

# What Do We Really Know About Boko Haram?

Written by Jideofor Adibe

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Since 2009 Boko Haram has become a metaphor for insecurity in Nigeria after the government launched a clampdown on the group, which resulted in some 800 deaths mostly of the sect members. Mohamed Yusuf, the group's leader was killed in that attack while in police custody. In what was apparently retaliation for the extra judicial killing of its leader, the group carried out its first terrorist attack in Borno in January 2010, at Dala Alemderi Ward in Maiduguri metropolis, Borno State, which resulted in the death of four people. Since then the sect has intensified its terrorist activities. On June 16 2011 for instance, it bombed the Police Force headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria's, capital in what was thought to be the first case of using a suicide bomber to carry out a terrorist activity in Nigeria. On August 26 2011 another suicide bomber blew up the UN headquarters in Abuja, leaving at least 21 people dead and dozens more injured. On January 20 2012 it attacked Kano, leaving more than 185 people dead. In fact, a day hardly passes these days without news of attacks by the sect. The government has also intensified its military action against the sect, capturing some of its leaders. But what do we really know about Boko Haram?

Though Boko Haram has dominated security discourse in Nigeria since early 2010, nearly everything about the sect still remains contested – from the meaning of its name to the reasons for its emergence and radicalisation and whether it is now affiliated to foreign terrorist groups such as the Al Shabaab in Somalia and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). It is also contestable whether the group is actually responsible for all the numerous terrorist atrocities attributed to it.

### Name

It is believed that members of Boko Haram actually prefer to be known by their Arabic name *-Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* – meaning 'People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad'. In the town of Maiduguri, North-eastern Nigeria, where the group was believed to have been formed, the residents call them 'Boko Haram' – a combination of the Hausa word 'boko' meaning 'Western education' and the Arabic word 'Haram' which figuratively means 'sin' and literally means 'forbidden'. Boko Haram has therefore been commonly translated as 'Western education is sacrilege' or 'Western education is a sin'. Some, such as Ioannis Mantzikos (2010) have however suggested that such a translation will be more a transliteration of the two words and that what the users of the expression meant to convey was that 'Western Civilisation is forbidden' rather than that 'Western education' is forbidden' or a sacrilege because what the group is opposed to really is Western civilization – which includes of course Western education but is not limited to it.

Apart from calling the sect 'Boko Haram' locals in Maiduguri also call the group by other names such as 'Taliban' even though there is no evidence it has links with the Taliban of Afghanistan. In fact there are some who contend that the group has no specific name for itself – just many names attributed to it by local people.

### Origin

Just as there are contestations over the name of the sect or the meaning of Boko Haram, there are also controversies over the origin of the group. The popular belief is that it was founded around 2001 or 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf. This belief has however been challenged by Isioma Madike (2011) who contends that the sect was actually started in 1995 as *Sahaba* and was initially led by one Lawan Abubakar who later left for further studies at the University of

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Medina in Saudi Arabia. Yusuf was said to have taken over the leadership of the sect after the departure of Abubakar and immediately embarked on intensive and hugely successful membership recruitment such that he had over 500,000 members before his demise. Madike also alleged that Yusuf taxed each member one Naira per day, meaning that he realized about N500, 000 (roughly £2000 pound sterling) per day.

Whatever may be the truth about the origin of the sect, what is not in dispute is that Yusuf was responsible for raising its profile. He was in fact said to have established a religious complex that included a mosque and a school where many poor families from Nigeria and the neighbouring countries enrolled their children.

## The Radicalisation of the Group

There is fairly a consensus that until 2009 Boko Haram conducted its operations more or less peacefully and that its radicalisation followed a government clampdown in 2009 in which some 800 people died (Adibe, 2011). Mohammed Yusuf was killed in that attack while in police custody. In what was apparently retaliation for the extra judicial killing of its leader, the group carried out its first terrorist attack in Borno in January 2010 at Dala Alemderi Ward in Maiduguri metropolis which resulted in the death of four people. In January 2012, Abubakar Shekau, a former deputy to Yusuf, who was thought to have died in the government clampdown of 2009, appeared in a video posted on Youtube and assumed leadership of the group.

Opinions differ on the reasons for the government clampdown in 2009. One version is that the government got wind that the group was arming itself and then struck. Another version traced this to a motorcycle incident. According to this view, some members of the sect were shot dead on 11 June 2009 following a row with the police over the members' refusal to wear crash helmets in Maiduguri. Yusuf was said to have vowed to avenge the death of his members, which he allegedly did three days after the incident and which led to some of the sect members being arrested and paraded by the Borno State police command. According to this version, the apparently coordinated attacks on the police in Bauchi and other states in the North from mid 2009 following this incident were reprisal attacks for the police arrest and humiliation of their members.

