

Boko Haram: A Threat to African and Global Security

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Abstract

Since the groups founding in 2002, Boko Haram has expanded its reach and conducted increasingly deadly attacks. The ability of this group to not only survive, but expand its operations in Northern Nigeria, can be attributed to both the instability of the Nigerian government and the possible support the group is receiving from groups such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Shabaab. Should the Nigerian government implement reforms to eliminate corruption and improve human rights, Boko Haram sympathizers will have little reason to continue to support the radical actions of the group. However, if widespread corruption and disregard for human rights continue within Nigeria, Boko Haram may continue to thrive; expanding its influence in Nigeria, and possibly conducting transnational attacks against other African nations and Western targets. In addition, increased attacks against Christians by the group threaten to plunge the country into sectarian chaos as Christian leaders are beginning to hint at retaliation. With this possibility in mind, it is important for the Nigerian government, with international assistance, to implement reforms which will dry up the group's pool of potential recruits and invalidate the organizations legitimate claim that the Nigerian government is responsible for the worsening political/economic situation within the country.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Islamists, Nigeria, Terrorism, Muslim, Christian, Corruption

Introduction

Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad), better known by the Hausa name Boko Haram (Western education is forbidden), has been a constant menace to Nigeria since its creation in 2002; being responsible for thousands of deaths, both military and civilian (Garba 2012). While the exact number of casualties is relatively hard to estimate due to a lack of information on the group, the large number of people who have died at the group's hands is certainly cause for concern. Despite the Nigerian government's use of heavy-handed tactics in dealing with the issue, Boko Haram has actually gained footing in the country and is growing in both size and sophistication. According to Toni Johnson (2011), "Human rights and diplomatic officials note that Nigeria's heavy-handed military approach (NYT) is compounding their security problem." This disturbing trend is further exacerbated by the widespread belief that Boko Haram receives support from and works in conjunction with both AQIM and al-Shabaab. This could help explain why Boko Haram's bomb attacks have been growing in sophistication. Laura Ploch (2011) states, "Boko Haram's explosives have reportedly grown increasingly sophisticated and by some accounts may

bear hallmarks of bomb-making techniques used by Al Qaeda affiliates” (p. 4). Also, Boko Haram may be receiving support from politicians/elites within Nigeria, who wish to use the organization as a pawn in achieving certain political objectives (Ploch, 2011, p. 6).

In addition to these problems, systemic corruption within the Nigerian government, government instability, widespread poverty, and continuous sectarian strife within the state, have created the perfect storm for the spread of terrorism within Nigeria; a situation that Boko Haram has continued to use to its advantage. With many of Nigerians living in poverty, while government officials enjoy the lion’s share of oil revenue within the country, Boko Haram has enjoyed widespread support in the Muslim north, due to the fact that many in the region believe Boko Haram’s objective – the establishment of an Islamic state in Nigeria – is the only possible remedy for the nation’s woes. In addition there is a sharp divide between the Muslim north and Christian south of the country. Many Muslims in Nigeria believe they have been marginalized and that the southern area of the country is given preferential treatment. This has fueled religious tensions within the country and has provided Boko Haram with another cause which it has taken up to justify its violent insurgency. This tension is evidenced by the numerous attacks on Christians by the group. This violence occurs regularly and although Boko Haram often does not claim responsibility for these attacks, they bear the Boko Haram hallmark. An excerpt from a recent Reuters article underscores this phenomenon:

Gunmen killed at least 15 people and wounded many more at a Christian service in Kano on Sunday, the latest round of violence which has seen hundreds killed in the mostly-Muslim north of Nigeria this year. No group took responsibility for either attack and it was not clear if they were coordinated. But both strikes bore the hallmarks of the Boko Haram sect, which has used bomb and gun attacks in its push to carve out an Islamic state in Africa's most populous nation.

These attacks have led to increased anti-Muslim rhetoric by Christian leaders, which in turn could lead to further violence against Christians by Boko Haram, who may use threats of retaliation by Christians as justification for increased violence. A recent Agence France-Presse (2012) article quoted Ayo Oritsejafor, the head of the Christian Association of Nigeria as saying:

I will now make a final call to the Nigerian government to use all resources available to it to clearly define and neutralise the problem as other nations have done. . . The Church leadership has hitherto put great restraint on the restive and aggrieved millions of Nigerians, but can no longer guarantee such cooperation if this trend of terror is not halted immediately.

