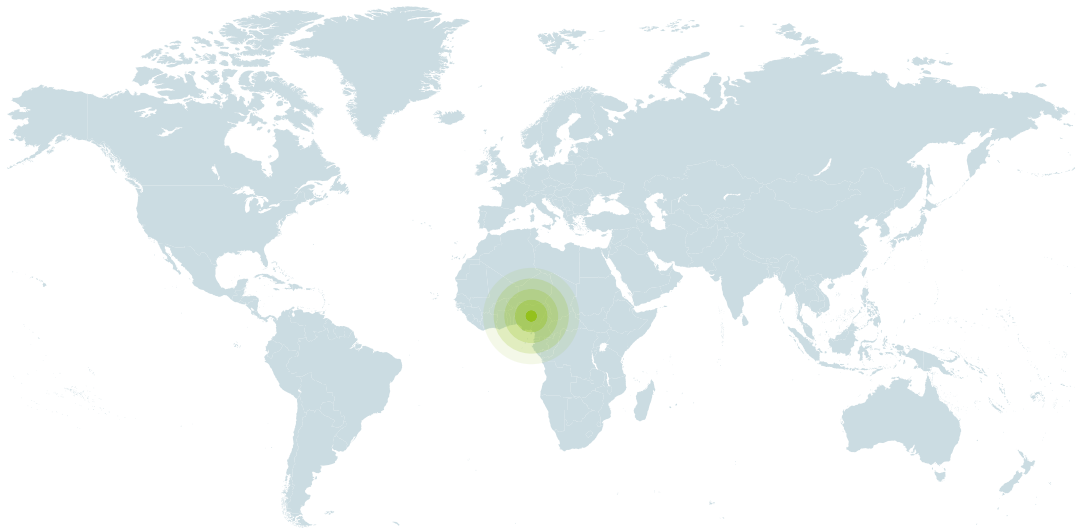


# From Protest Movement to Terrorism

Origins and Goals of Boko Haram

Bakary Sambe



In Western media the violence of Boko Haram has received considerable attention. Yet, little is known about its ideology and its aims. This article intends to close this gap while addressing the question as to which strategy is appropriate for dealing with the African jihadists.

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Current affairs in Africa are dominated by the violence perpetrated by Boko Haram, a movement that has been the subject of limited research, as the rhythm of their attacks has proven difficult to account for. These actions are drawing plenty of media attention, leaving little room for an in-depth examination of the origin and ideology of the movement, which is all too often hastily dismissed as a group of “God possessed” individuals adopting some sort of a scorched earth strategy, equally shying away from no risk and blindly killing without purpose.

### **The almost daily attacks of Boko Haram are directed against the most varied targets: churches, schools, Christian villages – even mosques.**

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Repeated acts of violence, where entire segments of the population are wiped out because they are suspected of cooperating with the security forces, are one of the hallmarks of Boko Haram. Since the uprising of 2009, which was a turning point for the security situation in northern Nigeria and resulted in more than 700 deaths in two years, the almost daily attacks of Boko Haram are directed against all kinds of targets: churches, schools, Christian villages – even mosques, as the recently committed attack in Kano has shown.

The Nigerian government responded with reinforcement and expansion of its military operations, focusing on the northern states of Borno,

Yobe and Adamawa, causing a vicious circle of arbitrary repression and ruthless retaliation. This ended in the population falling victim to a merciless struggle between parts of Boko Haram and the security forces, which, at times, appear helpless in the face of the scale of the attacks.

This bloody persecution is not victimising groups associated with Boko Haram, but is also driving other population groups to join the movement, as both the security forces and Boko Haram are resorting to the excessive use of force on the ground.

The population is facing a quandary. Both sides are accusing certain segments of the population of conspiring with the respective opponent. However, the Nigerian army seems to be losing out to Boko Haram as it is lacking the necessary intelligence for quite some time now.

The information deficit explains the disproportionate response of an army that is almost helplessly isolated from the population, with far-reaching consequences: Boko Haram is increasingly gaining local support. In some places, most of the population prefers to take the side of the reigning terrorist organisations rather than stand behind the security forces.

Entire villages are faced with the choice of either forming self-defence militias as part of the so-called Civilian Task Forces in support of the army in the fight against the terrorist movement, on the one hand, or to be armed and trained by Boko Haram on the other. Caught between the fronts, plenty have fled to the area around Maiduguri, and increasingly also to the neighbouring countries of Cameroon and Niger.





Car bomb: Christian institutions, here a Catholic church near Abuja, are a central target of Boko Haram apart from government buildings. Source: © Afolabi Sotunde, Reuters.

The present article attempts deliver an analysis that serves to make the situation comprehensible rather than merely describing it. The detailed analysis covers the social and historical conditions of the emergence of Boko Haram, its funding, ideology and goals, as well as the strategy adopted by the Nigerian government in fighting it.

