

FROM CHILD-WANDERING TO GUERRILLA-WARRIORS: ISLAMIC EXTREMISM AND THE BOKO HARAM RECRUITMENT IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes the recruitment strategies being employed by the Boko Haram terrorist organisation, particularly among the children and youths in Northern Nigeria. These young elements are frequently used as fighters, suicide bombers, spies and human shields. It focuses on the Islamic ideology of the sect and possible easy recruitment from the mass of Almajirai in many northern states of the country. Those factors that facilitate their metamorphosis from street begging to warriors are examined in this essay.

Key Words: *Islamic Extremism, Boko Haram, Child-Wandering, War-Mongering, Recruitment*

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Boko Haram is a movement shaped by its Nigerian context and reflecting Nigeria's history of poor governance and extreme poverty in the north. The movement is unique in that it combines a sectarian, radical Islamic agenda with violence (Campbell, 2014). It is an organization that focuses on the elimination of all western education, influence and globalization. The objective of the organization is to establish Sharia law in the state of Nigeria. Boko Haram's progression over the last decade evolved from a fundamentalist movement, to an aggressive insurgency (McFall, 2014). Boko Haram aspires to create an Islamic state in Nigeria, and is willing to kill Christians and Muslims they deem to be insufficiently pious in order to achieve it. It has attacked Nigerian police and security forces, military facilities, churches and schools; carried out bank robberies to finance its activities.

Bombings, abductions and a scorched earth policy of burning down entire villages and killing the inhabitants are some of the violent techniques used by the extremist group. Boko Haram, which is believed to have links with al-Qaeda and its affiliates, like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Somali-based a-Shebaab, is mainly active in north-eastern Nigeria (Olukoya, 2014). These deadly bombings and brazen kidnappings are the hallmarks of the insurgent group, which terrorizes local populations and regularly engages the Nigerian military in bloody combat. The day after the government's announcement of a cease-fire deal in October 2014, at least 60 young women were reported to have been kidnapped by militants in

Adamawa State, just south of the Boko Haram stronghold near Maiduguri. Numerous other attacks that followed have been attributed to the Boko Haram militants (*New York Times*, 2014). With each outbreak of violence the group grows more powerful, confident, and experienced in effective terrorist activity. Boko Haram claims to be working for a purer, Islam-driven society, a contrast to the corrupt patronage of the federal and state governments (Akinfala, 2014:119).

It is noted that the group has a large number of followers or recruits drawn from an expansive pool of Almajirai and other destitute children from neighbouring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger Republics who easily cross into Nigeria's porous borders. According to Onuoha (2012:2-3), these Almajirai live and study in very appalling conditions, thereby making them vulnerable to recruitment into extremist sects like the Boko Haram and Kala Kato, largely through indoctrination. As of 2010, Nigeria hosts about 9.5 million Almajirai, with over 80 per cent concentrated in northern Nigeria. Beside Almajirai that form the bulk of its foot soldiers, the sect also has as members some well-educated, wealthy and influential people such as university lecturers, business contractors and politicians who are the major financiers. Amaraegbu (2013) argues that Boko Haram, on the surface, is viewed by many as part of the unintended consequences of an unjust society that has squandered its oil wealth through decades of corrupt regime and a product of a political leadership that has failed to tackle the fundamental problems of a nation. But at the bottom, it reveals an ultra-secretive, yet hyperactive jihadi group determined to overthrow the government in Nigeria and institute Shari'a law.

Suffice to say that since members of the sect regrouped in April 2010, its attacks have grown in sophistication, intensity and geographical location having taken over some parts of northeastern Nigeria. Meagher (2014:2) observes that the shift to terrorism followed the killing of Yusuf in police custody and the deaths of 700 of his followers in 2009 in a clash with police. Boko Haram returned as a more aggressively terrorist organisation in 2010 under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau.

