

## Boko Haram Insurgency and the Counter-Terrorism Policy in Nigeria

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### Abstract

The Boko Haram fundamentalist Islamic group is the first insurgent organization in Nigeria to be classified as a terrorist organization by the United States of America and its allies. Since 2009 the violence the group has unleashed on the Nigerian State is unprecedented in the history of insurgency in the country. Several studies have intellectualized the origin, motive and other activities of this infamous rebellious group. To advance the discourse on Boko Haram, this study examines the measures the Nigerian government has taken so far to address the menace posed by the Boko Haram insurgents. Using library research and interview methods, the findings of the study indicate that first, that the path Government should not follow is using the same methods it used to combat the Niger Delta militants to address the Boko Haram insurgents. Second, that peace negotiation is most unlikely to succeed with insurgents like those of Boko Haram with vile ideologies, whose core demands undermine democracy and good governance. Rather, it is more likely to succeed with insurgent groups pursuing legitimate political or economic based grievances that are capable of deepening democracy and good governance, that is, if Government accepts their core demands. Third, that peace negotiation is most unlikely to succeed with Boko Haram insurgents, since they do not have the capacity to lead a provincial government, after disavowing terrorism. This study strongly recommends that to checkmate the threat posed by Boko Haram insurgents, Government should

treat them like terrorists rather than freedom fighters.

**Key words:** Boko Haram; Insurgency; Freedom fighters; Counter-terrorism policy

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### INTRODUCTION

Apart from the challenges of poverty, sectarian, economic and political crises, and Niger Delta Militancy, Nigeria is currently facing a deeper and profound challenge of terrorism, especially in the North-Eastern region of the country. In the past two years, we have witnessed the vulnerability of the Nigerian state to terror, criminality and instability. The list of these disheartening phenomena includes, but is not limited to the bombing of several Churches, Mosques, Police Stations, Schools and Prisons in Bauchi, Bornu, Yobe and Adamawa states. Other parts of the country were not spared, as the sect-bombing activities were witnessed in the Federal capital territory, Abuja, Plateau, Kaduna and Kano states. The bombing of the United Nations office in Abuja is perhaps what the insurgents used to gain global recognition; as they are now listed amongst terrorist organizations by the United States and its allies, (for more details see *The Economist*, September 3, 2011).

Available statistics on the number of deaths and property lost to Boko Haram insurgency between 2002 and 2013 to say the least is highly controversial. Our interviewee accounts claim that over 10,000 people (including women and children) have been killed and property worth over 100 million dollars have been destroyed during the period under discussion (culled from interview of victims of Boko Haram attacks in Abuja, North Central, North East and North West

regions of the country). However, official reports put the death toll at 8,000 plus and property destroyed at 40 million dollars (culled from the interview of government officials in Abuja, Yobe, Kaduna, Plateau and Adamawa states).

Government's response to the vicious attacks of Boko Haram has been a diverse mix of hope and trepidation. Hope lies in the fact that a state of emergency has been declared in (Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states) inhabited by the insurgent group. Apart from that each time the Police and other security organizations responsible for internal security seem to be overwhelmed by the insurgents, the army is usually brought in to force them to retreat. Trepidation arises from the ability of the insurgents to regroup and strike even with the imposed state of emergency. The country's vulnerability to incessant attacks from armed insurgents poses a great security challenge. According to the Minister of information, Labaran Maku, the country spends 27% of its budget on internal security alone. These are resources that could have been used to rehabilitate the country's deplorable infrastructure (Review of 2013 by Channels Television).

Following the declaration of state of emergency in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states, government troops have launched sustained offensive against the insurgent group, but this has not yielded the desired results. Most recently, the Air force base and Army post in Maiduguri were attacked by Boko Haram insurgents. According to an official report, "two helicopters and three out-of-service planes were destroyed". "Two military personnel were injured and 24 militants killed". However, witnesses account culled from social media claimed that over 100 persons, including civilians were killed.

