

JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY  
RICE UNIVERSITY

# BOKO HARAM: WHOSE ISLAMIC STATE?

BY

MICHAEL NWANKPA

VISITING SCHOLAR  
JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY  
RICE UNIVERSITY

MAY 1, 2015

THIS PAPER WAS WRITTEN BY A RESEARCHER WHO PARTICIPATED IN A BAKER INSTITUTE RESEARCH PROJECT. WHEREVER FEASIBLE, PAPERS ARE REVIEWED BY OUTSIDE EXPERTS BEFORE THEY ARE RELEASED. HOWEVER, THE RESEARCH AND VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THIS PAPER ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL RESEARCHER, AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY.

© 2015 BY THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY OF RICE UNIVERSITY

THIS MATERIAL MAY BE QUOTED OR REPRODUCED WITHOUT PRIOR PERMISSION,  
PROVIDED APPROPRIATE CREDIT IS GIVEN TO THE AUTHOR AND  
THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to express profound gratitude to Abdulbasit Kassim for his comments on the draft paper, and to Professor Martin Shaw and Professor David Cook for reviewing this paper and helping bring it to its current form.

## **Executive Summary**

Boko Haram may be reaching its bitter end as the Nigerian military, with the support of Niger, Cameroon, and Chad, plans a massive ground invasion of the insurgents' long-controlled safe zone, the Sambisa Forest. The regional Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) has the upper hand in this clash, as Boko Haram is running out of steam, having been subjected to constant aerial bombardment since February. Outgoing Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan has refused the offer of the United Nations to send troops, expressing confidence in the MNJTF's ability to rout Boko Haram before the May 29 handover to the new president. This is the right decision, as any direct involvement of the United States and its European allies, especially France, would only play into the hands of the insurgents and help broaden the international appeal of Boko Haram to other jihadist groups. However, the US can aid the counterterrorism efforts of the MNJTF by contributing to the pool of UN-sourced special funds for the task force and providing enhanced counterterrorism training, as well as intelligence and communication support, to the Nigerian forces and their partners. However, Boko Haram remains deadly as long as sharia is the precondition for political and economic gains to the Muslim north. The Boko Haram insurgency, therefore, is better understood within the dichotomous discourse of exclusion/inclusion and access/non-access to power. In this case, Boko Haram's self-declared goal of establishing a sharia state offers a partial truth.

## **Introduction**

In August 2014, one month after the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) declared an Islamic caliphate, the Jama'atul Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad ("People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad")—popularly known as Boko Haram—declared its own Islamic state. Between July 2014 and March 2015, Boko Haram controlled 70 percent of the state of Borno in Nigeria (a key state in the group's northeast stronghold) and conducted two major attacks on its capital city, Maiduguri. However, these attacks were repelled by the Nigerian military, denying Abubakar Shekau (the ruthless leader of Boko Haram who took over from Mohammed Yusuf, the slain founder of the group) and his men full control over Borno. Boko Haram also controlled several towns in the states of Yobe and Adamawa. The

whole area controlled by Boko Haram as of January 2015 consisted of about 20,000 square miles, a land mass equal to the size of Belgium.<sup>1</sup>

The Nigerian military, bolstered by the African Union–backed regional force of 7,500 troops from Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) countries—Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, and the Republic of Benin—has recorded some substantial success in its counterterrorism effort against Boko Haram.<sup>2</sup> Their victories include recovering most of the Boko Haram–occupied area and reclaiming Gwoza, the so-called caliphate’s capital, a day before Nigeria’s 2015 presidential election.<sup>3</sup> The military killed hundreds of the insurgents, recovered large numbers of weapons, and discovered terrorist bomb-making factories in Yobe on March 13 and in Gwoza on March 30.

The Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) is credited for the recent victories against Boko Haram, an assessment that overshadows the Nigerian military’s prior success. Shortly before the MNJTF formally began operation in early March 2015,<sup>4</sup> the Nigerian military had reclaimed about 10 towns in the state of Adamawa and several others in the state of Borno. But the conflicting reports on areas retaken or still under the insurgents’ control and the contested Baga casualty figures,<sup>5</sup> among many other irregularities, understated the military’s success.

The counterterrorism efforts of the Nigerian military were also undercut by the general suspicion that the heightened military action in the weeks leading to an important general election was motivated by the political opportunism of President Jonathan’s administration. Although President Jonathan lost the election, he had hoped the recent gains made against Boko Haram

---

<sup>1</sup> David Blair, “Boko Haram is now a mini-Islamic State, with its own territory,” *The Telegraph*, January 10, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/nigeria/11337722/Boko-Haram-is-now-a-mini-Islamic-State-with-its-own-territory.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The regional force was adopted by the heads of state at the 484th meeting of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU) on January 29, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> The border town between Nigeria and Cameroon was an ideal capital for Boko Haram because of its rocky and hilly nature and because of Mount Mandara, which provides a natural fortress for the insurgents with several channels of caves and tunnels leading to it.