This essay focuses on this very important section of the group's pool of recruits-Almajirai, because of its peculiar history and religious inclination. It is divided into five sections. The first section provides the background to the study while the second section examines the nexus between Islamic extremism and Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria. Section three analyses the almajiri system in northern Nigeria and section four focuses on the causal-factors for Youth radicalisation and Boko Haram recruitment strategies. Section five concludes the essay.

ISLAMIC EXTREMISM AND BOKO HARAM TERRORISM IN NIGERIA

Violent extremism is at the forefront of security concerns across Africa. From Mali to Somalia and from Sudan to Tanzania, there has been a rise in the number and activity of militant groups. In contrast to Western concerns, these groups are more interested in targeting state,

social and religious institutions that oppose their aim of establishing 'pure' Islamic states than they are in attacking Western interests. This has been happening in Nigeria for the past decade. Nigeria is the continent's most populous country, fastest growing economy and main oil exporter (Gustavo, 2013). Neuman (2010:12), drawing in part from *The Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Political Thought*, asserts that: "Extremism can be used to refer to political ideologies that oppose a society's core values and principles. In the context of liberal democracies this could be applied to any ideology that advocates racial or religious supremacy and/or opposes the core principles of democracy and universal human rights. The term can also be used to describe the methods through which political actors attempt to realise their aims, that is, by using means that 'show disregard for the life, liberty, and human rights of others. For terrorism, the Global Terrorism Index (2014) defines it as "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation".

According to Danjibo (2009:5), the earliest known sects in Islam are perhaps the Sunni and the Shi'a (Shiites). Whereas the Sunni believe in integrating religion and society by adopting religion to state structures, the Shiites believe in religious Puritanism such that Islam must be practiced in its pure form and must be guarded from being adulterated by the society. Secondly, there is also a controversy over the origin of their caliphs (representatives of the Prophet of Islam). Sunni-based terrorism, whether in Africa or the Middle East, has principally resulted from warped interpretations of religious "jihad" by poorly educated and ideologically motivated clerics and recruiters following Salafi/Wahhabi ideology. These teachings invariably begin with the premise that Muslims and non-Muslims who disagree with these interpretations are "unbelievers" or "kafir" and "apostates" who must be killed. Radical and terrorist recruiters have used the Osama bin Ladin message to recruit young men — and women — to do "jihad." Simply stated, Islam is under attack by its "enemies," and Muslims, therefore, must wage a "jihad" against these "enemies" by all means possible (Nakhleh, 2014).

Since the 19th century, Islam in the northern regions of Nigeria has been dominated by the Sokoto caliphate, an institution which remains the backbone of Nigerian Islam to this day. However, the balance of power between the Borno-dominated areas in the Northeast and the Sokoto caliphate domains has also been a constant challenge in Nigerian politics (Schwartz, 2010). The region also has a long tradition of Islamic fundamentalism, but it has generally been relatively non-political, focusing on withdrawal from society to study the Quran and leading a pure, religious life. However, there have also been instances of violent Islamist uprisings against the state, such as the jihad of Dan Fodio in the 19th century, and the Maitatsine uprisings in the 1970s and 1980s (Ofstedal, 2013:10).

The rapid growth of Islamic and Christian revivalism in the 1970s laid the foundation for contemporary radicalism in northern Nigeria. The puritanical tendency among the adherents of

both religions in northern Nigeria gave rise to increasingly zealous political actors. The Iranian revolution of 1979, which led to the emergence of an Islamic government, inspired many northern Nigerian Muslims. Radical Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brothers, later renamed the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, led by Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky of Kaduna State, introduced a militant pro-Iranian Shiite version of Islam into northern Nigeria in the 1980s (Sodipo, 2013:3). Also, previous research indicates the writings of Ibn Taymiyyah, a 14th century theologian who stressed the political authority of Islamic law, now underpin Boko Haram's ideology, among other Islamist movements in Nigeria (Mamdani, 1996 cited in Eveslage, 2013). This ideology, which Boko Haram subscribes to, has been used to criticise the validity of a secular state, non-Muslim state representation and corrupt Islamic leaders, favoring a return to Islamic authority in politics. In this context, a Sharia law-governed state has become an alternative to secular Nigeria, creating a basis for radical groups like Boko Haram to form and gather support, mainly from those who view the government as corrupt and ineffective (Eveslage, 2013).

