

# Boko Haram: origins, challenges and responses

By John Campbell

## ■ Executive summary

Boko Haram is a radical Islamist movement shaped by its Nigerian context and reflecting Nigeria's history of poor governance and extreme poverty in the north. The movement is unique in that it combines a sectarian, radical Islamic agenda with violence. Its stated goal is the establishment of a sharia state, but it shows little interest in actually governing or implementing economic development. It is based on the fundamentalist Wahhabi theological system and opposes the Islam of the traditional northern Nigerian establishment, which is broadly tolerant.

Boko Haram and its more radical splinter, Ansaru, are steadily expanding their area of operations. Kidnapping has become a major source of revenue and is widespread, while attacks have occurred in Lagos and Kano. The government's response has been to treat Boko Haram as a part of the international al-Qaeda movement. Security service abuses are likely a driver of some popular support for or acquiescence to Boko Haram.

The struggle between the government and Boko Haram has dire humanitarian consequences. Many people have been internally displaced in northern Nigeria and many refugees have fled to neighbouring countries. The international community may be asked to help provide humanitarian assistance in what is one of the poorest parts of the world.

## Introduction

"Boko Haram" is the popular moniker for an Islamist movement that calls itself the "Sunni Community for the Propagation of the Prophet's Teaching and Jihad".<sup>1</sup> Unlike al-Qaeda and its affiliates, its focus is specifically on Nigeria and adjacent countries rather than international jihad. The Nigerian context has shaped Boko Haram into what it has become.

Nigerian political life is based on patronage-clientage networks, and religious and ethnic loyalties supersede those to the nation. There has been remarkable continuity between military and civilian governance, particularly in terms of the isolation of the government from the people it governs.<sup>2</sup>

In 1900 it is estimated that the territory that makes up Nigeria was 26% Muslim and 1% Christian. The rest of the population adhered to traditional religions. However, during the 20th century, and especially after independence, Christianity grew explosively in the south and centre of the country. Its adherents may outnumber those of Islam, and due to internal migration there are now Christian minorities in the predominantly Muslim north (Jenkins, 2007: 195).

A religious ethos saturates all aspects of Nigerian public and private life, whether Christian or Muslim. Moreover, the cooperating and competing elites that run Nigeria exploit religious sentiments for their own purposes, while individuals and groups protesting against these elites also draw on religion to promote their own vision for Nigeria.

1 Jama'atu Ahles-Sunnah Lidda' Awati Wal Jihad.

2 With short civilian interludes, Nigeria had military governments from 1966 to 1999.

Religious conflict is thus both a symptom and a driver of conflict in the country. National identity remains underdeveloped, and to some extent religion – or religiosity – fills this void.

### **Boko Haram as a religious movement**

Boko Haram's combination of a sectarian agenda with violence is distinctive. According to the movement's rhetoric, its goal is to create God's kingdom on earth through justice for the poor achieved by the rigid application of Islamic law, or sharia.<sup>3</sup> Anything that gets in the way of this goal must be destroyed. For Boko Haram, violence is not a perversion of Islam; it is a justifiable means to a pure end.

The group adheres to the strict Wahhabi understanding of "tawhid" (the oneness of God or monotheism).<sup>4</sup> According to Boko Haram rhetoric, a secular nation promotes idolatry, i.e. state worship. The pledge of allegiance to the flag and singing of the national anthem are manifestations of such idolatry and hence punishable by death. For Boko Haram the state is a nest of corruption that exploits the poor. The state is formed and sustained by Western values and education, both of which are against the will of Allah.

Boko Haram is a recent manifestation of a decades-long civil war within Islam. Radical reformers in what is now Nigeria have long claimed that Muslim leaders are "infidels" if they are "unjust", even when the rulers themselves claim to be Muslims. This often manifests as a conflict between Salafi fundamentalists and the tolerant Sufis who dominate the traditional Nigerian Muslim elites.