This response by Nigeria’s Christian leadership could lead to actual retaliation by Christian groups wishing to exact revenge on Boko Haram; creating a vicious circle of sectarian strife which will plunge the country into further chaos. The June 2012 attacks against Christians

by Boko Haram shows that the group has stepped up attacks against Christian targets, creating a “wave of religious violence that is spiraling out of control” (Murdock 2012).

In order to combat the growing threat of Boko Haram, the Nigerian government, with the aid of the international community, must implement effective policies which will hamper the groups recruiting efforts. In addition, the Nigerian government must be encouraged to make much needed political measures such as fighting corruption, reducing poverty and improving human rights. Should these steps be taken, the main factors which have been attributed to Boko Haram’s survival will be eliminated; seriously curbing the group’s ambitions in the region, and improving both African and global security. With this being said, if Nigeria continues on its current course, Boko Haram will continue to increase in both size and sophistication; aided by support from groups such as AQIM and al-Shabaab. The group’s quick recovery following the death of its leader Mohammed Yusuf in 2009 demonstrates both the strength and flexibility of the organization. In addition, the government’s heavy handed responses to Boko Haram – such as the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf - have helped bolster support for the group. Yusuf’s execution, instead of eliminating Boko Haram, drew large amounts of public outcry directed at the Nigerian government. Brian Muhammad (2009) states:

questions arose from eye witnesses and human rights organizations concerning excessive force allegedly used by the government to end the rebellion. The criticism intensified when Mohammed Yusuf, the leader of the group was killed apparently while in police custody. Activists, clergy and international rights advocates voiced outrage over the slaying, labeling it an extra-judicial killing, which is the illegal killing of political dissidents and social figures by any authority of government, like the armed forces and police, or criminal outfits such as organized crime groups.

With the execution of Yusuf, the former deputy of the organization Abubakar Shekau quickly grasped the reins of the organization, and has been in charge ever since; vowing revenge for Yusuf’s execution and further radicalizing an already dangerous organization.

Boko Haram’s Increasing Strength and Sophistication

Since its first uprising in 2009, Boko Haram has been responsible for thousands of deaths. Since this time, the group has rapidly evolved; reconfiguring its organizational structure and increasingly relying on sophisticated explosive devices to conduct attacks, which are being fielded by suicide bombers. In addition, the predominantly Muslim northern Nigerian states of Borno, Yobe, Kano, Bauchi and Kaduna have supplied Boko Haram with a steady stream of recruits who are willing to wage violent jihad in order to find a better alternative to the current political situation within the country; believing the group’s version of radical Salafism to be the answer to their woes. According to Ploch (2011):

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Understanding Boko Haram's appeal among some citizens in Nigeria's far north requires an examination of the underlying development challenges facing northern Nigeria, where high rates of poverty and unemployment are exacerbated by extreme population growth and low levels of literacy. These factors, combined with weak governance, rampant corruption, and inadequate public service delivery, have contributed to widespread disaffection that some suggest may facilitate Boko Haram recruitment. Some observers contend that elements of the northern political classes have "tolerated" Boko Haram out of frustration with the government and sympathy for some of the group's political aims (p. 5).

This toleration –and in many cases direct support- of Boko Haram has been a critical component in keeping the group alive despite a continuous and brutal government crackdown aimed at the organization; a response that has been responsible for numerous civilian casualties and arrests that has further bolstered support for the group. A recent press release by U.S. African Command (AFRICOM) notes that:

Human rights abuses by security forces undermine their credibility, Yamamoto warned, and he urged the Nigerian government to promote respect for human rights and to engage communities in the northern part of the country that are vulnerable to Boko Haram. "Heavy-handed tactics and extrajudicial killings reinforce northerners' concerns that the Nigerian government does not care about them. The appointment of a credible northerner to lead the government response to northern grievances would be an important step in that direction," he said (Kaufman, 2012).

Should Nigeria work in conjunction with the international community to improve human rights and fight government corruption within Nigeria, it is possible that those in northern Nigeria who find Boko Haram's ideology appealing – due to a sense of disenfranchisement and hopelessness among northern Muslims – will no longer tolerate/support the group's violent agenda. Once this has been accomplished it is possible that the group could be eliminated relatively easily by Nigerian security forces; emphasizing respect for human rights and providing those accused due process.