Against the background of state failure, poverty and feelings of humiliation, the radical jihadist group Boko Haram emerged with the aim of overthrowing the government of Nigeria and establishing an Islamic state in the whole of the country. Boko Haram is rooted in the Islamic Yusufiyya sect, which is named after its founder Mohamed Yusuf. The sect started in Maiduguri, the capital of the federal state of Borno in the north-eastern part of Nigeria. In 2004, the group moved to Kanamma in the federal state of Yobe, close to the border with Niger. Since that time, Boko Haram has had a base there from which it organises its assaults (Brinkel and Ait-Hida, 2012)

Pérouse de Montclos (2014:142) argues that the real novelty of the sect in Nigeria is to resort to suicide attacks and terrorist techniques that follow (but presumably do not obey) a global jihadist model. In this logic, targeting Christian communities makes sense because it creates panic and challenges the secularity of the state, especially regarding freedom of religion. To get a national audience despite being based in the periphery of Nigeria, Boko Haram plays with the fears of southerners regarding forced conversion, the Shariah, and the jihad of Usman dan Fodio in the nineteenth century. This is rather easy in a society which often perceives itself as being divided between a Muslim North and a Christian South.

THE ALMAJIRI SYSTEM AS SOCIAL LABORATORY FOR RECRUITS?

Several scholars attribute the rise of widespread demand for religious education, and thus the proliferation of Almajirci, to the importance the reformist government of Usman dan Fodio attached to the religious education of the population and the substantial support Qur'anic schools received from both the community and the state (Lubeck 1985; Khalid 1997; NCWD 2001 cited in Hoechner, 2013). Almajirci, the process of being an almajiri has its root in the Arabic word Al- Muhajirun meaning those who migrate (Ogunkan, 2011:129). Although originating from the

term Hijra, referring to the Prophet Mohammad's migration from Medina to Mecca, and initially reflective of the movement of Tsangaya students in search of knowledge, the term today has become synonymous with begging. On moving to the cities, many of the students within the Tsangaya system start to beg for survival. These children then become vulnerable to crime and other hazards on the streets of a big city. Changing socio-economic conditions have increased their vulnerability (Bano, 2008:11).

This era in Islamic history inspired the Almajiri system in Northern Nigeria over a century ago, where parents entrust their children into the custody of Mallams (Quranic teachers) to memorise the holy book. Normally, the Mallam or Islamic teacher is given a number of children to be tutored in Islamic knowledge. He moves these children away to a distant community in the urban centre. Thus, with the use of the whip and religious indoctrination by the Mallam, assisted by the old pupils, the Almajirai are made to quickly adjust to the new realities of their lives. The Almajiri, who is equipped with a bowl and clad in dirty clothing, moves around begging for alms and food on the streets (Aminu, 2012). For much of the remaining time, they engage in a plethora of different activities to secure their livelihoods. While students of rural schools mainly farm with their teachers, students in urban areas beg for food/money in the neighbourhood or on the streets, work as household helps, or, when older, wash clothes, carry loads and engage in petty trading. While many students return home at least once a year (for the major holidays or to help their parents farm), others do not see their parents for years. Some teachers migrate with their schools following seasonal agricultural patterns (Hoechner, 2013).

