

Why Nigeria is Not Winning the Anti-Boko Haram War

Written by Hakeem Onapajo

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HAKEEM ONAPAJO, NOV 3 2013

With an aim to restore order in the northern region of Nigeria, the epicentre of Boko Haram, the Nigerian government in June 2011 created the Joint Task Force (JTF) as a special military task force, involving the main components of the state's armed forces, to counter the increasingly sophisticated terror attacks by the insurgent group. Since its emergence, the JTF, as claimed, has launched a massive crackdown on the terrorists' den and successfully arrested or killed a huge number of the members of the group including its key leaders. For example, it was reported on 24 September 2012 that 156 members of the group were arrested and 35 of them killed, including one of their key leaders in a major military raid on the group's enclave in Yobe and Adamawa States.[1]

In October 2012, it was reported that 30 members of the group were killed in a battle with the military.[2] Other major clampdowns occurred on different occasions in March 2013, which saw the death of 72 members of the group.[3] Given this anti-terror military onslaught and the acclaimed high number of casualties from the insurgent group, the Nigerian government has been trumpeting its success in the war on terror. It is in this light that the Nigerian Chief of Army Staff, Lieutenant-General Azubuike Ihejirika, pointed out that:

When you consider the fact that for every bomb that goes off; several others have been stopped from going off. Arrests have also been made. Only this week, and the week before, bomb batches were uncovered; in some instances, the perpetrators were killed; in some other instance, others were arrested. So I think we are making tremendous progress.[4]

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Despite the acclaimed success of the Nigerian anti-terror military operations, it is indeed paradoxical that the terror campaign of Boko Haram is yet to abate and is rather becoming more sophisticated, lethal, and producing some other splinter groups. It is noteworthy that a new terror group has emerged from Boko Haram with the name *Jama'atu Ansarul Musilimina fi Biladin Sudan* with fiercer attacks in Nigeria.[5] This new group claimed the abduction and killing of seven foreign nationals in Nigeria. With these developments, therefore, it is clear that the acclaimed success of the counter-terrorism campaign in Nigeria is, after all, not totally reliable. It therefore suffices to say that Nigeria is not winning its war on the Boko Haram terror. The next question that should then follow is: Why is Nigeria not winning the anti-terror campaign in the country? The subsequent sections of this piece attempt an answer to this important question.

Why Boko Haram Persists

The insufficiency of intelligence on Boko Haram and others alike marks a critical point to start with. Clearly, the Nigerian government is still struggling to acquire adequate knowledge of its own enemies. Amazingly, five years after the emergence of the Boko Haram phenomenon, the Nigerian government still perceives the group as faceless and unidentifiable. President Goodluck Jonathan during his official visit to Borno State (the stronghold of Boko Haram) in March 2013 still classified the group as a 'ghost'! Obviously, this explains the reason why the government is clueless on which particular group represents the authentic Boko Haram. In January 2013, a man believed in governmental circles to be the commander of the group, Abu Mohammed Ibn Abdulazeez, claimed to have had a series of peace talks with the government and as a result declared a ceasefire on behalf of Boko Haram.[6] In a spontaneous reaction, Abubakar Shekau (who had been rumored dead after being shot by JTF) dissociated himself as the authentic leader of Boko Haram and his group from Abdulazeez.[7] A few weeks later, multiple bomb attacks traced to the group were recorded in the metropolis of Kano State, which killed many southern Nigerians.

The ethnicisation and politicisation of the discourse on Boko Haram is also another factor militating against the government's anti-terror efforts. It is useful to mention at this juncture that the multi-ethnic character of the Nigerian state manifests in all aspects of its life. The discourse on Boko Haram has undoubtedly become another ethnic issue in the country. It is noteworthy that the Boko Haram crisis, coincidentally, became fiercer and popular at a time when there was intense mutual suspicion and tension between the northern and southern elites over the issue of rotation of state power. The northern elites saw themselves being shortchanged in a certain 'zoning formula' after the emergence of Goodluck Jonathan as the president following the sudden death of Umar Musa Yar'Adua. Given this, the general belief in the South – the origin of President Jonathan – is that Boko Haram is politically motivated, and an outcome of the general grievance from northern Nigeria. On the other hand, this belief has also fuelled a continuous distrust in the North about the sincerity of the Jonathan-led government's effort to counter Boko Haram.

In light of the above, it is popularly believed in the North that Jonathan's government is somewhat behind the Boko Haram terror attacks in order to strengthen the belief that the northern elites are sponsors of Boko Haram; hence the concept of 'Federal Government's Boko Haram'. In addition, northern elites also nurture the belief that the government is not sincere with efforts to tackle Boko Haram especially with its military approach. They see this as a deliberate attempt to destroy the North and its economy given that only innocent people are being killed by JTF. What they perceive as the best solution to the crisis is the declaration of an amnesty for Boko Haram members, similar to that of the Niger Delta, as a solution to the crisis. At the inception, the president including some sections in the South, as well as the Christian population – under the auspices of the Christian Association of Nigeria – registered their stiff opposition to an amnesty for Boko Haram members. Although the presidency later accepted the amnesty option for the group which has been pooh-poohed by the leadership of the insurgent group, the lack of consensus on the best approach to fight Boko Haram as a result of ethnic and political considerations has undoubtedly continued to be an albatross in the counter-terrorism process.