Another version on why Boko Haram got radicalised was that some politicians in Bornu State who were apparently using the sect members as thugs became frightened when they suddenly became too powerful for them and therefore had to invite the government to deal with them (Alonge, 2012). Former Bornu State Governor Ali Modu Sheriff has been linked to the sect in this narrative – which he has strongly denied. Ironically in the 2011 Bornu South Senatorial District election, the sect was said to have supported Ali Ndume who had decamped from the ANPP to the PDP against Modu Sheriff. Senator Ndume who won the election has since been charged to court by the Nigerian government for being one of the sponsors of Boko Haram – a charge he strongly denies.

## Explaining the Boko Haram Phenomenon

Just as there are contestations over the reasons for the radicalization of the group, there is also no unanimity on how the emergence of the sect could be explained. Several theses and theories have been proffered: For some, Boko Haram is a symptom that the Nigerian state has become either a failed or failing state. Others blame it on poverty and poor governance while yet some locate its emergence in a frustration-aggression hypothesis. Here members of the sect are said to be generally frustrated with the situation of things in the country, especially with the position of Northerners and Northern Muslims in the current configuration of political and economic power in Nigeria. In this view Boko Haram's terrorism is simply misplaced aggression.

For other analysts (see Adibe, 2011, 2012a, 2012b) Boko Haram is more of a symptom of the crisis in Nigeria's nation-building. This crisis, it is argued, has triggered a massive de-Nigerianization process, with several individuals and groups retreating into primordial identities where they seek to construct meaning as they feel let down by the Nigerian state. In this view, those withdrawing from the Nigeria project instinctively see the state as an enemy and attacks it using whatever means at its disposal – those entrusted with husbanding the country's resources steal it blind, law enforcement officers turn the other way if you offer them a little inducement, organised labour, including university lecturers, go on prolonged strikes on a whim, students resort to cultism and examination malpractices and

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workers drag their feet, refuse to put in their best and engage in moonlighting. Essentially everyone seems to have one form of grouse or the other against the Nigerian state and its institutions.

## External Linkages

Just as there is no agreement on how to explain the emergence of the Boko Haram phenomenon, opinions also differ on whether the sect now has linkages with Al Qaeda and other international terrorist groups. While the government thinks so or will want the world to believe that it does, there is as yet no empirical proof of such alliance – although the increasing sophistication of the sect's methods is persuading many to conclude that the sect must be enjoying such a linkage.

It can be argued that the Nigerian government has a vested interest in presenting Boko Haram as having such an international linkage. One, it will make it easier to attract international sympathy and technical assistance from European countries and USA which since September 11 has been especially paranoid about any group rumoured to be linked to Al Qaeda. Two, linking Boko Haram to Al-Qaeda will be face-saving, making it easier for the government to rationalise its inability to contain the group and its activities – after all, if the USA and the European countries have not been able to defeat Al Qaeda, why will anyone see it as a sign of weakness that an African government has not been able to defeat an organisation it sponsors? Three, by linking Boko Haram to Al Qaeda, the government may hope to use innuendos and name-dropping of US involvement to frighten the sect and help to pressure it to the negotiating table.

Assuming that Boko Haram does not already have such an external linkage, it will however also be in the sect's interest that it is being portrayed as an organisation working in cahoots with the dreaded Al Qaeda. Such a portraiture will not only increase the awe with which it is held but may also even help it to attract the attention and sympathy of Al Qaeda and similar terrorist organisations – if it does not already have such an alliance with them.

The paradox here is that if the USA gets openly involved in fighting Boko Haram, it could galvanise the support of anti- USA forces globally and even domestically behind the sect. It could also fire off a wave of nationalism that may end up winning the sect sympathisers even from Nigerians stoutly opposed to the sect's activities. It may in fact be argued that the sect's attack on the UN office in Nigeria was not only aimed at raising its profile but also to use any internationalisation of the fight against it for recruitment purposes. A similar thing could be said about its attacks on churches, which some believe is usually aimed at triggering a sectarian war which will be a veritable source of membership recruitment for the sect.

## Conclusion

What seems obvious from this essay is that there are several, often conflicting narratives, on virtually every aspect of Boko Haram. This, in my opinion, is evidence that much of what is known about the sect remains in the realm of speculation and highlights an urgent need for a rigorous empirical research to fill the lacuna.

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