<sup>4</sup> The Peace and Security Council of the AU approved the MNJTF operational documents and the announcement of 8,700 troops from the LCBC and Benin on March 6, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> The Baga massacre is one of the deadliest Boko Haram attacks with an estimated death toll of 2,000. The massacre lasted four days, January 3–7, 2015, after Boko Haram ransacked the MNJTF military barracks in the town. The Nigerian army disputes Amnesty International’s death toll of 2,000 and instead puts the number at 150.

would guarantee him victory.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the election campaigns of both President Jonathan and his opponent President-elect Muhammad Buhari, a retired general, were framed largely around the Boko Haram discourse.<sup>7</sup> But what does defeating Boko Haram really entail, and how should the recent success of the MNJTF be measured?

The MNJTF's success so far—wresting lands from Boko Haram's control and killing a number of insurgents—remains only a partial victory as long as many of the 276<sup>8</sup> Chibok school girls abducted by Boko Haram in April 2014 are still missing. This is just a fraction of the number of women and girls that Boko Haram has kidnapped since the start of 2014. The total number is estimated at 2,000, excluding boys and men.<sup>9</sup> Some of these abductees are likely to be among the casualties of Boko Haram. Many lives have been lost, and many more displaced. There is a symbolic sense of betrayal among members of the community, among Christians who feel that their Muslim neighbors betrayed them to Boko Haram,<sup>10</sup> and a sense of state betrayal. It will definitely take more than regaining land control and killing hundreds of insurgents to win the war against Boko Haram.

The defeat of Boko Haram is unlikely to be successful until the core leadership of the insurgency is either apprehended or killed, as it is very likely that Shekau and his ideologically driven commanders would rather die than surrender. The Nigeria Joint Task Force (JTF), a special force formed in 2011 comprising the military, navy, police, air force, secret service, and other security agencies, had a short-lived victory against Boko Haram in 2012 with the arrest and murder of several senior Boko Haram commanders.<sup>11</sup> In light of the 2004 failed amnesty offered to the Niger Delta militants by then-President Olusegun Obasanjo, in addition to the several botched negotiation attempts with Boko Haram, Shekau and his core commanders must be apprehended

---

<sup>6</sup> “Boko Haram ‘getting weaker’ says Nigeria President Goodluck Jonathan,” by Will Ross, *BBC*, March 20, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31979292>.

<sup>7</sup> President-elect Buhari had claimed that, if elected, he would defeat Boko Haram within a couple of weeks.

<sup>8</sup> There is no consensus on the number of Chibok girls abducted by Boko Haram, but 276 is commonly cited.

<sup>9</sup> Amnesty International, *Our Job is to Shoot, Slaughter and Kill: Boko Haram's Reign of Terror in North-East Nigeria* (London: Amnesty International, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> International Crisis Group, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency*, Africa Report No. 216 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2014).

(or killed if they resist arrest) before a full process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration commences.

Undeniably, Boko Haram had set upon establishing an Islamic state with potential expansion into northern Cameroon, Niger, and Chad, but in retrospect, its territorial control in northeast Nigeria and attacks in Cameroon and Chad were premature since it does not yet have the administrative capacity nor the military power to control the region. Boko Haram's declaration of a caliphate in August 2014 shows that it seeks inspiration from ISIS; however, it lacks the propagandistic and technical resourcefulness of ISIS. But, just as ISIS remains deadly despite suffering setbacks,<sup>12</sup> Boko Haram's recent losses make it no less dangerous. It is important to understand the ideological foundation of this insurgency for there to be a lasting victory over Boko Haram and any future Islamic insurrection in the region.

### **Understanding the Ideological and Religious Context for Boko Haram**

There is an apparent internal crisis within the Muslim leadership in the north of Nigeria, with several Muslim groups fighting for dominance. The Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) under the leadership of the Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar III, sets itself up as the dominant spiritual body for all Muslims in Nigeria with a goal familiar to Boko Haram's—to "promote the continued application of sharia in Nigeria and the observance of Islamic morality [and] ensure that the ideals of Islam as laid down in the glorious Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet Muhammad are adhered to by all Muslims in Nigeria."<sup>13</sup> The Muslim leadership in northern Nigeria, however, supports the practice of sharia within the existing framework of the Nigerian state.

---

<sup>12</sup> ISIS lost about 13,500 of the 55,000 square kilometers of land it controlled in northern and western Iraq, which is 25 percent of the total area it controlled. Luis Martinez, "ISIS Has Lost 25 Percent of Territory It Once Held in Iraq, US Says," *ABC News*, March 13, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/isis-lost-25-percent-territory-held-iraq-us/story?id=29625568>.

<sup>13</sup> "Objectives," Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, accessed April 29, 2015, <http://www.nscia.com.ng/index.php/about-us/objectives>.

