

## **Boko Haram in Nigeria: Territorial Terrorism**

*Africa*

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**Abstract:** The African country of Nigeria was one that was showing great promise heading into the 2010s. However, the rise of an Islamic fundamentalist group named Boko Haram sought to hamper any future progress. The pertinent issue of combatting terrorist organizations like Boko Haram is not one unique to Nigeria. Due to the destruction Islamic fundamentalist groups have left behind in the Middle East and North Africa, many have been left wondering why and under what circumstances these groups have arisen. This paper will investigate the rise and fall of Boko Haram in Nigeria while searching for answers as to why the group rose in prominence in the first place. While many arguments claim that terrorist organizations are birthed out of poverty and authoritarian rule, this paper makes the case

this catch-all belief does not apply in Nigeria. Instead, Boko Haram came to fruition in Nigeria due to conditions related to social and economic issues. However, this rise was ultimately facilitated due to the influence of fellow Islamist groups in the region.

Snugly located in the western-central portion of the continent, lies Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria. An electoral democracy since 1999, Nigeria is a country which many would see as having great promise. The country boasts unique biodiversity from rainforests and waterfalls to beaches along the Atlantic Ocean coastline. Waterway access in the South along the Atlantic has positioned Nigeria as a major oil exporter (Embassy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 2019). A read-through of tourist information similar to that provided so far may make Nigeria sound like an up and coming cultural and economic hub. However, significant issues have existed within the nation in the last decade. Tensions between northerners and southerners, religious divides, and large-scale violence have significantly hurt the nation. These issues are all thanks to an unruly actor birthed in the northern state of Borno. Inspired by the Taliban's toppling of the Afghani

government, a puritanical Islamist group whose common name roughly translates to "western education is sin" was founded in Nigeria between 2002 and 2003 (Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2019). The group whose official full name is Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad laid largely dormant within Nigeria until 2009. Since the emergence of this group, Nigeria, and any potential they may have shown prior, has been bogged down by the actions of the terrorist organization, commonly known as Boko Haram.

In understanding what led to the rise of Boko Haram, it is necessary to look back to 2008 to identify the preconditions of conflict. 2008 preceded the first year of significant violence carried out by Boko Haram in Nigeria. By this time, the most populous country in Africa had 150,269,623 people living within its borders; an all-time high. Of the 150 million people in the country, over half of them lived in villages,

farmland, or an area considered to be rural and outside of the country's big cities (World Bank 2019). While these numbers are impressive in their own right, they mean nothing without any contextual understanding of how the nation operated at the time.

Often when looking for why countries deal with civil wars or insurgent uprisings, researchers are quick to ask what the political environment is like in the country. The extent to which a nation is more authoritarian than democratic can often indicate a reason for a burgeoning civil war. Nigeria is a compelling case in this regard as in both 2008 and 2009 they had a Polity IV score of 4 (Center for Systemic Peace 2018). Polity IV scores rate how autocratic or democratic a nation is. Ranging from -10 (most autocratic) to 10 (most democratic), a score of 4 indicates that there were some signs of autocratic rule in the country, but primarily they leaned towards democracy. While the democratic leanings of

a country's government are often indicative of national stability, issues may still lie in the level of inclusion of all segments of the population. As identified by Lars-Erik Cederman et al. in their "Ethnic Power Relations Data Set Family," there were six politically relevant ethnic groups in Nigeria between 2008 and 2010. In looking for a cause of violence, one would expect a prominent one of these groups to be utterly powerless from political influence. While according to this dataset, there did exist two ethnic groups that were utterly powerless; their combined percentage of the population was only 3% (Vogt et al. 2015.). This number can be written off as statistically insignificant, meaning that the argument for political exclusion also does not hold up. With two of the most prevalent explanations for causes of violence not holding up in the case of Boko Haram's rise in Nigeria, we must look elsewhere for explanations.

A number of researchers have proposed several potential explanations for the popularity that Boko Haram gained in its early years. These explanations ranged from poverty rates to increased accessibility to the internet. While these are both logical explanations given the standards which existed in the country before 2008, they most likely are not the main reason for the terrorist group's rise. It is most likely high poverty rates, increased access to the internet, and more cellular service that left Nigerians open to the main reason for Boko Haram's rise, influence from other Islamic fundamentalist groups.