In response to the attack, the Government imposed a 24 hour curfew on the town. That the insurgent group is able to launch attacks on military installations and other public institutions even when the state of emergency is still in place, raises questions about the effectiveness of the government's counter-offensive policy. This is what has instigated this investigation. This study examines Government's counter-offensive policy to curb the threat posed by the Boko Haram insurgents, and why it has not yielded significant success. In doing so therefore, the study also illuminates the path the government should follow to checkmate the insurgency in a sustained manner.

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## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Using various variables, several scholars have tried to intellectualize what drives Boko Haram insurgents to carry out ferocious attacks against other people. Some have used religion to explain their act of violence, by simply arguing that there is something in their religion that influences them to undertake violence on a large scale. However, this argument is weak, because there is no significant relationship between being a Muslim and being

a terrorist. Apart from that, the group attacks both Muslims and Christian (for a detailed discussion on this issue, see Christopher, 2011; Faruk, 2012; Gambell, 2011).

Some others have used political, sociological and psychological variables to explain their action (Herskovit, 2010). The key point is that terrorism is not a mono-causal phenomenon. Rather, it is a multi-causal one. For us, a multi-analytical approach provides powerful insights for understanding terrorism around the globe compared to the religion-focused theory that is mono-causal in nature. For this study, we are more inclined to the multi-layered analysis using political, sociological and psychological variables to explain the activities of Boko Haram insurgents. From our investigation, there are sufficient empirical data which suggest that Boko Haram insurgents are driven by a combination of factors such as poverty, unemployment, bad governance and politics of North-South divide. Other intervening variables such as political rivalry amongst politicians in the Northern states and religion fuel their insurgent activities. In fact, every potential member of the group or sympathizer, have one vex-issue or the other against the government (for details of these vex-issues see Christopher, 2011). These are what predispose them to violence. Our investigation also reveals that apart from the elements above drugs also plays a vital role in the atrocities committed by Boko Haram members. One former member of the group informed us that before an operation, a particular kind of drug believed to be a pain killer is usually administered on everyone going for the operation. According to him, the drug prevents one from feeling pains even from bullets. Other kinds of drugs freely used by members include marijuana, cocaine and heroin. The Boko Haram convert seriously thinks that it is the drugs more than anything else that feeds their sadistic acts.

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## 2. GOVERNMENT'S COUNTER-OFFENSIVE RESPONSE: THE STICK AND CARROT APPROACH

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There is a common consensus in the Nigerian public sphere that Government's response to Boko Haram insurgents has been reactionary rather than proactive. Those who share this sentiment argue that Government usually waits for the insurgents to launch attacks on Churches, Schools, Police Stations and other public institutions, before it reacts.

Between 2009 and 2013, the insurgents have killed more people than the AL Qaeda terrorist organization did in the World Trade Center in the United States of America in 2011, and are still killing, without the government being able to deflate them substantially. It is important to note that though it took the United States government more than 10 years to locate and eliminate Osama Bin Laden, the alleged leader of the Al Qaeda terrorist group;

it ensured that the group was unable to launch new attacks on its soil, while the hunt for Bin Laden lasted. In Nigeria, in spite of the state of emergency imposed by the government, the insurgents are still attacking both security agents and innocent citizens. What this simply signifies is that the government's counter-offensive strategy is not yielding the right results. What are these strategies? Interestingly, no one other than President Goodluck Jonathan has been able to capture vividly Government's response to the threat posed by the insurgent group on the country. In his response to former President Olusegun Obasanjo's letter to him on the state of the nation titled, "Before it is too late" (2013), President Jonathan averred:

...At a stage, almost the entire North-East of Nigeria was under siege by insurgents. Bombings of churches and public buildings in the North and the federal capital became an almost weekly occurrence. Our entire national security apparatus seemed nonplussed and unable to come to grips with the new threat posed by the berthing of terrorism on our shores, but my administration has since brought that unacceptable situation under significant control. We have overhauled our entire national security architecture, improved intelligence gathering, training, funding, logistical support to our armed forces and security collaboration with friendly countries with very visible and positive results (Jonathan, 2013).