Boko Haram rejects the spiritual authority of the sultan. It is therefore an example of “socio-revolutionary Islamism”<sup>14</sup> in northern Nigeria that can be traced to the 19th-century jihad of Sheikh Usman Dan Fodio. Dan Fodio’s jihad provides a rallying point of political and religious legitimization for many Islamic activist groups in northern Nigeria, including both conservative (traditional Sufi Brotherhood) and insurgent groups (Boko Haram). For instance, Abubakar Shekau, the leader of Boko Haram, said in one of his most recent videos released on February 17, 2015: “...Even some of your religious scholars did not remember or think how the kingdom of Sheikh Usman Ibn Fodio was, and how he ruled his land by following the Qur’an.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, Shekau presents himself as the authentic purveyor of the true Islamic religion as he waves the olive branch to “whomever that comes and repents to Allah,” while promising to “enslave and sell to the market he who supports democracy.”<sup>16</sup>

Shekau, the self-styled imam of Boko Haram, presents himself and his group as the ultimate champion in the “symbolic struggle over the power to produce and impose the legitimate vision of the world.”<sup>17</sup> He invokes the spirit of Dan Fodio in constructing a social reality or vision that claims conformity to fundamental Islamic principles. Boko Haram, as such, represents a phase in the historical trend of Islamic reforms in northern Nigeria. It also follows the tradition of the much more popular Yan Izala, a Salafi-Wahhabist reform movement that emerged in the 1970s to challenge the traditional authority and syncretism of the Sufi Brotherhood and advocate a return to Islamic fundamental sources, and the Maitatsine, an Islamic revolutionary force that sparked uprisings in the early 1980s, contesting the authority and state control of a perceived illegitimate regime.<sup>18</sup>

Boko Haram and all the older Islamist groups share a common ideology—their challenge of conservative Muslim authority and propensity for violence. Ultimately, resistance to Western

---

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>15</sup> “Boko Haram Leader Abubakar Shekau Threatens Nigerian Elections,” YouTube video, posted by “Saharatv,” February 18, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfBXdcUy\\_II](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfBXdcUy_II).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Michael John Watts, “Capitalisms, Crises, and Cultures I: Notes toward a Totality of Fragments,” in *Reworking Modernity: Capitalism and Symbolic Discontent*, ed. Allan Pred and Michael John Watts (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



influence, crucial to explaining the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, is most likely secondary to the internal struggles for control of religious interpretations between dominant and dissenting religious institutions and networks.

*Boko Haram: The New Face of Islamic Fundamentalism in Northern Nigeria*

Boko Haram's fundamentalism, however, is different from the aforementioned groups. It emerged from the eventual fragmentation of the Izala movement but shows a radicalism that is different from Izala's moderate Salafism. While Izala accommodates Western education, seeing it as an expedient tool to level the social, economic, and political inequality between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, Boko Haram rejects Western education. However, Izala and Boko Haram agree on some fundamental Salafi tenets, such as the need to establish sharia. Professor Christoph Schuck rightly observes that the different Islamic groups are not separated by goals, but by the methodology they adopt to achieve their goals.<sup>19</sup>

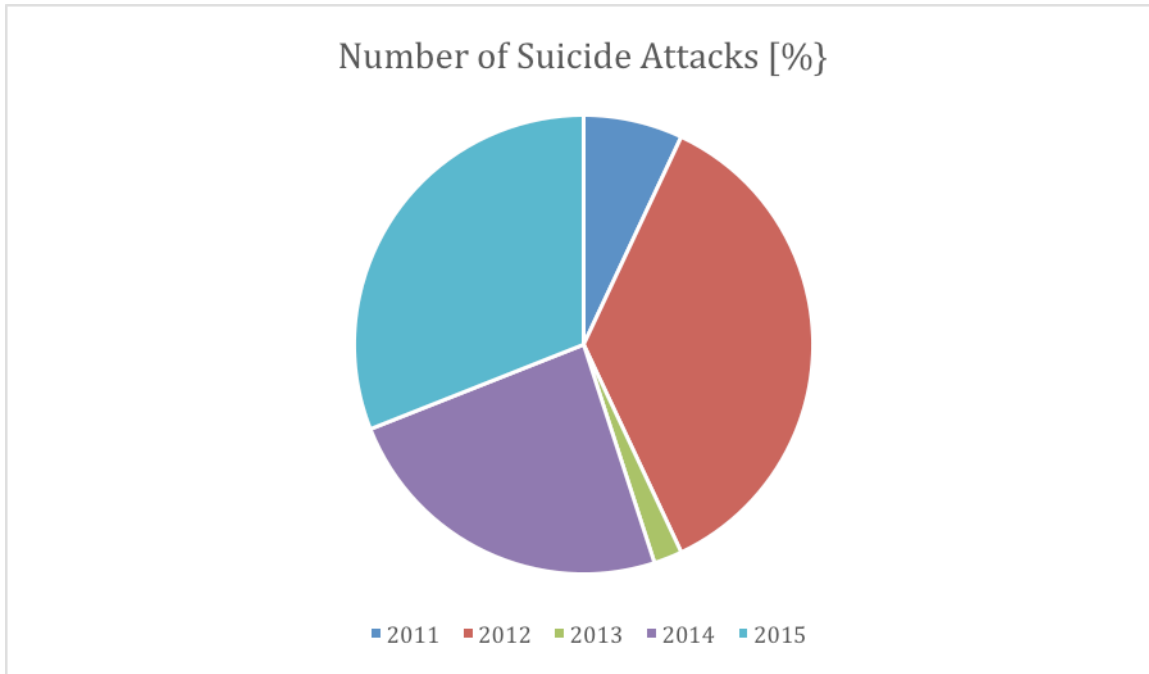
*Al Qaeda in Nigeria? Boko Haram and Suicide Missions*