Another area that is of increasing concern is the growing sophistication of Boko Haram's attacks. While relatively forty-seven percent of Boko Haram's attacks have been ambushes utilizing small arms, twenty-three percent have been conducted using explosive devices (Jane's 2011); a recent trend that may soon outweigh the group's reliance on ambush style attacks. This is a major concern because there is speculation that not only may Boko Haram be receiving growing support from other Salafist organizations such as AQIM and al-Shabaab, but the group may be becoming more ideologically extreme; based upon the recent utilization of suicide attacks by the group. Both these concerns were highlighted by the August 26 2011 vehicle borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack on the UN headquarters in Abuja Nigeria which killed 23 people. According to BBC Africa analyst Martin Plaut:

The attack on the UN headquarters indicates a growing sophistication by Boko Haram. . . Earlier this month, the commander of the US Africa Command, General Carter Ham, said he had several sources of information showing that Boko Haram had contacts with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which operates in north-west Africa. He said it also had ties with al-Shabab in Somalia. There have been other, independent, reports of Nigerians fighting alongside al-Shabab. Together these reports indicate where Boko Haram is getting the expertise needed to carry out its current wave of attacks. What began as a radical group in northern Nigeria is now part of a much wider Islamist movement (BBC News 2011).

Both the growing connections between Boko Haram and other terrorist groups in the region, along with the growing technical expertise of the group - which is potentially being facilitated by these relationships – not only spells trouble for Nigeria, but will also present a serious problem for the entire region and the international community if the organization continues to expand. Also, the fact that the UN attack was a suicide operation targeting foreigners, signals both the growing ideological fervor of the group and its wish to expand attacks against Western targets; disturbing recent trends which are more than enough reason for the international community to work with the Nigerian government to eliminate the Boko Haram threat as soon as possible.

With Boko Haram receiving widespread sympathy and support within northern Nigeria – and perhaps individuals within the Nigerian government – the group is likely to maintain its foothold within the region, and will continue to use it as a base of operations for conducting attacks throughout the country. In addition, if the political situation within Nigeria remains static, and government corruption and human rights abuses continue within the country, support for Boko Haram will increase along with the pool of potential recruits; bolstering the overall strength of the organization. Also, the increasing technical expertise of the group along with expanding relationships with other Islamist organizations will increase the ability of the organization to conduct increasingly sophisticated attacks against Nigerian and Western targets. The United States Department of State Country Reports on Terrorism 2010 notes that, “On October 1, Boko Haram placed posters at key road intersections in northern Nigeria warning the local public against assisting police in apprehending members of the sect. Each poster bore the signature of al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)” (p. 22). This is evidence of a growing relationship between Boko Haram and other Islamist groups within the region and provides an explanation for the group’s newfound technological savvy. Combine this reality with the fact that support for Boko Haram is on the rise, and it becomes clear that Boko Haram is a very real threat that must be dealt with in order to increase both African and global security.

Policy Suggestions

The primary factors which have allowed Boko Haram to flourish in Nigeria must be addressed if the Nigerian government wishes to bring security to the region. However, this will require the Nigerian government to look in the mirror and begin focusing on internal issues

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before actually targeting Boko Haram itself. Widespread corruption and a complete disregard for human rights have created an environment where, for many, Boko Haram is the better alternative to the Goodluck Jonathan regime. According to Ploch (2011), “A history of poor governance, corruption, and flawed elections has undermined the authority and legitimacy of the Nigerian state.” This undermined legitimacy of the Nigerian state has had the complete opposite effect on Boko Haram; providing it with legitimacy and reinforcing its preaching that the establishment of an Islamic state in Nigeria is the answer to the nations woes. If the Nigerian government continues to allow government corruption and human rights abuses to continue, Boko Haram will flourish and the country will become an even more ideal environment for terrorism. However, if these issues are addressed, the group will find itself lacking justification for its violent tactics and will find that many northerners will be less willing to take up the banner of Boko Haram.

In addition, the growing relationship between Boko Haram and other Islamists groups must be addressed in order to prevent the group from conducting increasingly deadly attacks. The operational capability of Boko Haram will continue to expand as the organization cements relationships with groups such as AQIM and al Shabaab. The increasing sophistication of explosive devices used by the group – which many have noted bare the al-Qaeda trademark – and its newfound reliance on suicide bombers and well-coordinated hit and run attacks is evidence of the danger associated with these growing relationships. In addition, the group’s newfound penchant for attacking Western targets is evidence that its associates are beginning to influence the group’s operations; potentially turning Boko Haram, like al-Shabaab, into a variable extension of the al-Qaeda franchise.

