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## Reports

# BOKO HARAM: NIGERIA'S EXTREMIST ISLAMIC SECT



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The extremist Islamic sect, Boko Haram, is now feared for its ability to mount both 'low-scale' and audacious attacks in Nigeria. Since July 2009 when it provoked a short-lived anti-government uprising in northern Nigeria, the sect has mounted serial attacks that have placed it in media spotlight, both locally and internationally. What is the philosophy of this group? How did it emerge? What are its main operational tactics and their impact on security in Nigeria? And what are the future scenarios for the Nigerian government to deal with the threat? These questions are what this report attempts to address in a very concise manner.

## Evolution and Philosophy

The exact date of the emergence of the Boko Haram sect is mired in controversy, especially if one relies on media accounts. Most local and foreign media trace its origin to 2002, when Mohammed Yusuf emerged as the leader of the sect. However, Nigerian security forces date the origin of the sect back to 1995, when Abubakar Lawan established the Ahlulsunna wal'jama'ah hijra sect at the University of Maduigiri, Borno State. It flourished as a non-violent movement until Mohammed Yusuf assumed leadership of the sect in 2002, shortly after Abubakar Lawan left to pursue further studies in Saudi Arabia. Since then, the sect has metamorphosed under various names like the Muhajirun, Yusufiyyah, Nigerian Taliban, Boko Haram and Jama'atu Ahlissunnah lidda'awati wal Jihad.

The philosophy of the sect is rooted in the practice of orthodox Islam. Orthodox Islam in their interpretation abhors Western education and working in the civil service. This explains why the sect is popularly known as the Boko Haram, literally meaning 'Western education is a sin'. However, a statement allegedly released in August 2009 by the acting leader of Boko Haram, Mallam Sanni Umaru, rejected such a designation:

Boko Haram does not in any way mean 'Western Education is a sin' as the infidel media continue to portray us. Boko Haram actually means 'Western Civilisation' is forbidden. The difference 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. The sect frowns at Medias' description of it as the Boko Haram. Instead it prefers to be addressed as the Jama'atu Ahlissunnah lidda'awati wal Jihad, meaning a "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad". Although the sect's name has changed over the years, its ideological mission is quite clear, namely to overthrow the Nigerian state and impose strict Islamic Sharia law in the country. Members of the sect are motivated by the conviction that the Nigerian state is filled with social vices and corruption, thus 'the best thing for a devout Muslim to do was to "migrate" from the morally bankrupt society to a secluded place and establish an ideal Islamic society devoid of political corruption and moral deprivation'.

In this wise, non-members were therefore considered as kuffar (disbelievers; those who deny the truth) or fasiqun (wrong-doers). It is alleged that members wore long beards, red or black headscarves and reject the use of certain modern (purportedly Western) goods, such as wristwatches and safety helmets. The irony however is that they do not reject or refuse to use technological products such as motorcycles, cars, cellular phones and AK-47 guns, and other benefits that are derived from Western civilization.

## Membership and Funding

The exact numbers of its members are not known, although it draws followers across the 19 states of northern Nigeria, Niger Republic, Chad and Sudan. Its members are mainly disaffected youths, unemployed graduates, and former Almajiris. The phenomenon of Almajiri (or Street Children) is a popular old practice whereby children are sent to live and study under renowned Islamic teachers in some cities in northern Nigeria. These Almajiris live and study in very appalling conditions, thereby making them vulnerable to recruitment into extremist sects like the Boko Haram and Kala Kato, largely through

indoctrination. As of 2010, Nigeria hosts about 9.5 million Almajiris, with over 80 per cent concentrated in northern Nigeria. Beside Almajiris that form the bulk of its foot soldiers, the sect also has as members some well-educated, wealthy and influential people such as university lecturers, business contractors and politicians who are the major financiers. Recently, the sect added bank robbery to its sources of funds for meeting different needs: helping the less privileged; sustaining the widows of those that died in the Jihad; giving alms to the poor and needy (Zakat); and for the prosecution of Jihad, among others.