Starting in 2011, a new trend emerged, not only in Boko Haram's strategy but also in other Islamic uprisings in the region: the use of suicide bombing. The first Boko Haram suicide mission (and the first in Nigeria's entire history) happened on June 16, 2011, when a suicide attacker detonated his bomb-laden car at the gates of the national police headquarters in Abuja, killing himself and a traffic policeman. Two months later, on August 26, 2011, Boko Haram carried out another suicide car bombing at the United Nation building in Abuja, killing 23 people. Boko Haram has now carried out a total of 58 (with a margin of error of  $\pm 0.5$ ) suicide bombings in the span of five years (2011-2015), responsible for about 5 percent of the total number of Boko Haram-related deaths.<sup>20</sup> The following graph shows the percentage of suicide attacks that happened in each year, from 2011 to 2015.

---

<sup>19</sup> Christoph Schuck, "A Conceptual Framework of Sunni Islamism," *Politics, Religion and Ideology* 14, no. 4 (2013): 485–506.

<sup>20</sup> The data and statistics were compiled by the author from several online and print publications.



There were four suicide bombings in the first year, with 32 deaths and many more casualties. The number of suicide bombings rose significantly to 21 in the following year, with an approximate death toll of 325, a record high (the actual number may be higher). In 2013, there was a noticeable reduction in Boko Haram’s use of suicide bomb tactics. The only major suicide bombing that year happened in Kano on March 18, when three suicide bombers, targeting travellers (mostly Christians and Igbos, people from the southeast of Nigeria) in a popular bus terminus, rammed their explosive-laden Volkswagen Golf car onto one of the buses, killing 41 people and wounding 44. The reason for the decline in suicide bomb attacks may be connected to the brief period of victory that the Nigerian Joint Task Force (JTF) enjoyed from late 2012 to 2013, when Boko Haram’s expansion to areas outside its northeast base was curtailed and pushed back to the outskirts of Maiduguri.

However, Boko Haram enjoyed a successful campaign of terror in 2014, unleashing its most deadly attacks in this year. In the first quarter of 2014, an estimated 1,500 people were killed in Boko Haram–related violence.<sup>21</sup> In April 2014, the group carried out the infamous kidnapping of 276 girls who were students at a boarding school in the town of Chibok in Borno. Boko Haram’s

<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International, *Nigeria: More than 1,500 Killed in Armed Conflict in North-Eastern Nigeria in Early 2014*, London: Amnesty International, 2014).

suicide missions took on a new dimension with the first attack by a female bomber on June 8, 2014, when a middle-aged woman carried out a suicide bomb attack on military barracks in northeast state of Gombe, killing herself and a soldier. One month later, there was a multiple suicide bomb attack in the northwest state of Kano involving three females and a male bomber. The subsequent increase in Boko Haram's use of female bombers included girls allegedly as young as 10 years old. Interestingly, 10 out of the 14 suicide bomb attacks recorded in 2014 were carried out by females, two by males, and the gender of the other two bombers was unknown. The number of deaths resulting from the suicide attacks in 2014 is roughly 256.<sup>22</sup>

Boko Haram's use of suicide bombing escalated in 2015, increasing in both frequency and intensity and showing a steady use of girls allegedly below the age of 12. There have been 18 suicide bomb attacks at the time of writing, and all these happened in just three months (January–March), resulting in 211 deaths. Again, 12 out of the 18 attacks were carried out by females of different ages, most by teenage girls. On January 10, 2015, a female child bomber as young as 10 years old blew herself up in a major market in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno, killing 20 people. A similar incident happened the next day in Potiskum, in the state of Yobe, when two girls no older than 10 years old carried out suicide bomb attacks in an open market, killing 16 people. Additionally, two suicide bomb attacks occurred outside Nigeria, in the town of Diffa in the Republic of Niger on February 8 and February 11, 2015. The February 11 attack involved two female suicide bombers with no other casualties besides the bombers, while the earlier attack, involving a boy, is being contested as a suicide or ordinary bomb attack.

The gender dynamics in Boko Haram's operations—particularly suicide missions—represent, on one hand, a tactical shift or practical exigency: the use of women guarantees a greater chance of success since women are less scrutinized by security operatives.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, it signals an ideological orientation that is borrowed from a number of sources, including religious and social movements. Female bombers were used by the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka as well as Al

---

<sup>22</sup> See note 20.

<sup>23</sup> Freedom C. Onuoha and Temilola A. George, *Boko Haram's Use of Female Suicide Bombing in Nigeria*, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, March 18, 2015, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2015/03/2015317105714685938.htm>; Ania Skinner, "The Rising Trend of Female Suicide Bombers in Nigeria," *Fund for Peace – Global Square Blog*, March 28, 2015, <http://library.fundforpeace.org/blog-20150328-nigeriawomenbombers>.