The Almajiri system of education is a form of religious instruction in which learning is limited to memorising the Koran; girls are not allowed and students are frequently exposed to the teaching of radical clerics. These children are proving to be a serious menace to society. They are sometimes believed to be the cannon fodder in the ethno-religious and communal clashes that have become a recurring decimal in the region. As noted by Parker (2012), in cities across northern Nigeria, the scale of the problem is apparent. Young boys swarm around cars stopped in traffic looking for alms or scraps of food. Kids with painful skin diseases and open sores on their heads and hands stare into car windows. Accidents, even fatalities, are common. In addition to destitution is a polygamous society that can produce dozens of children in a single family and parents, with little means to feed them, willingly send their offspring to *tsangayas*, often hundreds of miles away in neighboring states or even countries. Hoechner (2014:67) notes that the almajiri schools are largely beyond the state's purview and regulatory interventions, the teacher receiving no salary but living off the support given by the local community, the alms given in exchange for his spiritual services, the contributions of his students, and supplementary income-generating activities. Most teachers are not formally certified but are themselves products of the almajiri system.

This system of education has been rooted in northern Nigeria since long before British colonialism in the 19th century. It is eulogised for having produced regional leaders, religious reformers and clerics, administrators and scholars across northern Nigeria. The schools were typically maintained by the communities where they were located and, in return for the education and care provided by the schools, almajiri students would contribute to the community with simple tasks, such as weaving, gardening and sewing (Gustavo, 2013). The *system* has evolved over the years mainly due to the changing economic circumstances. But after the British introduced western education, the system collapsed and the funding was abolished (Ihuu-Maduenyi, 2008:139). However, the social significance of the Almajiri schools has long been a topic of debate in Nigeria. Many Muslims regard the schools as an important element of their religious identity. Critics, especially from abroad, say the young Almajiri pupils who wander through the streets and seek religious orientation are ideal recruits for extremists (Adrian Kriesch and Jan-Philip, 2014).

CAUSAL FACTORS FOR RADICALISATION AND BOKO HARAM RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

A *Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict* report noted that the forced recruitment of young men and children has become commonplace. Insurgents have been taking men of fighting age from occupied areas, leaving those towns inhabited only by the old. The recruitment push is a sign not of Boko Haram's weakness, but of a movement in its most ambitious and, arguably, successful phase (Pearson, 2014). Forest (2012:8) argues that any potential triggers are far more likely to enhance a terrorist organization's ideological resonance when the structural conditions described earlier are already a source of grievances. A trigger could also be an event that leads to new opportunities for terrorism. For example, a sudden regime change may create an anarchic environment in which groups find greater freedom to obtain weapons and conduct criminal and violent activity. Terrorist groups will usually seize any opportunity to capitalize on events from which they could benefit strategically, tactically, or operationally.

A cursory look at the situation in Northern Nigeria shows that youth radicalization is at the centre of the current crisis. Radicalization by definition is a process that leads to a situation in which a person or group of persons imbibe and adopt extreme social, religious and political views. At the stage of final or complete radicalization, such individuals totally reject the status quo and seek to undermine any other expression contrary to theirs (Emerson. 2004 cited in Okai, 2014:220). It is both a mental and emotional process that prepares and motivates an individual to pursue violent behaviour (Wilner and Dubouloz, 2010:38). The notion of the sect's core ideology, that western education is dogmatically wrong, is highlighted through the abductions and raids of private and public schools. They reject globalization and colonization, a further criticism of western ideologies. The basis of their campaign can be understood through the meaning of their name. Boko Haram is the Hausa translation of "Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad", which in Arabic means "People of the Profit for Teaching and Jihad",

loosely translating to “Western Education is Sin (McFall, 2014). According to Boko Haram rhetoric, a secular nation promotes idolatry, i.e. state worship. The pledge of allegiance to the flag and singing of the national anthem are manifestations of such idolatry and hence punishable by death. For Boko Haram, the state is a nest of corruption that exploits the poor. The state is formed and sustained by Western values and education, both of which are against the will of Allah (Campbell, 2014).