## **Descent to Extremist Violence**

The existence of this sect became a subject of serious local and international concern in the aftermath of the July 2009 anti-government revolt led by its leader, Mohammed Yusuf. A charismatic speaker, Yusuf was appointed the leader of the sect by a committee of shaykhs in 2002. He later ousted the shaykhs who appointed him, on allegations of corruption and failure to preach "pure Islam". Mohammed Yusuf claimed not to believe in most of the tenets of Western science. He denied that the world is round or that rain is caused by evaporated water. Yusuf also preached a simple, ascetic form of life for his followers, but enjoyed Western luxuries for himself, including a Mercedes car and imported delicacies. The emergence of Mohammed Yusuf was a major factor in the sect's shift to an Islamic extremist movement, intent on overthrowing the secular Nigerian State.

In its early transformative years to an extremist movement, the Boko Haram under Yusuf's leadership strove for self-exclusion of its members from the mainstream corrupt society by living in areas outside or far away from society in order to intellectualise and radicalise the revolutionary process that would ultimately lead to violent overthrow of the Nigerian state. By disassociating from the large society, members became more indoctrinated by the ideologues who inculcated in them anti-secular ideologies.

Before his death just after the riots of July 2009, Muhammad Yusuf was then the Commander in Chief (Amir ul-Aam) or the leader of the entire group. He has two deputies (Na'ib Amir ul-Aam I & II), and each State where they exist has its own Amir (Commander/Leader) and each Local Government Area also has an Amir. Below the Local Government Amirs are the remaining followers. They also organize themselves according to various roles, such as Soldiers and Police, among others. Under Yusuf leadership, the sect first took up arms on 24 December 2003 when it attacked police stations and public buildings in the towns of Geiam and Kanamma in Yobe State.

In 2004 it established a base called 'Afghanistan' in Kanamma village in northern Yobe State. The activities of the sect became more worrisome from 2004 when students, especially in tertiary institutions in Borno and Yobe states, withdrew from school, tore up their certificates and joined the group. On 21 September 2004 members attacked Bama and Gworza police stations in Borno State, killing several policemen and stealing arms and ammunition. It maintained intermittent hit-and-run attacks on security posts in some parts of Borno and Yobe States until July 2009 when it provoked a major anti-government revolt in Nigeria.

The fighting lasted from 26 to 30 July 2009, across five northern states: Bauchi, Borno, Kano, Katsina, and Yobe. The revolt ended when their leader, Mohammed Yusuf, was finally captured in his residence. After a few hours in police custody, Yusuf was brutally murdered in what appeared to have been an extrajudicial killing, although police officials claimed that he was killed while trying to escape. Over 1000 persons, mainly the sect's members, were killed during the revolt and hundreds of its members were also arrested and detained for formal trial.

The extrajudicial murder of Yusuf and some leaders and followers of the sect angered its surviving members, who unsurprisingly, are increasingly using martyrdom videos of the July 2009 revolt to radicalise its members. They had issued several radical messages in leaflets and audio and video tapes to the media, stating an intention to wage war on

secular authorities. Since the July 2009 revolt, the sect has evolved from a group that waged poorly planned open confrontation with state security forces to one that increasingly uses improvised explosive devices, guerrilla warfare, targeted assassination, and suicide bombings in its violent campaign.

Unlike the poorly coordinated hit-and-run attacks of its earlier years, recent attacks are more coordinated and sophisticated, and are authorized by an 18-member Shura, led by its new spiritual leader, Imam Abubakar Shekau. Attacks have focused largely on state security forces – police, soldiers, civil defence, and prison wardens, among others – and to a lesser extent on centers of worship, community and religious leaders, politicians, and other civilians who they consider as ‘enemies’. However, the attack on the United Nations building at Nigeria’s capital city, Abuja, on 26 August 2011 marked a departure from Boko Haram’s traditional target set of government facilities and indeed signposts the possibility of a change in target selection in the future.

### **Cost of the Insurgency**

Between July 2009 and January 2012, the Boko Haram conducted roughly 160 separate attacks, resulting in the death of over 1000 people and internal displacement of hundred others. It has also claimed attacks that have killed more than 200 people since the start of 2012. The attacks had occurred mainly in Maiduguri, the capital city of Borno State. However, several of such attacks for which the group has claimed responsibility, have occurred in Bauchi, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Niger, Plateau, and Yobe states, and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. The sect has concentrated its attacks mainly in northern Nigeria, although analysts feared that it may extend its attacks to the Christian dominated South as security agencies firm up counterinsurgency operations against the sect in these northern states. Its threat on January 2012, asking Southerners and Christians to leave the North within three days, although caused serious initial panic, failed to trigger mass exodus of Christians and Southerners for the fear of ethno-religious cleansing by the sect.