The political will to fight Boko Haram is also suspect. In January 2012, President Goodluck Jonathan shockingly announced that 'some of them [sponsors and sympathisers of Boko Haram] are in the executive arm of government, some of them are in the parliamentary/legislative arm of government, while some of them are even in the judiciary'. [8] Given the increasing sophistication of the attacks of the group, one cannot agree less with President Jonathan that there are truly some Nigerian 'big men' that sponsor the operations of the group. However, the government has yet to

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publicly identify and prosecute the elites in governmental circles who have direct or indirect connections with Boko Haram. This is despite the fact that some Boko Haram members have mentioned some names within the circles of the Nigerian elite. Besides, it is equally unclear if justice would be done on a few politicians that have been arrested for their links with Boko Haram as a result of the corruption and hijacking of the Nigerian judiciary. In a similar vein, two people appointed on the amnesty committee – Datti Ahmad and Shehu Sanni – declined their appointments on the grounds that earlier reconciliatory efforts they facilitated were frustrated by the government. According to Ahmad, 'since it is the same government, I will not participate in a program which outcome will be mismanaged. They failed to work with what we mutually arrived at in the past, so I will not be part of this one'.[9]

The counter-terrorism effort of the government is also being challenged by humanitarian concerns from domestic and international quarters. There are mounting criticisms by human rights organisations, international organisations, and Western nations over the casualties of the anti-terror activities of JTF in northern Nigeria. In its 2012 report, Amnesty International raised concerns about the 'unlawful killings, dragnet arrests, arbitrary and unlawful detentions, extortion and intimidation' by JTF in Borno State in its war on terror. Similarly, the local National Human Rights Commission has complained about extrajudicial executions in the ongoing war on terror.[10] As a result, reports suggest that there has been a great deal of migration of people out of the areas in order to avoid killings and arrests by JTF. A migrant was quoted by a local newspaper thus, 'We want to leave because yesterday morning (Sunday) military men came shooting in our places....A woman was hit by a stray bullet in her breast. We don't know where to go...Nobody is cautioning the JTF, they arrest anybody and have been breaking into our houses'.[11] The Baga military raid in April 2013 is another good example. It was reported that over 187, mostly civilians, lost their lives and lost several properties in the military action. Human Rights Watch and the United States prominently registered their displeasure with the attack. In fact, it was reported that the United States withdrew its military assistance following the outcome of the raid.[12]

Conclusion: The Need for National Consensus

Certainly, the issue of Boko Haram has continued to pose a serious security threat to Nigeria. It is a matter of emergency to the country. Recent reports suggest that the government is about to change its strategy on Boko Haram following the realization of the ineffectiveness of the present military approach. The government is now considering a carrot and stick approach on Boko Haram and jettisoning the 'all-round force' approach.[13] This might be a good step. However, there is a need for a good collaboration between the government and the people, especially the northerners, on the current war on Boko Haram. It is dangerous to play politics with a serious security issue such as terrorism. Nigeria needs a national consensus on how to contain Boko Haram. It is only when Nigerians gain this consciousness, and drop ethnic and tribal sentiments, that there can be a meaningful solution to the Boko Haram terror in the country.

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[1] *Al-Jazeera*, "Deaths in Nigeria Boko Haram crackdown", 24 September 2012. available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/09/2012924205430561216.html> (accessed March 25 2013)

[2] *Al-Jazeera*, "Nigerian army kills 'Boko Haram' fighters", 8 October 2012, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/10/201210720345539879.html> (accessed March 25 2013).

[3] *The Nation*, "52 die in army, Boko Haram clash", 10 March 2013,

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<http://thenationonlineng.net/new/news/52-die-in-army-boko-haram-clash/>; *The Nation*, “20 Boko Haram members killed in Borno”, 3 March 2013, <http://thenationonlineng.net/new/news-update/20-boko-haram-members-killed-in-borno/> (accessed 25 March 2013)

[4] *Vanguard*, “Terrorism: Our efforts are paying off – Ihejirika”, 16 August 2012, available at: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/08/terrorism-our-efforts-are-paying-off-ihejirika/> (accessed 27 March 2013).

[5] See Onuoha, F.C. “Jama’atu Ansarul Musilimina Fi Biladis Sudan: Nigeria’s evolving terrorist group”, 14 March 2013, available at: <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2013/03/20133141037235504.htm> (accessed 25 March 2013).

[6] *Al-Jazeera*, “Boko Haram ‘commander’ declares ceasefire”, 29 January 2013, available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/01/2013129111721386179.html> (accessed 26 March 2013).

[7] *The Herald*, “Shekau denies Boko Haram ceasefire, threatens more attacks”, 4 March 2013, available at: <http://www.theheraldng.com/shekau-denies-boko-haram-ceasefire-threatens-more-attacks/> (accessed 27 March 2013).

[8] *The Telegraph*, “Boko Haram sympathisers ‘in government and security agencies’”, 8 January 2013, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/nigeria/9001033/Boko-Haram-sympathisers-in-government-and-security-agencies.html> (accessed 28 March 2013).

[9] *Daily Trust*, “Datti rejects amnesty c’ttee membership...says FG not sincere”, 19 April 2013, available at: <http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/index.php/top-stories/52620-datti-rejects-amnesty-c-tee-membership-says-fg-not-sincere> (accessed 13 May 2013)

[10] *Amnesty International*, *Amnesty International Reports 2012: The State of World’s Human Rights*. London: AI

[11] *Daily Trust*, “Thousands Flee Damaturu, Accuse JTF of Rampant Arrests”, 14 August 2012, available at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201208140571.html> (accessed 28 March 2013).

[12] *The Will*, “US Withdraws Military Assistance to Nigeria Over Baga, Human Rights Violation” <http://www.thenigerianvoice.com/nvnews/112917/1/us-withdraws-military-assistance-to-nigeria-over-b.html> (accessed 14 May 2013).

[13] *The Nation*, “FG to change strategy on Boko Haram”, 23 March 2013, available at: <http://thenationonlineng.net/new/news/fg-to-change-strategy-on-boko-haram/> (accessed 28 March 2013).