Other measures deduced from the President's letter include poverty alleviation programmes, economic development, education and social reforms. The details are the provision of modern basic education schools for the Almajiri and the establishment of nine new federal universities in several Northern states. The government is also aggressively addressing the challenges of poverty through its youth empowerment programme like YouWin, and investing massively in infrastructure to promote economic development. At the height of the insurgency, Government set up an administrative panel to discuss with the insurgents, but they bluntly refused to meet with the government team. The sum of the administrative framework within much of the anti-insurgency policy, which has been implemented, especially within the context of Boko Haram are as follows:

- Troops have been reinforced
- The leadership of the movement has been targeted
- The International Joint Task Force (JTF) has been put in place
- The army has taken over the provision of internal security (declaration of state of emergence)
- A Curfew has been imposed
- GSM services have been banned and restored
- Civilian JTFs have been established
- Road blocks have been set up, and many other measures which the security operatives interviewed in the course of this study refused to disclose, for security reasons.

From our investigation, the most visible and positive result the above measures have yielded, is a significant reduction in the scope, but not in the impact of the insurgents' operations. In terms of scope, the insurgents

activities to a large extent, is now limited to the North-Eastern region of the country. However, the impact of its operations is still being felt across the country.

The reasons for this seeming failure of Government's counter-offensive measures as the findings of this study show are: first, the federal government is using the same methods (force, administrative panel and negotiation) it used in addressing the Niger Delta militancy to tackle the Boko Haram insurgency. This is a wrong approach because both insurgent groups follow different trajectories. The Niger Delta militants had visible leadership and were ever ready to engage the government to drive home their demands. Anyone interested in their struggle could encounter them in both print and electronic media. For instance, their demands were well articulated in the Ogoni Bill of Rights and the Kaima Declaration. Their struggle became violent in reaction to Government's use of violence to suppress their legitimate demands for a clean environment and a fair share of the proceeds from oil resources found on their ancestral land (for a detail discussion on this issue see Suberu, 1996; Akpan, 2000; Ibeanu, 2000). However, like most struggles for material benefits, criminals infiltrated their ranks and introduced oil theft, kidnappings and assassinations. In addition, politicians began to use them to achieve personal goals. They set them up against their political opponents. Nevertheless, at least, we could separate the real militants from the criminals whenever the need arose.

On the contrary, the Boko Haram sect has become ubiquitous group after the death of Mohammed Yusuf, their founder. Not even Abubakar Shekaru, the newly acclaimed leader can claim effective control of the group. According to John (2013), the group does not have a clear structure or evident chain of command and has been called "diffuse". Similarly, Walker (2013) describes the group as a "cell-like structure" facilitating factions and split. According to the Al Jazeera cable news network, the group is divided into three factions, with Ansaru being the most known faction. In addition, its demands are not well articulated. What most analysts claim, are that the group's demands are at best unsubstantiated. For instance, the demand of Islamizing the country is not supported by empirical evidence, unlike the Taliban that establish provincial governments based on Islamic laws, whenever they take control of an area. This is reminiscent of the Afghanistan's Taliban.

What is more worrisome is the fact that the group refused to negotiate with the government when it was offered the opportunity. This means that the group is not ready to dialogue with the government. They are ready to fight until they get what they want. What is it they want? Even Shekaru has not been able to state categorically what they want in his press and video releases. Renowned terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda, Taliban and others always state their demands or motives in clear terms and never shy away from negotiation. Most of the times, It is

government that refuses to negotiate with them because their demands are not usually compatible with democratic tenets and good governance.

In the case of Boko Haram, they are the ones who refuse to negotiate with the government. This gives credence to the conspiracy theory that the group is being used by aggrieved Northern politicians who promised to make the country ungovernable for President Jonathan, following the 2011 elections for usurping the second term of late President Umaru Yar Adua which they believe is meant for Northerners. This is also in a bid to ensure that he does not win a second term if he decides to contest in 2015.