While the aforementioned issues must be targeted primarily by the Nigerian government, the international community should provide the support and incentives necessary to facilitate both government reform, and the targeting of Boko Haram by military and police units. By providing various forms of military support to Nigeria, the country will be better able to combat the increasing sophistication and tactical expertise of Boko Haram. This support however should be limited to foreign advisors providing Nigerian military and police leadership with the tactical expertise needed to effectively target terrorists within the country. This support should go hand-in-hand with a commitment by Nigeria to respect human rights and fight corruption. Progress on these issues should be monitored by international monitors who report back to an organization such as the UN on a regular basis. If Nigeria indeed takes the steps necessary to fight corruption and improve human rights then, and only then, should financial assistance follow. As of now, “The United States is the largest bilateral donor in Nigeria, providing over \$600 million annually in recent years to bolster democratic governance, agriculture and economic reform, education and health services, and to professionalize and reform the security services” (Ploch, 2011). The problem is, the US, although discussing the problem of corruption and human rights within Nigeria, has done little to directly address the problem; regardless of performance on these issues the US has, and will continue, to provide economic assistance. This is a major problem and

simply exacerbates the corruption and human rights issues within Nigeria. The United States Department of state notes that, “Democratic and economic progress in Nigeria is challenged by poor governance, entrenched corruption, internal conflict, ineffective service delivery, and pervasive poverty” (United States Department of State 2012). Yet, despite this acknowledgement the US provided roughly \$648 million in aid to Nigeria in 2011 (United States Agency for International Development 2011).

Sectarian violence between northern Muslims and southern Christians within Nigeria must also be addressed if Boko Haram is to be defeated. As tensions continue to percolate between the two religious groups, Boko Haram uses these increased tensions to further its agenda. Not only do northern Muslims feel marginalized – arguably for good reason – but violent attacks against Christians by Boko Haram have in turn, led to violent rhetoric by Christian leaders within the country who have hinted at possible retaliatory attacks (Agence France-Presse 2012). This is used by Boko Haram as evidence of a Christian conspiracy against Muslims in Nigeria, and should retaliatory attacks actually occur, Boko Haram will most likely see a boost in new recruits and will use these attacks as justification for increased violence. This could lead to a never ending cycle of attacks and retaliations by Muslims and Christians, which would create an environment in which Boko Haram would continue to thrive. The Nigerian government must work on bridging the gap between the country’s Muslims and Christians. Providing the Muslim north with a share of the country’s oil revenue through various social programs aimed at alleviating poverty and hunger could appease many Muslims, who’s main area of contention has been their belief that they have been neglected by the Christian government. In addition a uniform system of law throughout the country must be established so that Christians and other religious minorities in the north are not bound under the Shari code which has been implemented in the northern states. This division of law on a domestic level has led to increased tensions and numerous clashes between religious groups in the north. In order for the government to stifle Boko Haram’s growing strength the Nigerian government must reconcile differences between Muslims and Christians within the country.

In order to fight Boko Haram, drastic political changes must be made by the Nigerian government to address government corruption and human rights. In turn, the international community should provide Nigerian military and police units with the training needed to effectively target terrorism. This training must emphasize respect for human rights. Should Nigeria improve its performance in both problem areas – confirmed by independent observers -, the international community should then follow-up military support with financial assistance; providing an incentive for the Nigerian government to address corruption and human rights. Should corruption and human rights abuse remain the norm, assistance should be strictly limited to military/police training. This approach directly addresses the issues which have been responsible for bolstering support for Boko Haram, and will provide the Nigerian government with the necessary training to target the organization once its support base has withered. Following this, the Nigerian government should receive financial assistance in order to bolster

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economic growth, address hunger, alleviate poverty and fight disease within the country. Addressing these issues will further bolster the legitimacy of the Nigerian government and will subsequently reduce support for Boko Haram, which has cited these issues as being evidence of the government's failure to take care of the people. Should these policies be implemented Nigeria will find itself in a much better place, and Boko Haram will be unable to justify its existence. In addition, both regional and global security will increase due to the reduced threat of Boko Haram which currently has both local and transnational inspirations.

Conclusion

Boko Haram presents a very real threat to both African and global security. The group has continued to conduct increasingly deadly attacks within Nigeria and may be developing transnational ambitions as evidenced by statements from the group's leadership. The attack by the group on the UN headquarters in Nigeria was a clear signal by Boko Haram that it considers both Western and domestic targets within Nigeria to be fair game. U.S. AFRICOM commander General Carter Ham noted in September 2011 that Islamist organizations in Africa – including Boko Haram - “have very explicitly and publicly voiced an intent to target Westerners, and the U.S. specifically” (Mojeed and Schmitt 2011). This recent focus on Western targets can perhaps be tied in to the expanding relationships between Boko Haram and other Islamist groups such as AQIM and al-Shabaab. These growing relationships may also explain the growing sophistication of attacks by the group along with an increasing reliance on suicide bombers. In addition, the group appears to be developing an ideology that is frighteningly similar to that of al-Qaeda and has stepped up attacks against Nigerian Christians and other religious minorities within the country to demonstrate its Salafist beliefs.

