

Nigeria's Boko Haram: the Anatomy of a Crisis

Written by Murray Last

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In January 2012 there have been significant changes in the tactics of the Muslim militant group Jama'at ahl al-sunna li'l-daw'a wa'l-jihad, better known by its Hausa nickname Boko Haram. First, over a number of days it has attacked for the first time a wide range of security service buildings in the major city of Kano, caused the deaths of nearly 200 people and released some prisoners. Second, it posted a 15-minute video film on Youtube in which its Imam, Abu Muhammad Abubakar Muhammad Shekau explained and justified its actions: with his face in full view, he was not reading from a prepared text; after a prayer in Arabic he spoke in Hausa. It was the first sight the public have had of Shekau or any 'leader' of Boko Haram – and we assume the video was actually showing him, and not a stand-in. It had been thought that Shekau was killed in 2009, but he may have only been wounded in the thigh; if so, he lay low for a full year. Similarly, the man who is always quoted as Boko Haram's spokesman, Abu 'l-Qaqa, is never seen live, and his name is a pseudonym – presumably in reference to a warrior famous for his rousing voice in the army of the 7th century Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab. Abu 'l-Qaqa speaks in Hausa but with a non-Hausa accent. He is only contacted by journalists via intermediaries on the phone, but there is more than one phone number – and therefore more than one person? – used in calling up a 'Boko Haram spokesman'.

Finally, it is widely assumed that Boko Haram runs like a franchise: different sections (factions?) carry out their own actions, so that attacks in Abuja may be run by the "Kabiru Umar Sokoto" who was arrested by police but then escaped from custody (freed it seems by a crowd that mobbed the police who were transporting him). The attacks in Kano may well have been run by a Kano 'branch' (an arms cache had been found there late last year; the much earlier attack on Sharada and Panshekara in 2007 may have been theirs too, as could be the shooting at dawn within a Dorayi mosque of Shaikh Ja'afar Adam). More worrying are the 'sections' in smaller towns and villages that specifically attack Christians in church or in their distinct quarters: not all of these, however, are attributable to Boko Haram, being deadly but localised inter-communal vendettas. Indeed, some – but only some – of these sectarian attacks (e.g. in Mubi, or in southern Nigerian towns) were carried out, some sources now suggest, by individual Christians acting as provocateurs or simply by people with their own in-group feuds. Furthermore, some warnings sent in the name of Boko Haram by text message are now known to have been student jokes by Igbos or other Christians. Lastly, the police have tended to attribute raids such as those in Kankara or Gombi – where the targets were both banks (for ready cash) and police stations (for guns and ammunition) – to criminal gangs, and not to Boko Haram. Kidnapping is very rare and seems not to be a Boko Haram practice (as ransom demands would lead police to the kidnappers; a safe house would also be needed). Nonetheless the public and the media tend to put all dramatic incidents down to Boko Haram, whether or not a 'spokesman' claims them. Some of the 'bombs' used in recent attacks have been small enough to be packed into a single soft-drinks can and so are readily hidden and thrown. Once the technique is known, almost anyone could make one.

In short, not even the Nigerian government and its main state security personnel (not even, I have been told, those in Maiduguri where Boko Haram has its main centre) know, despite surveillance, who belongs to, let alone effectively leads, Boko Haram. In the past, groups comparable to Boko Haram had well-known leaders, were based in known quarters of a city or village, and the group's followers were widely recognisable. That 'open' policy proved disastrous: one such leader, Mai Tatsine, in 1980 became based in Kano's Kofar Mata quarter where his people were eventually attacked; their houses (and all the inhabitants inside) were simply crushed by army tanks – 4000 bodies were removed and buried in a mass grave beyond Kano's western wall where the city's nightsoil is always dumped. In 2009, Boko Haram's founder and leader Ustaz Muhammad Yusuf had similarly taken over a quarter of Maiduguri,

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the capital of Borno: there eventually the army was ordered in, using heavy weapons to wipe out as many followers of Boko Haram as they could find – over 700, people assume. On that occasion, the army captured Muhammad Yusuf, briefly interrogated him and handed him over to the police who then simply shot him; the police were filmed also openly shooting other men, some of whom had handed themselves in to the police, others who were made to lie in rows on the ground. In such a context, therefore, the current leadership of Boko Haram are taking great care not to be readily identified or located; their followers do not wear beards, and so look like any other Nigerian citizen. Army personnel complain that on their raids into Muslim houses and in counter-attacks in the street after an explosion they simply do not know whom exactly to shoot – so many a civilian, fleeing or taking cover, dies innocently. The Nigerian state's security men, it has been said, have killed more than Boko Haram have ever done; indeed the 'joint task forces' in the problem towns are sometimes regarded by locals not as providing protection but more as an army of occupation – thus potentially alienating ordinary people who, while not actually supporting Boko Haram, are then reluctant to betray Boko Haram's operatives (assuming anyone knows who they are). Calling in the army is itself a risk.