Most Nigerians are poorer today than they were at independence in 1960, victims of the resource curse and rampant, entrenched corruption. Agriculture, once the economy’s mainstay is struggling. In many parts of the country, the government is unable to provide security, good roads, water, health, reliable power and education. The situation is particularly dire in the far north (ICG, 2014:i). Only 28% of children in the northern state of Borno attend school, according to Nigerian government statistics, and the literacy rate in the north is 32% compared with the 68% national average. Nigeria's poverty rate grew from 55% in 2004 to 61% in 2010, largely because of the collapse of the northern economy (Dixon, 2014).

When a government fails to adhere to the conventional social contract between government and the governed, its citizens become disenchanting and seek the power to force change. This, in turn, has resulted in a variety of revolutionary movements throughout history. Corrupt governments seek to maintain and increase their power over others and over resources by any means necessary, while the powerless see the corruption and look for ways to combat it—even through violent acts of terrorism, as that may be perceived as their only form of recourse (Forest, 2012:6). Frustration and alienation drive many to join “self-help” ethnic, religious, community or civic groups, some of which are hostile to the state. It is in this environment that the group called Boko Haram emerged. It is an Islamic sect that believes corrupt, false Muslims control northern Nigeria. The group and fellow travelers want to remedy this by establishing an Islamic state in the north with strict adherence to Islamic law (ICG, 2014:i).

Loimeier (2012:141), drawing from Lubeck and Höchner, notes that Muslim religious scholars, the Nigerian press, and Western observers and academics in the 80s saw a connection between Maitatsine and the Almajirai and that similar allegations have been made in the context of the rise of the Boko Haram movement. In cities like Kano and Kaduna, many Almajirai have graduated into Yandaba, adolescent groups that once socialised teenagers into adulthood but have in many cases become gangs. In 2005, the National Council for the Welfare of the Destitute estimated there were seven million Almajiri children in northern Nigeria (ICG, 2014:4). In spite of the establishment of new Almajiri schools in northern part of the country, it is evident that “the youngsters' only schooling comes from threadbare clerics for whom they recite the Koran a few hours a day. And then they go out and beg for food. Such conditions have made the *Almajirai* prime fodder for recruitment by Boko Haram” (Dixon, 2014). All efforts to address the

menace of Almajiri, including the federal government intervention to domesticate them and integrate them into society, are more or less not proving effective.

Both Boko Haram and the Civilian Joint Task Force (“Civilian JTF”), a self-defense militia formed in mid-2013 in Borno’s State capital of Maiduguri, recruit children for spying and, at times, participation in hostilities. Boko Haram has recruited children through abduction, threatening children’s families, and incentivizing boys and young men to join the group by providing them with monetary compensation. Security forces often detain children who are suspected or found to be members of Boko Haram. These arrests sometimes take place during raids on Boko Haram camps, but also occur arbitrarily, during mass arrests of civilians based on seemingly weak intelligence. Children affiliated with the conflict are often held incommunicado, in unofficial military detention facilities known for their mistreatment of detainees (Watchlist, 2014:5).

The militants use untrained boys to acquire intelligence and carry out the first wave of attacks on villages or barracks. When they gain experience, they can be part of the second wave designed to overwhelm the security forces after the first wave weakens their positions and morale (Zenn, 2014). However, Boko Haram has admitted to sending its members to train with AQIM and al Shabaab terrorist organizations. During training with AQIM, Boko Haram members mastered the skills of bomb making practices. Prior to the United Nations building attack and perhaps in preparation for it, Boko Haram militants also attended al Shabaab owned training camps in Somalia. Members were taught how to construct and detonate improvised exploding devices, as well as employ the use of suicide bombers, which until participating in the training camps, Boko Haram did not engage such practices (Epperson 2012 cited in Connell, 2012:89).