Qaeda in Iraq and other terrorist groups in Lebanon and Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. It is therefore not unusual for a Salafi-jihadi group such as Boko Haram to use female suicide bombers. What is rather particularly striking is the use of girls as young as 10 years old. But placed within a broader context of child-related violence, the instrumental use of young boys and girls as a tool of war is not new. Child soldiers (boys and girls alike) have been used by both government and rebel forces in many of African civil wars and guerrilla warfare, including places like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia, South Sudan, and Rwanda. There was also a preponderance of child soldiers in the sectarian war between the Muslim Seleka rebels and the largely Christian anti-balaka militia in the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2014.<sup>24</sup>

However, this phenomenon is not unique to Africa. During the Iranian Revolution in 1979, children were employed as human bombs. As many as 1 million children in Iran were indoctrinated with the concept of martyrdom as “children of Imam” and used as human shields.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, suicide attacks are not peculiar to Islam. Evidences of suicide attacks abound in other religions, including Christianity and Buddhism, and even in non-religious settings.<sup>26</sup> However, Assaf Moghadam, a terrorism scholar, identifies the contemporary rise of suicide missions among Muslims with the rise of radicalism in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>27</sup> While suicide bombing is historically associated with Shiism, it is interesting to note that the Shia Muslims in Nigeria, the Nigerian Muslim Brotherhood, have not used this method in any of their clashes with Nigerian authorities. On the contrary, the Nigerian Muslim Brotherhood has itself been a victim of Boko Haram’s suicide attacks.<sup>28</sup>

The use of suicide missions bears the signature of Al Qaeda and its affiliates.<sup>29</sup> One of the objectives of suicide attacks by radical Muslim sects, besides creating fear and inflicting

---

<sup>24</sup> Save the Children, *Caught in a Combat Zone* (London: Save the Children, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> David Cook, “The Implications of ‘Martyrdom Operations’ for Contemporary Islam,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 32 (2004): 129–151.

<sup>27</sup> Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom*.

<sup>28</sup> On November 3, 2014, a suicide bomber targeted a Shiite procession in the state of Yobe, killing 15 Shiites. Nobody claimed the attack, but Boko Haram is suspected.

<sup>29</sup> Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom*.

maximum casualty with minimal force, is propaganda.<sup>30</sup> Suicide attackers often film “martyrdom videos” before they carry out their attacks. These videos, which featured largely in Al Qaeda’s propaganda strategy, give the impression of victory against the enemy and demonstrate the benefits of sacrificing one’s life for the sake of millions of Muslims. The only publicly available Boko Haram martyrdom video is from the UN compound bombing. Hence, there is very little information about the motivations of its suicide bombers. It is possible that most of Boko Haram’s female suicide bombers, especially the young girls, are being forced against their will.<sup>31</sup> Another possibility is that Boko Haram has a dedicated training unit for suicide missions.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Politics of Sharia and the (Dis/Re)Alignment of Goals between Boko Haram and the Northern Muslim Religious and Political Elite**

Boko Haram emerged from the political context of sharia, which was adopted and introduced into the penal codes of 12 northern states from 1999 to 2003, after Nigeria returned to civilian rule following a long period of military rule. Then-President Olusegun Obasanjo quickly dismissed this initiative as “political sharia.” Ali Mazrui describes it as “shariacracy.”<sup>33</sup> The religious institutions in northern Nigeria, however, did not suspect any political motive in the sharia that was initiated by the north’s political class—they only saw an opportunity to position themselves as major players in the implementation of sharia. But this “shariacracy” project failed, not because of anti-Muslim resistance but because of the political motive behind it and the underlying struggle for monopoly over Islamic structures.

The historical development of Boko Haram clearly shows a pattern of local resistance to a traditional, established Muslim authority that is perceived as being more interested in protecting its own class (and all the privileges attached to it) than the interest of the *umma* (the Muslim community). It is therefore very unlikely to find any alignment between the mainstream Muslim

---

<sup>30</sup> Cook, “Martyrdom Operations”; Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom*.

<sup>31</sup> Jacob Zenn and Elizabeth Pearson, “Women, Gender and the Evolving Tactics of Boko Haram,” *Journal of Terrorism Research* 5, no. 1 (2014): 46–57.

<sup>32</sup> Onuoha and George, *Female Suicide Bombing*.

<sup>33</sup> Ali Mazrui, “Shariacracy and Federal Models in the Era of Globalization: Nigeria in Comparative Perspective,” *Democratic Institution Performance: Research and Policy Perspectives*, ed. Edward McMahon and Thomas Sinclair (Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 63.

groups in the north and Boko Haram. What is striking, however, is that most of the initial criticism of Boko Haram—besides criticisms made by non-Muslims—came largely from *ulama* (Islamic religious leaders) of the Salafi-Wahhabist tendency, rather than the mainstream religious authorities. The mainstream Islamic authorities have an ambivalent attitude toward the Boko Haram insurgency.<sup>34</sup> For instance, Alhaji Sa’ad Abubakar, head of the NSCIA and the Sultan of Sokoto, led the call for amnesty for Boko Haram in 2013.<sup>35</sup>

