northern elites who spoke, acted, ruled and operated the state like their Western colonial masters. It is not uncommon to hear in discussions among Islamist scholars and average northerners that poverty and collapsed governance—the bane of the region—can be blamed on the failures and corrupt attitudes of yan boko (modern elites trained at secular schools) who have acquired a Western education and are currently in positions of power. As such, the system represented by the yan boko is unjust, secular and has no divine origin. It is therefore un-Islamic, which in turn accounts for its ineptitude and corruptness. (2010: 332)

The Boko Haram group was led by Mohammed Yusuf until he was killed by Nigerian security forces just after the sectarian violence in Nigeria in July 2009, which caused over 1,000 deaths (Umar 2011). Yusuf was born on the 29th of January 1970 in Girgir, in Yobe State, Nigeria. He received instruction in Salafi radicalism and was greatly influenced by Ibn Taymiyyah, an Islamic scholar (alim) born in Harran in modern-day Turkey (Chothia 2011). At the time of his death, Yusuf was the commander in chief (Amir ul-Aam) of the entire group. He had two deputies (Na‘ib Amir ul-Aam I and II), and each state and local government where they existed had its own amir (commander/leader).

Boko Haram’s membership comprises university lecturers, bankers, political elites, drug addicts, unemployed graduates, almajiris, and migrants from neighboring countries. Members are also drawn primarily from the Kanuri tribe—roughly 4 percent of the population—who are concentrated in the northeastern states of Nigeria, like Bauchi and Borno, and the Hausa-Fulani (29 percent of the population), spread more generally throughout most of the northern states (Forest 2012). Boko Haram members distinguish themselves by growing long beards.
and wearing red or black headscarves. Like the members of the Maitatsine movement, many of the members attracted by Boko Haram are animated by deep-seated socioeconomic and political grievances, such as poor governance and elite corruption. As John Campbell notes, “Boko Haram, once an obscure, radical Islamic cult in the North, is evolving into an insurrection with support among the impoverished and alienated Northern population” (June 24, 2012).

Boko Haram’s ideology is embedded in the deep tradition of Islamism, and is but one of several variants of radical Islamism to have emerged in northern Nigeria. Its adherents are reportedly influenced by the Koranic verse (TMQ 5: 44): “Anyone who is not governed by what Allah has revealed is among the transgressors” (cited in Thurston 2011). As the name suggests, Boko Haram is strongly opposed to what it sees as a Western-based incursion that threatens traditional values, beliefs, and customs among Muslim communities in northern Nigeria. The group’s first leader, Mohammed Yusuf, a charismatic preacher, told the BBC in 2009: “Western-style education is mixed with issues that run contrary to our beliefs in Islam” (BBC News, July 31, 2009). Elsewhere, the leader argues: “Our land was an Islamic state before the colonial masters turned it to a kafir land. The current system is contrary to true Islamic beliefs” (Salkida 2009). In an audiotape posted on the internet in January 2012, a spokesman for the group, Abubakar Shekau, even accused US President Barrack Obama of waging war on Islam (Reuters Africa, January 30, 2012). Boko Haram members saw themselves at odds with the secular authorities, whom they came to view as representatives of a corrupt, illegitimate, Christian-dominated federal government.

Boko Haram became a full-fledged insurgency following confrontations between the group and the state’s security agency in Bauchi State charged with the responsibility of enforcing a newly introduced law requiring motorcyclists to wear crash-helmets in the country. Members of Boko Haram refused to obey this law. That refusal led to a violent confrontation between the state’s enforcement agency and Boko Haram, killing 17 Boko Haram members in the crossfire (United States Institute of Peace 2012: 12). The group’s hideout in Bauchi State was also ransacked and materials for making explosives were confiscated. Following this crackdown, the group mobilized its members for reprisal attacks that led to the death of several policemen and civilians. The riot was temporarily quelled after Nigerian forces captured and killed the Boko Haram leader, Mohammed Yusuf. Following Yusuf’s death, and the arrest of several of Boko Haram members, the group retreated. But it was
only pro tem, for they resurfaced with more advanced tactics and devastating attacks by bombing the police headquarters in Abuja in June 2011 and the United Nations Headquarters in August 2011 (Reuters Africa, August 29, 2011).