At their very core, Boko Haram is a puritanical Islamic terrorist group whose goal in instigating violence with the Nigerian government has to do with complete separation from the state. Boko Haram was founded in the city of Maiduguri in the Northern-Nigerian state of Borno. Given Nigeria's demographics, this base of

operations made sense. There exists within the country a divide between the predominantly Muslim North and the predominantly Christian South. Boko Haram's stated goal since inception has been the toppling of the Nigerian government in the North in order to establish a puritanically ruled caliphate in the region. The group's motivation in doing so was inspired by the actions of the Taliban, who were able to gain significant power in Afghanistan (Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2019). There existed around the time of Boko Haram's founding a sense of hope and comradery amongst Islamic fundamentalist groups like Boko Haram, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda. It is due to this fact that we saw Boko Haram aided in getting on their feet as a group through support by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb supported Boko Haram's growth in its early years through funding and the supplying of weaponry acquired in Libya (Huang 2016).

While this is not the only time that Boko Haram would work closely with a fellow Islamist group, their interaction with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb helped contribute to their rise in prominence.

Given the funding of their violent efforts by a fellow terrorist organization, by the time 2009 came, Boko Haram was ready to make their impact felt in Nigeria. The group began their efforts in the North to topple the government there and establish their caliphate. Unfortunately for Boko Haram, they did not have much early success. During early fighting with the Nigerian government, their leader at the time, Mohamed Yusuf, was killed in combat. Yusuf's death halted Boko Haram's actions early, creating a period without any conflict. However, between 2010 and 2011, under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram escalated tensions once again in the North. It took until 2011 for the Nigerian government to truly realize the threat that Boko Haram

posed to the country. Seeing the successful attacks conducted by the terrorist group, the state began to bolster their security efforts in Borno. In December of 2011, Nigerian President Goodluck Johnathon went as far as to declare a state of emergency in the North. The emergency was declared as security efforts were failing to prevent Boko Haram from claiming territory and increasing efforts in the North. While much of the government's operations against the group took place in the North, Boko Haram had their eyes set on southward expansion. However, in 2013 the terrorist group would see a retrenchment of sorts to their base of operations in Borno. During this time, Boko Haram would continue to perpetrate violence there quite successfully. By the end of 2014, Boko Haram was holding territory the size of Belgium as they consolidated their presence in the North of Nigeria and began expansion into neighboring countries. By January of 2015, Boko Haram had claimed the

establishment of a caliphate in Northern Nigeria and had expanded its efforts into Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. It was in the period between 2014 and 2015 that Boko Haram saw their campaigns of violence most successfully carried out (Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2019).

With early efforts made by the Nigerian government somewhat successful in slowing Boko Haram's rise, the question remains as to how the group grew to the prominent position they held by 2015? Thanks to the Global Terrorism Database, we have statistics on how Boko Haram successfully carried out its campaign of violence. Between 2009 and 2015, Boko Haram carried out 1,647 acts of violence in Nigeria. Of these acts of violence, 809 or 49% were carried out on private citizens. Attacks on private citizens are typically indicative of an organization that relies on terroristic actions to send a message to a certain actor. For much of the time, the main

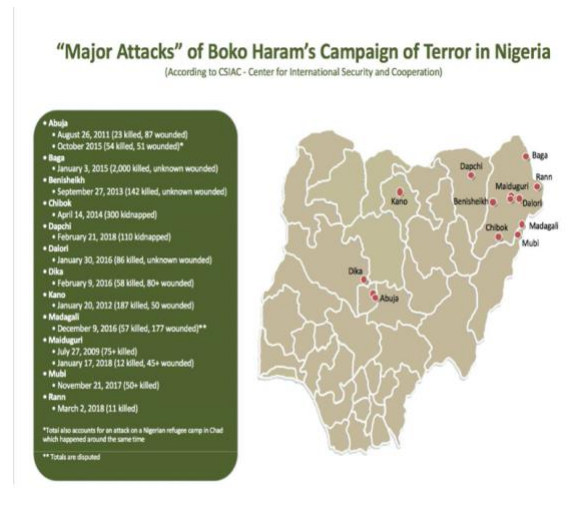
actor whom Boko Haram was seeking to send a message to was the Nigerian government. However, by the time the most violent year in the terrorist organization's lifespan, 2015, rolled around, we began to see different patterns of violence. As Boko Haram declared land holdings as their caliphate, their methods of violence changed slightly. While still perpetrating acts of violence against private citizens, two of the most significant attacks carried out by the group in 2015 were on military targets. These two attacks were on Chadian military positions resulting in 208 and 230 fatalities, respectively. These attacks were indicative of a Boko Haram who saw themselves transitioning from a terrorist campaign to a multi-frontal war with opposition states. The group seemed to be strategically attempting to gain land in areas occupied by the Kanuri ethnic group, whom Boko Haram saw as their base of support. While the switching of tactics was interesting, it did not seem to be

hugely successful. Despite Boko Haram successfully carrying out attacks and gaining land, they were suffering many casualties in the process. In fact, of the 208 casualties recorded in the August 13, 2015 attack on Chadian military forces, 207 were members of Boko Haram. The bulk of their attacks on military forces were conducted in early 2015. As they saw increased pushback from state-based opposition throughout the year, the group would soon re-focus their attacks on private citizens, looking for other outlets of support (Global Terrorism Database 2019).