In Nigerian politics, personal interest overrides both party and national interests. From these theorists also comes the argument that the insurgents' attack on Churches and Schools was intended to spark reprisals by Christians against Muslims, in line with the argument of making the country ungovernable for the President. Several other theories abound for and against the motive behind the insurgency, but they are simply academic conjectures that need empirical substantiation.

The second finding of the study indicates that the government seems to be treating the insurgent group like freedom fighters with legitimate demands, rather than as a terrorist group. This explains why the government wants to negotiate with them. However, this approach has also failed to yield any significant result because as Niaz Murtaza (2013) rightly points out, historically, peace negotiations succeed more easily with militant groups pursuing legitimate identity-based grievances. It is easier for government to accept their core demand, which actually strengthens democracy and good governance. From every indication, the demands of the Boko Haram insurgent group are not legitimate and compatible with the country's constitution. This in part explains why they have refused to negotiate with the government. Therefore, Government should stop treating them like freedom fighters.

The third finding shows that there are individuals within and outside the government that are benefitting from the insurgency through contracts and supplies to government. These people encourage the government to treat the insurgents like freedom fighters rather than terrorists, so that they can continue to benefit from policies that prolong the insurgency rather than checkmate it. Closely following this, in the fight against the insurgents, is the role of top Military, Police and other security organizations. There is significant evidence in the data collected for this study which indicates the complicity of the Military, Police and other security agencies in the fight against the insurgents. Our findings on this issue collaborates the submission of military experts who commented on Channels television on the recent attacks on the Air force base in Maiduguri where several people were killed, and two helicopters and three out-of-service planes were destroyed. That

the insurgents were able to launch attacks on military installations even when the state of emergency imposed by the government was still in place raises serious questions of complicity within the rank and file of the military and other security organizations.

In the light of the above, it is our argument that Boko Haram is not the kind of group Government should use administrative measures to tackle. It is also not the kind that should be granted amnesty like some people have suggested. Empirical evidence abound in other climes such as Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Pakistan of terrorist group that uses similar tactics like the Boko Haram and how they are treated by their respective governments.

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### 3. THE WAY FORWARD

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The prognoses of action suggested by the findings of this study are as follows: First, government at all levels should begin to treat Boko Haram like a terrorist group rather than freedom fighters, especially after the rejection of the government's olive branch. Freedom fighters are insurgents whose core demands are capable of addressing social, political and economic injustices. In this case, if Government accepts their demands, democracy is enhanced and good governance is promoted.

Second, the federal government should undertake intensive policing of the country's border, especially the Nigeria-Chad and Nigeria-Cameroon borders in the North-Eastern region of the country. This measure will prevent the insurgents and their foreign supporters from entering or establishing camps within the country's borders.

Third, the saboteurs in the military and other security organizations should be identified and prosecuted. Thereafter, Government should ensure that the insurgents do not carry out more attacks on its shores by taking the fight to the insurgents, like the American government did with the Al Qaeda network. To achieve this, the government should enter into bilateral agreements with the governments of Chad and Cameroon on how to address the insurgency. The multi-national task force should be expanded and strengthened to cover the entire border areas between Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon.

Fourth, the federal government should enlist the support of citizens in the fight against the insurgents by compensating anyone who gives reasonable information to security organizations about the members of the group. Government should also ensure that such persons are protected against insurgent's reprisal attacks. The establishment of the 7 Division of the Nigerian army in Maiduguri is a welcome development.

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### CONCLUSION

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This study discussed the inherent weaknesses in the Government's counter-offensive policy to the threat posed

by the Boko Haram insurgents to the Nigerian state. Available evidence shows that the counter-terrorist policy of the government is defective. The study highlighted the measures the government should undertake to curb the menace of the insurgents such as policing its borders in the North Eastern region effectively, collaborating with countries that it shares borders with, equipping her security organizations and enlisting the support of her citizens in the fight against the insurgents, amongst others. This study concludes that the more effective way of checkmating the threat posed by Boko Haram insurgents to the Nigerian state is for the government to treat the insurgents like terrorists rather than freedom fighters.

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