For many Boko Haram members, the extrajudicial killing of their founder served to foment preexisting animosities toward the Nigerian government and its security forces. Not surprising, Boko Haram’s most frequent targets have been police stations, patrols, and individual policemen at home or in public who are off-duty or even retired. They have used petrol bombs, improvised explosive devices, and armed assaults in these violent attacks (Forest 2012). Among the demands of the group are the release of all its prisoners and the prosecution of those responsible for the extrajudicial killing of their founder (Oxford Research Group 2012). Such demands pitted the group against the Nigerian state and its security forces in a dagger-drawn opposition.

While the overriding goal of Boko Haram is to wrest control from the Nigerian state and to impose Sharia legal code across the entire country, the cocktail of political corruption, chronic poverty, and youth unemployment in northern Nigeria continues to fuel members and supporters of Boko Haram. According to Isa, Boko Haram communities had been wrecked by “poverty, deteriorating social services and infrastructure, educational backwardness, rising numbers of unemployed graduates, massive numbers of unemployed youths, dwindling fortunes in agriculture . . . and the weak and dwindling productive base of the northern economy” (2010: 329). It has been argued that people living under poor socioeconomic conditions may draw guidance—rightly or wrongly—from their religious identity, particularly as religious actors are commonly accessible at the most grass-roots levels (EWER 2009).

But where does Boko Haram derive its funding? In the past, Nigerian officials have been criticized for their inability to trace much of the funding that the group has received. However, in February 2012, recently arrested Boko Haram officials revealed that while the group initially relied on donations from members, its links with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) opened it up to more funding from groups in Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the arrested officials divulged that other sources of funding included the Al Muntada Trust Fund and the Islamic World Society. In addition, a spokesman of Boko Haram revealed that Kano State governor Ibrahim Shekarau and Bauchi State governor Isa Yuguda had paid them monthly (Aziken et al. 2012).
Boko Haram also derives its finances from robbing local banks. For example, on January 12, 2010, four Boko Haram members attempted to rob a bank in Bakori Local Government Area of Katsina State, according to the local Police Commissioner Umaru Abubakar (Leigh 2011). On December 4, 2011, Bauchi Police Commissioner Ikechukwu Aduba claimed that members of Boko Haram had robbed local branches of Guaranty Trust Bank PLC and Intercontinental Bank PLC (Ibrahim 2011). And on December 10, 2011, Mohammed Abdullahi, Central Bank of Nigeria spokesman, claimed: “At least 30 bank attacks attributed to Boko Haram have been reported this year” (Onu and Muhammad 2011). Beyond bank robberies and individual financiers, there have also been rumors of Boko Haram’s involvement in trafficking of illicit weapons and drugs, albeit there has been no hard evidence to corroborate such claims.

It is instructive to note that Boko Haram is not a monolithic entity with a unified purpose. There are separate factions within the movement who disagree about tactics and strategic directions, competing at times for attention and followers (Agbiboa, forthcoming). A recent US House of Representatives report suggested that one faction of the group may be focused on domestic issues and another on violent international extremism. Another report indicated that the group may have even split into three factions: one that remains moderate and welcomes an end to the violence; another that wants a peace agreement; and a third that refuses to negotiate and wants to implement strict Sharia law across Nigeria (Forest 2012). In July 2011, a group calling itself the Yusufiyya Islamic Movement distributed leaflets widely through Maiduguri denouncing other Boko Haram factions as “evil” (Agbiboa, forthcoming). Asserting the legacy of founder Mohammed Yusuf, the authors of the leaflets distanced themselves from attacks on civilians and on churches. Today, “some local observers now discriminate between a Kogi Boko Haram, Kanuri Boko Haram, and Hausa Fulani Boko Haram” (Forest 2012: 121).

Given their large-scale attacks that have spread serious ripples beyond the shores of Nigeria, there is little doubt that Boko Haram’s activities have generated a psychological impact that transcends the actual physical damage caused. In particular, using suicide bombers and explosives has intensified the ferocity of the sect and led to speculation in some quarters that the group might be linked to Al-Qaeda (Uzodike and Maiangwa 2012). Indeed, on November 24, a spokesman for Boko Haram, Abul Qaqa, stated: “It is true that we have links
with al-Qaeda. They assist us and we assist them” (Chothia 2012:1). Boko Haram has also admitted to establishing links in Somalia. A statement released by the group read:

Very soon, we will wage jihad . . . . We want to make it known that our jihadists have arrived in Nigeria from Somalia where they received real training on warfare from our brethren who made that country ungovernable . . . This time round, our attacks will be fiercer and wider than they have been. (Zimmerman 2011)

III. WHY BOKO HARAM EXISTS: THE RELATIVE DEPRIVATION PERSPECTIVE

It was Jeffrey Seul (1999:553) who once argued that religious conflicts need not be about religion, and indeed usually have nonreligious causes. They are called religious conflicts because religion serves as the unifying and mobilizing identity. In his words: “Religion is not the cause of religious conflict; rather for many . . . it frequently supplies the fault line along which intergroup identity and resource competition occurs” (1999: 558). This section of the paper uses the theory of relative deprivation to explain why Boko Haram exists.

The meaning of relative deprivation can be gleaned from the works of its finest exponents. In his book *Why Men Rebel*, Ted Gurr (1970) argues that people become dissatisfied if they feel they have less than they should and could have. Over time, such dissatisfaction leads to frustration and then rebellion against the (real or perceived) source of their deprivation. Elsewhere, Gurr (2005: 20) argues that structural poverty and inequality within countries are “breeding grounds for violent political movements in general and terrorism specifically.” Drawing on his studies of relative deprivation and conflict in Northern Ireland, Birrel (1972: 317) contends that group tensions develop from a discrepancy between the “ought” and the “is” of collective value satisfaction. Similarly, Davies (1962) argues that the occasion of political violence is due to the insupportable gap between what people want and what they get; the difference between expectations and gratifications: “this discrepancy is a frustrating experience that is sufficiently intense and focused to result in either rebellion or revolution” (Davies 1962: 5). The crux of all these works is that violent actions flourish within a context of sustained grievances caused by relative deprivation.
It is no coincidence that one of the worst forms of political violence in Nigeria today originates in the most socioeconomically deprived parts of the country. In the North, for example, where unemployment and chronic poverty are rife, radical Islamists groups have challenged the authority of the state. In the South-East, specifically the Niger Delta where Nigeria’s oil resource is located, environmental degradation caused by irresponsible oil practices has compromised the major source of livelihood of indigenous people. This, in turn, has given rise to various militant groups in the region, often consisting of unemployed youths, who have engaged in kidnappings, oil pipeline vandalizations, extortion, car bombings, and other forms of violent attacks against the Nigerian state and its oil infrastructures (Omeje 2004; Omotola 2006).

In particular, the effect of poverty on health and education in northern Nigeria is striking, if not alarming. In Borno State, the birthplace of Boko Haram, “only 2% of children under 25 months have been vaccinated; 83% of young people are illiterate; 48.5% of children do not go to school” (Oxford Research Group 2012: 3). Another report, by the National Population Commission, found that literacy rates are much lower among states in the North, and that 72 percent of children around the ages of 6–16 never attended schools in Borno State, where Boko Haram was founded (Foster 2012). Furthermore, the 2010 National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) data show that the highest poverty rate of 64.8 percent is recorded in the North-East geopolitical zone, followed by 61.2 percent in the North-West. On the other hand, the lowest rate of 31.2 percent is recorded in the South-East, followed by 40.2 percent in the South-West (NBS 2010). As for the poverty index in Nigeria, the top five states (that is, the poorest) are all in the northern areas (UNDP 2009: 9).

From the above, it is clear that the reality of relative deprivation in northern Nigeria is deep-rooted, demanding more attention than is currently given. This situation is compounded by the predominant perception in northern Nigeria that “the wealthy elite throughout the country tend to be Christian, while the most impoverished communities in the country are found among the Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, and other northern groups—all of them primarily Muslim” (Forest 2012: 56). Thus, Alex Thurston observed that “Boko Haram has an entrenched sense of victimhood and now sees the state as both the main persecutor of ‘true’ Muslims and the major obstacle to ‘true’ Islamic reform” (2011: 1). Sope Williams Elegbe, Research Director of the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG), further argues:
The increasing poverty in Nigeria is accompanied by increasing unemployment. Unemployment is higher in the north than in the south. Mix this situation with radical Islam, which promises a better life for martyrs, and you can understand the growing violence in the north. Government statistics show that the northern states have the highest proportion of uneducated persons. If you link a lack of education and attendant lack of opportunities to a high male youth population, you can imagine that some areas are actually a breeding ground for terrorism. (cited in Oxford Research Group 2012: 4)