To effectively combat the growing threat of Boko Haram, the Nigerian government must take multiple steps to eliminate the factors that have fueled the group's existence. These steps would include; eliminating widespread government corruption, improving human rights, working with the international community in developing effective CT policy, improving the relationship between Christians and Muslims within Nigeria, and fighting poverty and hunger within the country. Taking these steps will eliminate the key factors that have both contributed to the rise and expansion of Boko Haram in Nigeria.

Nigeria, with the help of the international community must take steps to eliminate support for the organization, and sever its connections to outside organizations. Unfortunately, these steps may not be popular amongst the political elite in Nigeria who have hoarded the lion's share of the country's oil profits and allowed widespread corruption and abuse of human rights. According to the Associated Press (2011), “foreign firms pump out the millions of barrels of oil that fuel Nigeria's government coffers. Much of that money sloshes into politician's pockets in a nation routinely described by analysts as being one of the world's most corrupt countries.”

However, this corruption and abuse of human rights has been one of the key elements that has allowed Boko Haram to thrive, as it gives the group legitimacy and has boosted support for the organization amongst disenfranchised Nigerians; especially northern Muslims. The government must make reforms which will eliminate corruption, allow transparency, and improve human rights within the country if Boko Haram is to be eliminated. Improving human rights and fighting corruption is an essential element in combating Boko Haram and can be facilitated by the international community which could provide financial assistance as an incentive for making improvements in these two areas.

The role of the international community should be centered on counterterrorism cooperation – strictly advisory - and financial assistance for the country should its track record on corruption and human rights improve. This will allow Nigeria to better tackle Boko Haram and at the same time, will help increase stability as any money given should be provided only under the precondition that it would be used for various social programs such as those designed to reduce poverty and hunger, expand infrastructure, and improve healthcare within the state. Should these steps be taken Boko Haram will find itself hard pressed to justify its existence as much of its legitimacy is garnered from the governments lack of credibility.

Another issue that the Nigerian government must address in order to tackle Boko Haram, is improving the relationship between Muslims and Christian within the country. Increasing attacks by Boko Haram have widened the divide between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, and threaten to plunge the country into absolute chaos should Christians begin to retaliate against these attacks; a very real possibility given the current statements by Nigeria's Christian leadership. While Boko Haram may continue attacking Christians until the government is able to target the organization itself, the Jonathan government must work on improving conditions for northern Muslims, and developing a uniform legal system throughout the country under which all citizens are treated equally. By allowing the northern states to operate under Sharia law, Christians in the north will continue to feel threatened. According to GlobalSecurity.Org (2012):

Following the adoption of the shari'a criminal code by Zamfara State in October 1999, northern Muslim political and religious leaders established the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria (SCSN), an organization designed to promote adoption of shari'a in other Nigerian states. Christian groups in the southern half of the country and in the Middle Belt reacted sharply to what they perceived as a Muslim, northern effort to lay the foundations for an Islamic, theocratic state.

This problem has persisted, and many Christians in Nigeria view the establishment of Sharia law in the northern states as a threat to their safety and religious freedom. Sharia law in the north must be eliminated and replaced with a system of uniform law which applies to Nigeria as a whole in order to appease Christians and block Islamist radicalism from taking hold of the northern states. Also, the Muslim minority in northern Nigeria must receive the same benefits and attention from the Nigerian government as the Christian south. Many Muslims feel they have

been neglected by the Christian majority government and have grown increasingly isolated and bitter as a consequence. According to GlobalSecurity.Org (2012), "Muslims feel marginalized on their own turf, which fuels their sense of grievance against the southern Christian settlers in their midst." The sense of marginalization amongst Nigerian Muslims along with Christian's concerns over being persecuted under Sharia law need to be eliminated in order to tackle the growing threat of Boko Haram. As long as a sharp sectarian divide between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria exists, Boko Haram will be able to justify its existence.

Should these issues be addressed, the Nigerian government will find itself at an advantage in eliminating Boko Haram. Not only will Boko Haram find itself in a weakened state, and therefore more vulnerable to attack, but the pool of recruits and sympathizers will be dramatically reduced; preventing the organization from bolstering its forces under increased government pressure. While Boko Haram is currently a threat to African and global security, this threat can be eliminated if the proper steps are taken to target the key issues that have given rise to, and allowed for the expansion of Boko Haram in Nigeria.

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