Particularly worrisome however of the evolving threat of Boko Haram is the inclusion of suicide bombing to its violent tactics. Since it mounted the first suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices attack at the Police Headquarters in the Federal Capital city, Abuja, on 16 June 2011, the sect has staged at least six other suicide bombings, with huge death toll and destruction of property resulting from these attacks. For instance, a series of coordinated gun assaults and suicide bombing attacks by the sect on 20 January 2012 in the city of Kano, the capital of Kano state, killed at least 211 people.

The consequences of the Boko Haram insurgency have been grave. An obvious implication is the destruction of human lives. Other costs include internal displacement of people, wanton destruction of property, fracturing of family structure, discouraging of local and foreign investment, and damage to the country’s image, among others.

### **Dealing with the Insurgency**

The Nigerian government has adopted the ‘stick’ approach, with plans to add the “carrot” in its response to the festering insurgency. The “carrot” may involve granting amnesty to sect members who renounce extremism, although there is very slim opportunity for this to happen due to the faceless nature of the group. In fact, the Nigerian government has over the last few months indicated its disposition to resolving the insurgency through political dialogue with all stakeholders. In this wise, it set up a committee of inquiry headed by Ambassador Usman Galtimari, to among others, identify the grievances of the sect and make possible recommendations on how to improve security in the northeast region. The carrot may also include programs by the government to address problems in northern Nigeria such as poverty, unemployment, social injustice and public corruption. These challenges foster grievances that galvanize extremist tendencies among Muslim youth in northern Nigeria.

However, the “stick” employed involved the use of state security forces to mount aggressive pursuit and crackdown of its members. In this regard, a Special Joint Task Force (JTF), known as “Operation Restore Order”, or JTORO, was established to specifically tackle the Boko Haram threat. The JTORO has registered successes including the September 2011 arrest of a top Boko Haram commander, Ali Saleh, and five accomplices in Maiduguri. It has also won plaudits for the effective use of military checkpoints and temporary bans of motorbikes which are used by extremists in drive-by attacks. The JTF has however received criticism for harsh tactics that have injured civilians and damaged property. Other security measures adopted by the government to check the activities of the sect include the closure of Nigeria’s borders with Cameroon and Niger republics, deportation of illegal immigrants mostly Nigeriens and Chadians, declaration of state of emergency in some parts of States attacked by the sect, and the recent establishment of new defence intelligence missions in neighbouring Niger Republic and the Republic of Mali. In the last one month, state security agencies have also made arrest of high profile members of the sect, including the arrest of a self-identified spokesman for the sect, Abu Qada, and the alleged mastermind of the Christmas Day bombing at Madalla, Kabiru Abubakar Dikko, alias Kabiru Sokoto. The recent arrest of top leaders and strategists of the sect has the potentials of significantly degrading its operational capability to mount audacious attacks but cannot put an end to the insurgency.

### **Future of Boko Haram Extremism**

Notwithstanding the modest achievement made by the government, the Boko Haram remains the biggest security challenge facing Nigeria today. A close observation of the existence and operation of the Boko Harm shows that the sect’s survival rests on a tripod. The first strand is rooted on large number of followers or recruits drawn from an expansive pool of Almajiris and other destitute children from neighbouring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger Republics who easily cross into Nigeria’s porous borders. The second is rooted in the financial support from politicians and other wealthy members, which helps to sustain the sect’s operation in the areas of arms and weapons procurement, training, and compensation for those wounded in battle or relatives of suicide bombers. The last leg rests on the influence of local experienced ideologues that frame the violent ideology of the sect and exploit their connections with established foreign terror groups such as Somali-based Al Shabaab and Al Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to fanatically indoctrinate or radicalize recruits.

Given that current government response largely hinges on military offensive against the sect, there is the tendency that the ultra-radical elements within the sect would further reach out to established terrorist networks like AQIM, Al Shabaab and Al-Qaeda in order to survive, probably morphing into a new transnational terror network possibly as Al-Qaeda in Nigeria (AQIN). In the event of this survival transmutation, the sect’s operational reach would expand beyond northern Nigeria and their target selection could change fundamentally to include attacks on Western interests. To win the fight against Boko Haram therefore, 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 extremist exploits in their recruitment drive, rationalization of their anti-secular ideologies and staging of violent attacks in Nigeria.

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