Given the increased frequency of bomb attacks carried out by Boko Haram, the prospect for human security remains grim in Nigeria, with potentially grave consequences for the international community. Boko Haram provides Al-Qaeda with an avenue to expand its operations in Africa, should the two groups become affiliated organizations. Leaders of both organizations have publicly pledged mutual support. Abubakar bin Muhammad Shekau, current head of Boko Haram, has linked the jihad being fought by Boko Haram with the global jihad. He has threatened attacks not only in Nigeria but also against “outposts of Western culture” (Radin 2012: 1). In association with Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram could potentially pose a threat not only to Nigeria, but also transnationally since Nigeria is Africa’s largest oil producer and most populous state. For one thing, the group’s increasing sophistication of attacks and its adoption of suicide car bombings may be a sign that Boko Haram is indeed receiving tactical and operational assistance from a foreign militant group.

Since AQIM has attacked UN targets in Algeria, and Al-Shabaab has attacked UN targets in Somalia, Boko Haram’s decision to attack the UN building in Abuja is unlikely to be a coincidence. According to Forest, “This attack on a distinctly non-Nigerian target was a first for Boko Haram, and may indicate a major shift in its ideology and strategic goals” (2012: 81). On June 21, 2012, the US State Department added Boko Haram’s most visible leader, Abubakar Shekau, to the list of specially designated global terrorists. Khalid al Barnawi and Abubakar Adam Kamba were also included in the list because of their ties to Boko Haram and close links with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The designation “blocks all of Shekau’s, Kambar’s and al-Barnawi’s property interests subject to U.S. jurisdiction and prohibits U.S. persons from engaging in transactions with or for the benefit of these individuals” (US
IV. CONCLUSION

Boko Haram remains a significant problem confronting the democratic government of President Goodluck Jonathan. The Nigerian government has over the last few months indicated its disposition to resolving the crisis through a stick approach, involving the use of state security forces to “mount aggressive pursuit and crackdown of [Boko Haram] members” (Onuoha 2012: 5). To this end, the Nigerian government established a special joint task force (JTF) to eliminate Boko Haram. However, JTF has been accused of killing innocent people in the name of counterterrorism. In Borno State, for example, JTF resorted to extralegal killings, dragnet arrests, and intimidation of hapless Borno residents: “Far from conducting intelligence-driven operations, the JTF simply cordoned off areas and carried out house-to-house searches, at times shooting young men in these homes” (Solomon 2012:9). According to Edmond Keller, “An overreliance on intimidatory techniques not only presents the image of a state which is low in legitimacy and desperately struggling to survive, but also in the long run can do more to threaten state coherence than to aid it” (1983: 274).

While the arrest of major Boko Haram leaders and strategists has the potential to significantly weaken its operational capability to mount attacks, it has not yet resulted in the destruction of the group’s capabilities. Moreover, it must be considered that the current heavy-handed approach by the Nigerian government may force ultraradical elements within Boko Haram to establish terrorist networks with AQIM, Al Shabaab, and Al-Qaeda as a form of survival strategy. In the event of this happening, the group’s operational base could expand beyond northern Nigeria and their target selection could change fundamentally to include attacks on Western interests (Onuoha 2012).

Addressing the current Boko Haram impasse in Nigeria must include a serious consideration of the pervasive realities of poverty and economic deprivation in the north where Boko Haram originated. A swelling population amid economic despair not only creates an environment in which radical extremist groups can thrive but also legitimates their actions. In addition, to diminish Boko Haram’s capabilities...
for causing further bloodshed, there is need to identify and interdict its financial sources—a critical aspect of any terrorist group’s operational capabilities. This would require a sense of urgency and cooperation among both governmental and nongovernmental entities, at both the local and global level.

NOTES

1. “The young itinerant students of the Koran who attached themselves to any learned malam in a time-honoured system of apprenticeship . . . [the almajiris] had a very poor and simple life-style and won their daily bread in the cities by begging” (Hickey 1984: 253).

2. This refers to an Arabic term used in an Islamic doctrinal sense, usually translated as “unbeliever,” “disbeliever,” or “infidel.” The term refers to a person who rejects Allah or who covers the “truth.”

REFERENCES


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