While poverty and corruption have created a fertile recruiting ground for Boko Haram, the constant mutation and evolution of the sect has frustrated any clear assessment of its objectives and membership. The shift to violent extremism since 2010 has been accompanied by changes in both its objectives and recruitment tactics, as well as by a fragmentation of the group itself (Meagher, 2014:2). In its early transformative years to an extremist movement, the Boko Haram under Yusuf’s leadership strove for self-exclusion of its members from the mainstream corrupt society by living in areas outside or far away from society in order to intellectualise and radicalise the revolutionary process that would ultimately lead to violent overthrow of the Nigerian state. By disassociating from the large society, members became more indoctrinated by the ideologues who inculcated in them anti-secular ideologies (Onuoha, 2012:2).

In the recruitment and cohesion of members of Boko Haram, religion plays a significant role. Members behave as if they belong to a religious sect. They usually pray in their own mosques and do not mingle with the local population. They can be recognised by their long

beards and black headdresses. However, their first and foremost common characteristic is adherence to a specific form of radical Islam. The members see themselves as Muslims, who in their own opinion preach the only true interpretation of their religion (Brinkel and Ait-Hida, 2012:12). Zenn (2012) argues that some Boko Haram members may have been radicalized by Nigerian imams. These imams create acceptance in mainstream society for many of the issues that Boko Haram and Ansaru use to appeal to recruits. Indeed, Boko Haram has attacked polio workers and a media agency that associated the Prophet Muhammad with beauty queens; while Ansaru attacked Nigerian troops preparing to deploy to Mali. Both Boko Haram and Ansaru have taken advantage of anti-American and anti-Western sentiment, and have adopted al-Qaeda's ideology in their public relations strategy. Abubakar Shekau, the reputed leader of Boko Haram, specifically mentioned he would respond to the "Innocence of Muslims," an anti-Islamic film that caused violent protests throughout the Muslim world in September 2012.

CONCLUSION

It is observed that illiteracy, extreme poverty, misinterpretation of religious books by leaders, poor parental guidance all act as contributing factors for the involvement of the youth in violent extremism once they are radicalised (Bawa, 2014:67). It is evident in some countries that poverty and socio-political exclusion have given rise to self-determination movements and prolonged insurgencies. Nigeria is an example of this trajectory. The Nigerian government has, at various times, promised the domestic and international publics that the terrorism threat in the country will soon be a thing of the past. Boko Haram insurgency represents an immediate threat to Nigeria's territorial integrity and to the lives and security of those in the northeast region. It also represents a major threat to the future of a whole generation of boys and girls. Indeed, the nature of attacks attributed to Boko Haram suggests that the group has grown rapidly in confidence, capability and coordination.

Pul (2014) argues that "the ability of Boko Haram to defy the power of the Nigerian state and survive to prosecute its war sets up a model that may repeat itself in countries with enclave religious populations that have a collective sense of marginalization and victimhood". Unless Nigeria and its partners can address the growing radicalization of Nigeria's youth and the festering ethno-religious tensions across the country, many poor and marginalized northern Nigerians will continue to gravitate toward radical Islamist groups, turning the north into a hub of insecurity. This, in turn, has security and economic implications for the broader region and international partners (Sodipo, 2013).

There is an assumption that Boko Haram may continue to commit acts of terrorism and sectarian violence due to their ideological belief, current ability to gain funding, organizational structure, government deficits, ineffective counter-measures by the Nigerian government, economic marginality and ability to recruit (Soloman, 2012 cited in Blanquart, 2012). Mahmood

(2013) affirms that a multitude of cultural, social, and political factors define Boko Haram's operating environment. Poor government leadership and corruption have contributed to the socio-economic situation, and generate an environment lacking viable job prospects for large numbers of youth. The Nigerian government, according to Margon (2014), has failed to adequately address the problem of Boko Haram, primarily because it is relying solely on a hard-nosed, military approach instead of crafting a more wide-ranging strategy to address some of the catalysts of Boko Haram's existence: rampant corruption, widespread poverty and systemic impunity for abuses. It is unquestionable and ultimately true that humankind itself is the insurmountable barrier in the accomplishment of peace, since alternatives of war and peace, of progress and regress, of construction and destruction are matters of human choice and not historical processes.

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