It is not surprising that a Salafist cleric, Mahmud Ja’far Adam—a former mentor of Boko Haram’s founder, Mohammed Yusuf—was the first of Boko Haram’s casualties in a string of assassinations of Islamic clerics who criticized the group.<sup>36</sup> Other Salafi-Wahhabist clerics killed by Boko Haram include Ibrahim Birkuti, who was killed on June 6, 2011; Mallam Dala on September 4, 2011; Sheikh Ali Jana’a on October 29, 2011; Imam Ibrahim Ahmed Abdullahi on March 13, 2011; and a prominent Islamic cleric, Liman Bana, in Niger. It is noteworthy that many of the Islamic clerics assassinated by Boko Haram at this early stage were Salafist or Wahhabist and mainly based in Maiduguri. However, Boko Haram does not typically discriminate when choosing its targets. It has targeted and assassinated Muslim clerics of Salafist, Sufi, and other Islamic sects. Still, it is worth investigating further the reason for the mainstream Muslim authorities’ initially weak criticisms of the group. The mainstream’s ambivalent attitude towards Boko Haram may be compared to the complicity of the Kano state government during the Maitatsine uprising of 1980.<sup>37</sup> The socialist government in Kano directly benefited from the Maitatsine crisis and allowed the insurrection to fester in order to advance its own political ambitions against the dominant northern ruling party, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN).

Clearly, contestation over the definition and practice of Islam manifest abundantly at different levels in the Muslim world of northern Nigeria. Even within a particular sect, there is a

---

<sup>34</sup> Abimbola Adesoji, “The Boko Haram Uprising and Islamic Revivalism in Nigeria,” *Africa Spectrum* 45, no. 2 (2010): 95–108.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Nwankpa, “The Politics of Amnesty in Nigeria: A Comparative Analysis of the Boko Haram and Niger Delta Insurgencies,” *Journal of Terrorism Research* 5, no. 1 (2014): 67–77.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Walker, *What is Boko Haram?* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> The Federal Government’s Tribunal of Inquiry 1981:18 implicates local religious and political leaders in Kano of gross incompetency, ignorance, complicity, negligence, and direct or indirect support.

multiplicity of groups and conflicts. This perhaps explains why there is an obvious absence of *fatwa* supporting the jihad of Boko Haram.<sup>38</sup>

From the previous discussion, we can reach some conclusions. First, notwithstanding the different strands of Islamic ideologies and groups in northern Nigeria, there is very little disagreement over the goal of ultimately being governed by sharia. The main distinction (besides methodology) between the conservative Muslim authority and the other variants, most visibly Boko Haram, is the practice of sharia within the framework of a secular Nigerian state. We have established the fact that there is an intra-religious contest over the definition of Islam (which is not peculiar to Nigeria), and many analysts agree with the fact that Boko Haram constitutes a challenge to the traditional Islamic authority in northern Nigeria.<sup>39</sup> However, the crisis goes beyond that.

If Boko Haram were to establish an Islamic state, would Shekau and his Kanuri people (the major ethnic group in Borno and the Boko Haram-controlled northeast states) become the new hegemon? Boko Haram rejects the authority of the sultan as the spiritual leader of Muslims in Nigeria. Ultimately, a Boko Haram-established Islamic state threatens the authority of the Fulani-Hausa dominance in Nigeria, making it very difficult to see how the traditional Muslim authority could be allied with Boko Haram's caliphate. Shekau's temporal caliphate was strategically headquartered at Gwoza. Hence, we might be seeing a renewed effort at creating a northeast state, similar to the ambition of the Bornu Youth Movement (BYM) in the period of Nigeria's independence.

However, this does not fully explain Boko Haram's activities outside the northeast states, particularly its attacks in the northwest states of Kano and Kaduna and the in Middle Belt states (especially Plateau). Jacob Zenn, a Boko Haram scholar, has suggested that the northwest axis is controlled by Al-Barnawi and Mamman Nur, the leaders of Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina fi Biladis Sudan (popularly called Ansaru), a Boko Haram splinter group that was established in

---

<sup>38</sup> David Cook, *Boko Haram: A New Islamic State in Nigeria* (Houston, TX: Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, (2014). "Introduction and Overview," in *Boko Haram: Islamism, politics, security and the state in Nigeria*, ed. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, West African Politics and Society Series, 2 (2014): 1–6.

January 2012.<sup>40</sup> Yet Ansaru's jihad is more internationally oriented. It is my impression, contrary to popular view, that Ansaru and Boko Haram are similar in many respects. Ansaru is "fighting to reclaim 'the lost dignity of Muslims of black Africa' and [aiming] to create an Islamic state from Niger to Cameroon and northern Nigeria."<sup>41</sup> Ansaru's establishment in January 2012 also corresponds with the start of Boko Haram's attacks in the northwest states. Interestingly, we have not heard much about Ansaru since 2013. It is very likely that Ansaru and Boko Haram are not as split as often portrayed in many publications on Boko Haram. The impression of several contesting terrorist groups creates room for maneuvering: in other words, many of the unclaimed attacks in the north may very well have been carried out by criminal groups other than Boko Haram, or even by Boko Haram and its affiliates in an effort to conceal other agendas.