Boko Haram is thus a direct threat to the traditional Islamic establishment, which is led by the sultan of Sokoto and the shehu of Borno, both of whom the movement has tried to murder; it also claimed responsibility for killing the shehu's brother and bodyguards of the sultan.

An aspect of the broad Islamist revival in northern Nigeria has been a Salafi rejection of the secular state. Charismatic preachers organise communities that withdraw from secular life. Usually, such groups are quietist, even pacifists; however, at times they can turn violent, usually in response to the secular state's heavy handedness. Boko Haram's trajectory is a classic example of such a response.

Mohammed Yusuf, a charismatic preacher, organised his community in the city of Maiduguri around 2003. It sought to establish God's kingdom on earth by isolating itself from wider society. Although the movement was hostile to the Nigerian state and rejected Western education as non-Islamic, it remained generally non-violent until 2009.

In that year there were altercations over local issues that were likely manipulated by local politicians, which resulted in Yusuf ordering a direct attack on the state, to which the security forces responded brutally. During the suppression of the uprising the police murdered Yusuf. This crime was captured on video and went viral on social media (Al Jazeera, 2010), while several hundred of Yusuf's followers were extrajudicially killed. The movement went underground, re-emerging in 2010 under the dead leader's deputy, Abubakar Shekau.

The reconstituted Boko Haram sought revenge against the security forces and committed itself to the overthrow through violence of the Nigerian state government and the compromised Islamic establishment. The movement has called for the replacement of the sultan of Sokoto with a *shura* (council) dominated by Boko Haram (Soufan Group, 2013).

The size of Shekau's Boko Haram is unknown. However, it has mounted operations involving at least 500 operatives, implying several thousand members and affiliates (*Leadership*, 2013). In addition, much larger numbers appear to acquiesce to what Boko Haram is doing.

### **Ansaru**

By origin a splinter of Boko Haram, Ansaru's base is in Kano and Kaduna. Its full name in English is "Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa".<sup>5</sup> Its leadership is obscure; Abu Usama al Ansari is frequently identified as its leader, but little other than his name is known. Its spokesmen claim the group split from Boko Haram because of the latter's frequent killing of Muslims. Ansaru avoids Muslim casualties and instead actively attacks Christian churches and government officials.

Ansaru has introduced tactics commonly associated with the Sahel and al-Qaeda that were previously unknown in West Africa, such as kidnappings and suicide bombers, including females. The group had links with radical Islamist groups in Algeria and Mali, but it is unlikely that it takes direction from them. However, its fighters include some individuals from outside Nigeria, especially Chad and Niger. There is evidence of tactical cooperation between Ansaru and Boko Haram, and it is possible that they have reunited. The Chibok schoolgirls' kidnapping has the flavour of Ansaru, but Shekau claimed responsibility. Ansaru has issued no public statements for many months, which is another indication that it may have merged back into Boko Haram.

### **Boko Haram's operational scope**

Boko Haram is concentrated in north-east Nigeria, but it has demonstrated national reach. It has carried out

3 Boko Haram has never issued a political manifesto or programme and appears to be uninterested in conventional politics or "economic development". Its message is delivered through recorded sermons and video messages from Abubakar Shekau and other Boko Haram imams, word of mouth, and local Islamic teachers.

4 Wahhabism finds its strongest expression in Saudi Arabia.

5 Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan.

operations in Plateau State, where ethnic and religious conflict has long been fierce. Shekau also claimed responsibility for a suicide bomb attack in the port of Lagos. Elsewhere in the north are other groups about which outsiders – including the Nigerian government – appear to know little. Their grievances and violence are usually local, although they use the Salafi rhetoric associated with Shekau. Presumably, many of them have a criminal or political dimension.

Funding for Boko Haram and other radical groups comes from bank robberies, kidnapping ransoms, the theft of weapons from government armouries, and – especially in the case of criminal groups – smuggling. Remittances from overseas appear to play no role.

Terrorism in northern Nigeria is cheap. Explosives – and knowledge about them – are widespread, not least because of the presence of an indigenous mining industry. Vehicles used for suicide attacks and car bombs are usually stolen. The large number of weapons in radical hands that come from government armouries implies that radical Islamic groups have infiltrated the military and other institutions of government, as senior military officials and even President Jonathan have acknowledged (Dockins, 2014).

