



# Nigeria's Strategy and Boko Haram: Any End in Sight?

By Richard Ali



On the 29th of November 2020, 43 rice farmers had their throats slit by Boko Haram terrorists at Zabamari in Nigeria's northeastern Borno state. Following this attack, the Senior Special Assistant to the President on Media and Publicity blamed the deceased for not having received clearance from the military to harvest their crops. The military stated that though they had defeated Boko Haram, terrorists remained embedded in local communities and there was little they could do when civilians refused to provide intelligence. President Buhari issued his usual response, the operative phrase being that he "condemned the killing of our hardworking farmers".

2020 was not done with showing just how precarious Nigerian state stability is. On the 11th of December last year, More than 300 students were kidnapped from their government school at Kankara, a two-hour drive from President Buhari's hometown where he was vacationing at the time. Boko Haram claimed responsibility; the government denied this. Eventually, the students were released in a still obscure deal involving the Fulani ethnic *Miyetti Allah* group which has been accused of fomenting the Boko Haram-unrelated farmer-herdsmen crisis in central Nigeria. The Nigerian government then engaged in a shameful and ridiculous attempt to spin this fiasco.

In response, activists have trended the hashtags #ZabamariMassacre #FreeKankaraBoys #SackBuhari and #SecureNorth. Viewed through any one of several internal security lenses, the

brutal, clear-eyed reality is that Nigeria is a scene of carnage and chaos related—directly or not—to the challenge posed by Boko Haram.

Successive governments have been hobbled by this Islamist sect which started a campaign of terror in 2009. Well over 37,000 people have been killed, with millions displaced to Internally Displaced Persons' and refugee camps. The conflict is internationalised, localised as it is around Lake Chad which Nigeria shares with three French-speaking countries—Niger, Chad and Cameroon. The threat profile of Boko Haram that is unfolding in these hyper-connected times is far more scalable than any 20th century conflict. Ending the Boko Haram conflict is crucial to shoring up state stability in Nigeria and West Africa. Yet, Nigeria's strategic engagement with this existential problem leaves much to be desired and is a cause for concern.

At the centre of all conflict resolution approaches is identifying the conflict and, in the case of Boko Haram, this remains blurry. What is clear is that the conflict was kick-started by the murder of the leader of the Boko Haram sect, Muhammad Yusuf, by officers of the Nigerian state. A charismatic preacher and adherent of Salafi revanchist ideology, Yusuf had taken over leadership of the group in 2002 and quickly gathered an immense local following. He then lent his popularity to local politicians uncertain of their legitimacy, until he fell out with them, leading to his death in 2009. The sect then came to be led by the choleric and belligerent Abubakar Shekau, who would go on to plug his group into the international jihadi mainstream with a 2015 pledge to al-Baghdadi's then territorial Islamic State (IS). It now comprises an indeterminate number of factions sharing a narrative that the secular Nigerian state ought to be replaced with an Islamist one, and a willingness to exact an appalling human cost on soft targets and security forces alike. In these axioms, Boko Haram has been single-minded.

Georgetown University professor Jacob Zenn provides compelling research on Boko Haram in his 2020 book *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria*. Zenn's thesis sets out and explores Islamist jihadism as an international network of ideas within which Boko Haram has positioned itself, even if its initial concerns were far more localised. At the centre of this network of ideas is Saudi Arabia's decades-long project to balance out Iranian influence by indoctrinating moderate Muslim clerics and making generous petrodollar grants to spread the Kingdom's ultraconservative Wahhabi Islam. While Mohamed bin Salman continues to try to scale down his country's polarisation of the Middle East through rapprochement with Israel, for example, nothing is likely to be done by the Kingdom to scale back the effect of decades of state support for fundamentalist Islam and virulent extremism in Africa.

This fundamentalism underscored al-Qaeda, which exerted extremist influence on regions farther away, changing Islam forever in societies like the heterogeneous and heterodox ones of Nigeria, which found themselves faced with a new crisis of identity, of political economy, and of state stability. That there will be no help from the Saud who opened the basket of vipers is a given. That defeating Boko Haram requires a holistic, all-of-government strategic engagement by the government of Nigeria is obvious. That Nigeria's state apparatus is currently engaged in chasing after indicators while disregarding the larger syndrome, is a reality rooted in an absence of a common understanding of the Boko Haram problem.

The importance of Dr Jacob Zenn's *Unmasking Boko Haram* lies in its methodology for clarifying the Boko Haram reality. Zenn comes to his analysis from a position of expertise in jihadism and Boko Haram, facility with Hausa and Arabic languages and familiarity with the interconnections between points in the African web of armed non-state actors ranging from AQIM to al-Shabaab. To this he adds copious amounts of research stretching back fifty years, organising this in demonstrably objective ways. His expertise, rigour and creativity weave a narrative of Boko Haram's early influence by bin Laden's deputies in Sudan and the general context, tracing a line of international

influences—including by the Shia—that created its peculiar syncretism. *Unmasking* then sets out the conflict between Boko Haram and mainstream Salafi scholarship, and the fracturing of the group into several factions, giving detailed descriptions of ideological differences. I do not expect that the government of Nigeria will adopt Zenn's conclusions but there can be no doubt that a common understanding of the Boko Haram group is needed and that, eleven years on, it remains lacking.