Nigeria's President, to everyone's surprise, has said more than once that he knows for sure there are Boko Haram sympathisers both within his Cabinet and in his security services. But he has never named names. Several senior politicians have been brought in for intensive interrogation on the assumption they are possible 'sponsors' or 'mentors' of terrorism, but unsurprisingly nothing has been proved against any one of them: for anyone with a grudge it is too tempting to settle old scores this way – he can accuse a politician and the police may act upon it (and tell the media too). But no one gets any closer to identifying those who truly comprise the network that is Boko Haram. Instead, the President confidently labels Nigeria's terrorism as part of a world-wide phenomenon and so it is not truly 'Nigerian' in origin or context: outsiders are blamed – al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) or Somalia's al-Shabaab, or al-Qaeda more generally. In Kano after the recent bombings there, 200 men were rounded up – all of them 'Chadians', said the police. Blaming men from Chad has been a regular response going back a hundred years at least (though in 1917 they were usually called Wadaians); a common alternative scapegoat are impoverished immigrants from Niger. 'Chadians', can be said to have been over-heard speaking a non-Hausa language, and thus are plainly not one of 'us' – yet they can still disappear without trace as if they were indigenes of northern Nigeria. It dismays many Nigerians that the government is apparently refusing even to consider that the dissent-turned-violent is really indigenous and could possibly arise out of local desperation with the way the country is managed.

Clearly, at some point negotiations with Boko Haram will have to be opened if only to get the campaign of violence called off. But who on the Government side will be brave enough to reverse policy and call seriously for talks, and for Boko Haram, whom can they truly trust if the Government does put someone forward? The current conditions are that Boko Haram should first hand over its weapons: but who among the frustrated security forces could then resist eliminating a disarmed Boko Haram? Some local Borno elders were once in contact with Boko Haram but the Nigerian Police (and no doubt some higher authority) put a stop to it; Borno, however, has already compensated a key family closely linked to the late Muhammad Yusuf, and some police officers are being tried for his murder – so the avenues for contact are there. The President has called upon Boko Haram to show itself so that talks might start – but so far the Nigerian state's security men have remained strikingly hawkish, being confident they can again wipe out Boko Haram. Almost all Nigeria's military/security top brass are not Muslims but, like the President, come from southern Nigeria where there has been a lot of talk, especially among articulate Christian intellectuals, about how Nigeria should rid itself of the 'backward' Muslim north. There is a growing 'anti-Islam' rhetoric, not just in southern Nigeria but in the diaspora too.

The Muslim-Christian dimension is especially worrying. The Pastor who currently heads the overall Christian Association of Nigeria, Ayo Oritsejafor, has been credited with calling for every Christian to carry a gun, not just, it seems, in self-defence but ready for retaliation; and it is widely known on the Jos Plateau that deliveries of weapons and ammunition have been made recently to churches and Christian training colleges, turning these places of worship into arsenals. The weapons have been imported or smuggled in from abroad via southern Nigerian entry points. The killings, then, have not just been Boko Haram targeting Christians, but two-way: Christians have been using weapons against Muslims both in Jos and in villages on the Plateau, with major massacres also in southern Kaduna. Such Christian-on-Muslim killings tend to get less press coverage abroad, so that one can come across European Africanists who have never heard of them. But these 'unmentioned' massacres play a major role in Boko

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Haram's rationale and deep sense of grievance: they want revenge against not only the police who harass them but against Christian groups murdering Muslims and who in one notorious case imply they have eaten bits of the roasted flesh of their Muslim victims: the truth of this is hard to verify (and it may be purely local), but Muslims' belief that it has indeed been done at least once (in Jos north, on a specific occasion) is powerful enough; Shekau himself in his video refers to it. Such visceral hatred does not fade away.

Finally, the crisis over Boko Haram has resulted in a recent Nigerian budget in which 20% of the whole has been earmarked for security. In practical terms, this means a lot of money for contracts to buy new technology (like CCTV cameras and radio communications), new weaponry, new helicopters or armoured vehicles, new or reinforced security infrastructure; and this means massive profits for those who get those contracts. Emergencies can be profitable: in short, it's not always in everyone's interest for an emergency to end soon. The President clearly needs it to end, as do all ordinary Nigerians. But at the same time, there will be many a young Muslim who is both impressed by Boko Haram's proven ability to scare the Christian-led Nigerian government and agrees in principle with Boko Haram that the everyday behaviour of the country's governing elite is far from being properly Islamic. For them, the "boko" in Boko Haram refers not to 'western education' (as all the western media repeat unthinkingly) but to the westernised lifestyles, the materialistic ethics of a governing elite that have for decades systematically 'stolen' the revenues from the nation's oil account, and left the common people, despite the nation's huge wealth, persistently poor without proper schools, clinics, jobs. With 40% of the Nigeria's youth out of work (according to the Government's own Minister for Youth), the potential scale of popular anger at the grass-roots is immense. 'Boko' thus comes also to mean sham or fake, standing for all that's pseudo, or simply lies, in a westernised 'modernity'. In a strongly religious milieu where truth is all important, repeated lies are indeed 'haram': anger against 'liars' then seems righteous, even when that anger finds expression in un-Islamic bombs and gunfire.

Nigerians will doubtless find ways to overcome this crisis, but the solution may not lie in counter-violence. Boko Haram are undoubtedly wrong in criminally killing and harming so many people, even as acts of revenge: vengeance does not work, at least not in the long term, and the cycle of revenge, its lure, must be broken on both sides of the growing divide. This is not, despite notable claims that it is, like it was in the North early in 1966, when, after the assassination of the Sardauna and other Muslim leaders, massacres of Igbos were instigated: both the anger at the top and, at the bottom, the persistent provocation from ordinary Igbos in markets and lorry-parks were then very different indeed. But it will take remarkable acts of statesmanship to achieve an honourable peace – but it was done in 1970 after Nigeria's bloody civil ('Biafran') war. It can be done again: there is a sufficient cadre of remarkable people in Nigeria to bring peace about, if not now then in a short while.

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