One factor that is often stressed but fails to garner unanimous agreement among Boko Haram scholars is the poverty clause. David Cook, a scholar on Boko Haram, identifies "poverty and underdevelopment of the Muslim north" and "climate change or the desiccation of the Sahel" as part of the theoretical explanation for the emergence of Boko Haram and points out the weakness in these arguments. On the economic side, he notes the obvious absence of economic referents in Boko Haram's numerous videos as well as scarce evidence across most African societies that supports economic causation of extreme violence.<sup>42</sup>

However, underlying the Boko Haram conflict is a strong economic undercurrent. The large-scale irrigation schemes and damming process that formed a massive part of the industrialization projects of the 1970s (supported by the oil booms) have had a long-term devastating effect on the economic livelihood of people in the northeast region and contributed to the social and ethno-religious tensions across the whole of the north, including the Middle Belt. The desiccation of the Sahel and the drying up of Lake Chad are crucial factors in the Boko Haram conflict, even if Shekau does not appreciate their importance.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Jacob Zenn, "Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, February 24, 2014, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/leadership-analysis-of-boko-haram-and-ansaru-in-nigeria>.

<sup>41</sup> Farouk Chothia, "Profile: Who are Nigeria's Ansaru Islamists?" BBC Africa, March 11, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-21510767>.

<sup>42</sup> Cook, *Boko Haram*.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



Ultimately, these economic and social conditions produce fissures that become structural tools of control for the elites. Boko Haram, despite its Islamic bent, is—like the Niger Delta region—a consequence of the elites’ manipulation of prevailing structural conditions. Sharia becomes an outlet for Boko Haram to express its reaction to the harsh socioeconomic realities in the region, and whether the group acknowledges this or not is a moot point. Hence, failure to address these socioeconomic issues will undermine the effect of other counterterrorism policies adopted.

### **Prognosis**

The northern conservative Muslim authority will fight to uphold a unified Nigeria as long as its interests are protected. The sultan has recently spoken strongly against Boko Haram. He has declared Boko Haram’s actions un-Islamic and rejected the idea that Boko Haram is an Islamic sect.<sup>44</sup> Other notable northern clerics and political elites have also joined in condemning Boko Haram’s terrorist acts. The emir of Kano, Sanusi Lamido, is among the growing voices that have denounced the sect and called for popular uprising against it.

Nigeria’s President-elect Muhammad Buhari, a northern Hausa Muslim, promised in his election campaign and speeches to take a hard stance against Boko Haram, ruling out any possibility of amnesty for the group and of ceding any area to them. Although Buhari promised to defeat Boko Haram within the first months of his presidency, he now recognizes the difficulty of achieving this target, as his first post-election interview reveals:<sup>45</sup>

We are asking Nigerians for their cooperation. They shouldn’t expect a miracle to happen a couple of months after we take over because the destruction took so many years ... If for five, six years, the Nigerian law enforcement agency, including the military, could not secure 14 local governments out of 774, how can I promise a miracle when I come?

The president-elect also gave a realistic assessment of the small chance of rescuing the remaining Chibok girls held captive by Boko Haram. According to Buhari’s remarks on the April 14, 2015, anniversary of the abduction of the Chibok girls, “We do not know if the Chibok girls can be

---

<sup>44</sup> Stoyan Zaimov, “Islamic Leader Condemns Boko Haram and Terrorism,” *The Christian Post*, May 28, 2014, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/islamic-leader-condemns-boko-haram-and-terrorism-120475/>.

<sup>45</sup> “Nigeria: Buhari promises to tackle Boko Haram,” by Peter Okwoche, *BBC*, April 1, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32156140>.

rescued. Their whereabouts remain unknown ... As much as I wish to, I cannot promise that we can find them.”<sup>46</sup> There are several ways to interpret Buhari’s statements. One possible explanation is that the president-elect and his party may have finally carried out a realistic assessment of the situation and arrived at the conclusion that they erred in their initial oversimplification of the insurgency. Another plausible interpretation is that the pre-election framing of Boko Haram was just an election strategy. One thing is clear irrespective of the interpretations: Boko Haram’s capacity to survive cannot be downplayed, and defeating it requires serious commitment.

If Buhari adopts a military approach to Boko Haram, then we might likely see an intensification of the insurgency, similar to how the state of emergency declared by President Jonathan and the security forces’ aggressive counterterrorism response have escalated and protracted the conflict so far. At the moment, Boko Haram seems to be in a weakened position, due to the combined efforts of the MNJTF. However, Boko Haram continues to be dangerous, as it has proven with the gun attacks and bombings in the states of Gombe and Borno on March 28, 2015, the day of the presidential elections, and with subsequent attacks.

The counterterrorism cooperation between Nigeria and its neighbors has suffered in the past because of distrust among the armies. The counterterrorism actions of the various forces are not synchronized and instead show only peripheral cooperation, where the forces of each participating country concentrate on Boko Haram’s threat within its own borders or, at most, at its border with Nigeria. Each country’s operations rarely extend beyond its borders, except on the few occasions when the Chadian army carried out counterterrorism operations within Nigeria. There seems to be better cooperation between Chad and Cameroon, as a number of Chadian forces are helping to fight the insurgents inside Cameroon. It is somewhat doubtful that Buhari, a former military general, will fully support the MNJTF, given that the Jonathan administration only recently (and reluctantly) accepted external help. Disbanding the MNJTF will undermine the counterterrorism effort against Boko Haram.