The first thing to be exploded is the idea that Boko Haram's actions, reprehensible as they are, are senseless. Boko Haram's foundational dissent against mainstream Western ideas—such as Darwinism, allegiance to a secular state, mixed-gender education, for example—in favour of Sharia and the supremacy of the Quran are not particularly special. Revivalist movements within religions, especially Islam, Christianity and Judaism, are commonplace. The group should thus be approached as a sociological attempt to recalibrate society, no different from any of the other -isms academics, intellectuals and ideologues foment, even if misguided. This done, the underlying logic—one which devalues human life and disregards social cooperation and diversity—can be contradicted by floating counter-ideologies or changing society to accommodate or undercut the *raison d'être* of groups like Boko Haram.

Thought to have been founded in 1995, Boko Haram is rooted in a Borno-based jihadist community whose leaders had spent time abroad—particularly in the Sudan and Saudi Arabia—from the 90s right up to 9/11 and believed that postcolonial states were illegitimate. It merged with Saudi-backed Salafi groups which seek to emulate Arab Muslims of the 7th century, are strictly literalist in terms of Islamic tenets—thus rejecting all “innovation”—and believe that there exists a universal Islamic brotherhood of faith to which all else is in opposition. The synthesis of these two strands of ideology led to the defining character of Boko Haram—the certainty that they can declare other Muslims as apostates and wage violence against them and against non-Muslims who are, of course, infidels, precisely because they are either secular or simply non-Muslim.

Abubakar Shekau's leadership of the sect would go on to fully test this minting of new apostates while designating infidels very broadly. He soon turned on the Salafi groups when it was clear they had no stomach for actual violence and had opted for state capture—by participating in politics—instead. The Salafi groups retaliated by mobilising what state resources they had under their influence against Boko Haram, which responded in kind. This, of course, was happening against the backdrop of Saudi backpedaling of Salafi association with jihadists following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Saudis had greatly incentivised local Salafis following the Gulf War in 1990-1991—a period proximate to the coming to the fore of foreign-exposed or foreign-influenced local jihadists, such as the founders of Boko Haram. This is the loop within which the insurgency exists.

An examination of the Nigerian government's strategic response to Boko Haram starts from it failing at its primary role as a state, which is providing people-centred development through managing identity and guaranteeing the security of its citizens. Today, the northeast has a 76 per cent poverty rate, with its quality of life and internally generated revenue profiles placing it amongst the poorest regions in the world. All this was achieved over decades of neglect and public sector corruption, precisely the sort of *boko* behavior Boko Haram uses to argue for a return to simpler times from fourteen centuries ago.

Nigeria's initial reaction to Boko Haram absolutely ignored the interrelated local socioeconomic factors and the international environment that shaped the sect. Hence the assumption that the extrajudicial killing of Mohammed Yusuf would put paid to the sect, which turned out to be grossly incorrect. The initial response also seemed ignorant of the prior twenty years of evolution of armed non-state actors such as al-Qaeda employing a diffused command and control structure which has been described as “cell-like” and more sophisticated than hierarchical state structures. The Nigerian

Police, widely known for human rights abuses and thought of as both incompetent and corrupt, quickly proved inadequate in addressing the insurgency and the military was drafted in for what was essentially an internal security issue.

The earliest military response included blanket arrests and disappearances which alienated local communities in the northeast and guaranteed little cooperation. These actions in fact gained sympathy for the insurgents, who soon began to seize territory. Determined military pushback has now seen the insurgency evolve into a low-intensity conflict with control of some territory routinely changing hands at the cost of military and civilian lives. Attacks have been frequent, especially by the ISWA (Islamic State of West Africa) faction of Boko Haram. A 2019 shift in military strategy saw the creation of “super-camps” and garrison towns which had the effect of leaving the countryside to the insurgents. In these territories, Boko Haram factions have proceeded to levy taxes and duties on economic activity, such as farming and harvesting. It is instructive that Abubakar Shekau, in claiming responsibility for the killing of the rice farmers in Zabamari, said it was done in revenge against the farmers for having arrested an insurgent and cooperated with the military.

It is quite clear that the Nigerian government’s response has not been proactive and preemptive, and has failed to emphasise building intelligence networks with local community buy-in that can disrupt Boko Haram. Nor has it denied Boko Haram factions the ability to recruit and replenish their ranks. The terror unleashed by Boko Haram results from these failures and the insurgents’ demonstrated ability to finance themselves.

It is over a decade since the Boko Haram insurgency started and the lack of strategic coherence on the part of the government of Nigeria is of great concern. Beyond documents and statements, proof of strategy is action and results.

It is important to go back to the drawing board and this starts with the government of Nigeria achieving a common understanding of the conflict and the opposing party—Boko Haram. This is a blind spot that researchers such as the American Dr Jacob Zenn amply illuminate, alongside the thinking of Nigerian academics and researchers who have done rigorous work on Boko Haram. The danger with not doing this is that the conflict will continue, with the usual victims of terror suffering in horrific ways, and after a decade or two, the state will collapse not because it could not save itself and regenerate its vitality, and definitely not because of a superior enemy, but simply out of sheer inertia. This would have catastrophic implications for West Africa and the continent at large.

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