In what seemed like an effort to consolidate their land holdings and regional power, in March of 2015, Boko Haram would rebrand themselves as "Wilayat in West Africa" as the group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. The Islamic State, often referred to as IS, ISIS or ISIL, had by 2015 taken land holdings in Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The Islamic fundamentalist organization's campaign of terror was one that saw no

boundaries, unlike Boko Haram, who focused much of their efforts in Nigeria. As Boko Haram pledged their allegiance, their focuses shifted once again. No longer were they primarily concerned with combatting the Nigerian government or waging a multi-frontal war. Instead, they focused on securing territory for the greater Islamic caliphate of IS. Despite the group's seemingly similar goals, their partnership would not be long-lasting. In August of 2016, the Islamic State appointed Habid Yusuf as the new emir of West Africa. Yusuf would replace Abubakar Shekau as the leader in this region. Issues between the two quickly arose as Shekau accused Yusuf of denying him a line of communications. In retaliation, Yusuf would accuse Shekau of killing too many Muslims in his previous efforts. Ultimately, this divide was too much to bridge, and Boko Haram would resurface separate from the Islamic State not long after (Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2019). Since the resurfacing of

Boko Haram in the Sambisa forest in late 2016, the organization has not enjoyed the strength nor success they held before joining the Islamic State. Today, Boko Haram mainly operates out of two sects, and the group no longer holds the territory nor power they once had (Adibe 2019). However, that is not to say that they have been defeated. In fact, five of the fourteen "Major attacks" in Boko Haram's history, as highlighted by the Center for International Security and Cooperation, have occurred since the group's reappearance in late 2016 (Figure 1) (Center for International Security and Cooperation 2019). While their presence in Nigeria today is not negligible, Boko Haram is not the threat they once were. The government of Nigeria is aware of this as calls are being made for the state to begin considering post-conflict peacebuilding (Mohammed, Uddin, and Umar 2019).



**Figure 1**

Efforts at bringing peace to Nigeria through reaching settlement agreements with Boko Haram have not been frequent throughout their campaign of violence. There were early discussions of amnesty clauses between Boko Haram leaders and the Nigerian government in 2009. However, following the induction of a new president uninterested in offering such deals and the media catching wind of said talks, Boko Haram swore off discussions with the Nigerian government. Since 2009 there have been rumors of ceasefire agreements between the two sides in both 2013 and 2014, but Boko Haram never acknowledged such



rumors. Both sides seem too proud to partake in such bargaining with their perceived opposition. Boko Haram, given their extremist viewpoints, seems unlikely ever to accept an open defeat at the hands of their enemy, willing to fight till their very last day. On the other hand, the Nigerian government seems too prideful to accept any outside assistance in dealing with Boko Haram. With hopes of maintaining a strong international image, Nigeria has not allowed for any United Nations peacekeeping missions, nor are they openly willing to negotiate with Boko Haram as they currently exist. As of today, the conflict seems to have hit a stalemate with neither side willing to make any ultimate accommodations to end the violence between them (Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2019).

In their heyday, Boko Haram was seen as a severe threat to the political, ideological, and social stability of west-central Africa. Beginning as a small

puritanical Islamic terrorist group, Boko Haram's campaign to fight the Nigerian government and establish their caliphate gained momentum between the years 2009 and 2015. At one point extending territorial holdings into neighboring countries, Boko Haram once stood as a potential state actor willing to wage war in the region. However, a perceived overreach on the group's behalf and a failed alignment with the Islamic State hampered the group's strength. After reappearing in late 2016, Boko Haram has not been the force they once were. While their operations continue, the threat they pose has significantly decreased. With neither the terrorist group nor the state government willing to budge on peace discussions, it is unlikely the efforts of Boko Haram will go unfelt in Nigeria any time soon. As of now, only time will tell how long this conflict continues to play out for and if, or how the violence in Northern Nigeria will finally end.

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