None of these groups has attempted to set up an alternative state structure nor to levy taxes on the local people. This may be changing: as of August 2014 Boko Haram controls a swath of territory estimated to be slightly larger than Luxembourg, where it has destroyed all vestiges of secular or traditional rule. Shekau has publicly expressed support for the caliphate established by the self-proclaimed Islamic State in parts of Syria and Iraq and has previously called for a caliphate in northern Nigeria.

## The political context

To manage ethnic, regional, and religious divisions, at the end of military rule in 1998 the competing and cooperating elites in the ruling People's Democratic Party established a pattern of alternating the presidency between the predominantly Muslim north and the mostly Christian south.

This system was essentially dismantled in 2011 when southern Christian Goodluck Jonathan successfully won the presidential campaign for re-election – with the support or acquiescence of some of the northern Islamic establishment, who were probably bribed. Jonathan's failure to replace the system of alternate Christian and Muslim presidents with a new balancing structure during a period of accelerating political appeals to ethnic and religious identities has been an important driver of northern marginalisation and a catalyst for the current wave of

conflicts there. On the streets the traditional Islamic establishment is seen as having sold out to secularism, making room for Boko Haram.<sup>6</sup>

## The government's response to Boko Haram

The government's response to Boko Haram is to see it as a terrorist movement in isolation from any environment that may have fostered it, and state security forces have reacted with violent repression. The government's seemingly indiscriminate killing of alleged Boko Haram members and many others who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time appears to be a driver of popular support for or acquiescence to Boko Haram (Amnesty International, 2014).

## The international response to Boko Haram

The U.S. and British governments designated Boko Haram and Ansaru as terrorist organisations in 2013, while the United Nations designated Boko Haram an al-Qaeda affiliate in 2014. In the aftermath of the Chibok schoolgirls' kidnapping a number of Western countries offered to help Nigeria find and liberate the captives.<sup>7</sup> However, the government has done little to take advantage of these offers. Moreover, credible reports of human rights abuses by the Nigerian security forces create difficulties for outside involvement by democratic states committed to furthering human rights.<sup>8</sup>

## Policy recommendations

*Firstly*, friends of Nigeria should adhere to the principle of "do no harm". Assistance to the Abuja government should be undertaken only following wide consultation with Nigerians, both in and outside government. These friends should resist the temptation to "just do something", especially in the aftermath of a horrific Boko Haram atrocity. Any action outsiders take should be informed by knowledge of and sensitivity to the religious dimension of the current Nigerian crisis. Any outside intervention in Nigeria's north will be perceived by the Muslim majority in religious terms, i.e. as an attack on Islam.

*Secondly*, there should be a focus on humanitarian assistance directed toward meeting the basic human needs of the millions of people who have been internally displaced by the struggle between Boko Haram and the state. Such assistance should also be made available to Nigeria's neighbours, which are hosting thousands of refugees (BBC, 2014).

*Thirdly*, Western governments should not be silent in the face of official human rights violations. Silence only undercuts the efforts of Nigerian human rights activists. The principle must be that sovereign states that aspire to

<sup>6</sup> For more information on the contemporary history of Nigeria, see Campbell (2013); Paden (2005; 2008); Lewis (2007); and Maier (2002).

<sup>7</sup> The U.S. media reported offers from Canada, France, Israel, Britain and the U.S. There may have been others.

<sup>8</sup> For example, U.S. law prohibits assistance to military or police units credibly accused of human rights abuses unless or until the accusations are investigated by the relevant government and corrected. This has not happened in Nigeria.

be democratic should always be held to a higher standard than terrorist groups.

It is already widely assumed in West Africa that the West is "at war" with Islam. The Western response to Boko Haram and the wider Nigerian crisis will demand greater Western sensitivity to and understanding of the religious dimension to the crisis in West Africa in general and Boko Haram in particular.

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