---

<sup>46</sup> Michelle Faul, “Nigeria's President-Elect Muhammadu Buhari Says He Can't Promise To Find Chibok Girls,” *Huffington Post*, April 14, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/14/muhammadu-buhari-chibok-girls\\_n\\_7061058.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/14/muhammadu-buhari-chibok-girls_n_7061058.html).

The MNJTF has helped pushed Boko Haram into the Mandara Mountains and Sambisa Forest, where the insurgents are most likely regrouping and where the MNJTF may be planning a final onslaught. The MNJTF has succeeded so far in its mandate of preventing Boko Haram's expansion. The coordination among the LCBC, despite its shortfalls (the governments and armies of Chad, Niger, and Cameroon have accused the Nigerian military of stalling in its cooperation), has produced some useful counterterrorism actions against the insurgents. The war against Boko Haram is, however, far from won.

The MNJTF might be able to achieve a military victory over Boko Haram, but this chance can slip away if there is continuous distrust among the coordinating forces, as was the case with Boko Haram's brief overthrow of the MNJTF headquarters in Baga. With the new MNJTF headquarters now located in N'djamena, the capital of Chad, far away from the northeast base of Boko Haram, there is a chance of better cooperation. The Chadian army was instrumental in the recent tide of victory over Boko Haram, just like the Kurdish army in Iraq in the fight against ISIS. Chad's army is considered one of the best-trained armies in Africa, with experience fighting insurgents in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR) in addition to Chad. The Chadian army was solely responsible for reclaiming the town of Damasak in Borno. However, it is misleading to assume that Chad can defeat Boko Haram alone or to undervalue the input of the other partners.

### **What Can the United States Do?**

The United States can support the fight against Boko Haram in a number of ways. It can provide additional funds through the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) or contribute to a special pool of UN funding to support the operations of the MNJTF and train the armies of the coordinating forces. With the expectation of transparency and less corruption in President-elect Buhari's government, the US may also want to review the factors that previously constrained its counterterrorism support to Nigeria (specifically, corruption and human rights abuse by the Nigerian military).

One area of support will be helping Nigeria's military secure its facilities and arsenal of weapons. Boko Haram obtained a large arsenal of weapons from its numerous attacks on several Nigerian military barracks and police stations. On March 14, 2014, Boko Haram carried out a brazen assault on the highly fortified Giwa barracks in Maiduguri, freeing hundreds of detained suspects. In May 2014, a military base and police barracks in Buni Yadi, Yobe state, were attacked. This year alone, Boko Haram gained temporary control of two major military barracks: it overran the Baga barracks, the MNJTF's headquarters in Borno on January 3, 2015, and dislodged soldiers of the 243 Battalion at Monguno barracks in Borno on January 25, 2015.

It would be advantageous if the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) played a greater role in the counterterrorism efforts against Boko Haram. By contrast, however, any direct involvement of the United States and its European allies, especially France, would only play into the hands of the insurgents and help broaden the international appeal of Boko Haram to other jihadist groups. Although Boko Haram is officially aligned with ISIS, the reward of this alliance remains minimal, except that it might help Boko Haram develop a more effective propaganda campaign.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that Boko Haram is driven by an internal struggle within the Muslim leadership in northern Nigeria. The situation in northern Nigeria is similar to the global struggle in Islamic societies over the definition and meaning of Islam. However, the Nigerian case is peculiar. There is very little disagreement among the different Islamic factions in northern Nigeria about the concept of sharia. Even its Muslim critics acknowledge its relevance while trying to prevent it from taking precedence over the Nigerian constitution. The bone of contention is the contest between the different Muslim groups over the monopoly of sharia, and this struggle will continue as long as sharia is the sine qua non for political and economic gains to the Muslim north. The Boko Haram insurgency, therefore, is better understood as a consequence of power marginalization and exclusion, and their self-declared goal of establishing a sharia state as an attempt to alter the power structure.

Boko Haram and similar Islamic sects will continue to threaten the peace and security of Nigeria, its neighbors, and the world as long as the position of sharia in Nigeria's public space is not clearly defined. It is convenient to say that sharia is restricted to the domain of customary law, but it is quite striking how sharia serves as a tool of protest and resistance to constituted authority. However, we must understand that the anti-Western and anti-Christian elements in Boko Haram's publication and attacks are only incidental to its primary aim.

The northern elites' previous demand for amnesty for Boko Haram and their noticeable silence or weak criticism of the Islamist sect can only suggest a deliberate strategy to draw attention away from the internal warring between their strong conservative stance and the fundamentalist disposition of Boko Haram. Furthermore, the advent of Boko Haram may even be connected to the group's disenchantment with the leadership in northern Nigeria, who has controlled the federal government for a long time, for the apparent lack of governance, palpable poverty, massive underdevelopment, and social exclusion of the northern Muslim populace.