### **Sociogenesis of the Movement: The Roots of Boko Haram**

The emergence of Boko Haram must be considered in the ideological context of the longing for an Islamic state (*al-Dawla al-Islamiyya*) within societies with a predominantly Muslim population since the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1922.

The speech held in Yobe by the leader of the movement, Muhammad Yusuf, is widely regarded as the primary speech on the identity of Boko Haram, which answered questions regarding the banishment of “boko”, or western education. He defined boko as follows: “It refers to studies at schools founded by Christian missionaries (*al-munassirûn*), and includes the curricula from primary through secondary school and higher education (*collèges*) to public service, and thereby work in the service of the state in general.”<sup>1</sup>

Any analysis of the sociogenesis of Boko Haram clearly suffers the central difficulty of drawing up a theoretical foundation for a specifically Nigerian phenomenon that entails a distinctive risk of spreading to other countries. The most difficult part is the formulation of a typology





One Laptop per Child: Boko Haram focus their actions on this and other educational projects.

Source: © Afolabi Sotunde, Reuters.

of the life paths and profiles of the followers of this ideology, and the definition of their modus operandi. For this, we will cover the internal literature of the movement.

Even though the behaviour and conduct of their leader, Abubakar Shekau, might suggest otherwise in his various records and speeches, the “Taliban of Nigeria”, as some analysts have simplistically called the group, do in fact have an ideology. An analysis of the perspective of the founders facilitates an understanding of the logic that directs the bloody actions of the movement.

The rejection of the state education model and abandonment of “official” schools in favour of studying Sharia in the North, as well as the

denunciation of an alleged “control” of this system by the Church and Christians, actually constitutes the repudiation of the post-colonial state order, which is considered the political and ideological continuation of the British or Western system. The term “amaliyyat tañcîr”, or process of “Christianisation” through Western education, which the founder Mohammed Yusuf used in his sermons from the outset, is indicative of the group’s extent to which they reject the state system in its entirety.

The typical Boko Haram fighter is an individual who rejects the entire state system due to his contempt of formal education as a vehicle of un-Islamic values. This person has left Nigerian society behind and regards it as contrary to an idealised, “truly Islamic” society.<sup>2</sup> This fracture

that threatens to dismantling the Nigerian government and society, as well as widening the gap between the predominantly Muslim north and the multi-confessional south (mainly populated by Christians and the followers of traditional African religions), is two-fold in nature:

*Break with the Authorities:*

The fighter or young person enthusiastically following the speeches and ideology of Boko Haram demonstrates his rejection of the Nigerian state model, which is very similar to British heritage, and hence the West. To his mind, the state structures and the secular state model appear “godless” and incompatible with Islam.

*Break with Identities:*

The Boko Haram fighter-persona has mentally rejected the identity of his fellow citizens. Further to the dialectic of a “Muslim” North and a “Christian” South, the new disciples of Boko Haram are provided with an alternative conception to the federal state, and particularly the national identities fostered in school. While the institutions of the “godless” state cultivate a sense of nationality and weld together a community by fostering a sense of belonging to the country, Boko Haram are feeding their members with continuous speeches nourishing the longing for an Islamic state in Nigeria, which – by the way – never actually existed in the history of Islam, nor on the present territory of Nigeria, except – albeit very minor in geographical scope – during the era of the kingdom of Sokoto.<sup>3</sup>

The vision of a state, or rather the idea of an Islamic “nation” along the lines of a Sokoto ruled by Usman Dan Fodio, cherished by the Boko Haram fighters, does not follow the ideals mediated by school, the army and the administration of Abuja. This fringe group regards the Nigerian State as a mere illusion of the Anglophone elite in its current shape and orientation, “degenerated” through westernisation, and legitimised by an educational system that itself is “haram”, or forbidden by the religion.

Beyond this formal rejection, the attitude held by Boko Haram is also an expression of frustration with the state and its educational system. Indeed, the opponents of boko accuse the system of favouring the Western-oriented population and depriving those who have chosen an “Arab-Islamic” education, as Ahmad Zana, representative of the federal state Borno, noted in the Nigeria parliament. Furthermore, as a young man from Miduguri explained: “The injustices behind the phenomenon Boko Haram are striking; contrary to British-style education, a well-founded Arab-Islamic education offers no advantages.”<sup>4</sup>

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The clash of different education systems is one of the main causes of exclusion and impoverishment, which is driving the predominantly Islamic population of most societies of the Sahel region towards radicalisation. Since it is difficult to get a place at university on the strength of a career in the parallel madrasa system and the Islamic schools, many continue their education in the Arab world, where universities offer students from sub-Saharan countries few opportunities, usually limiting them to studies of (Arab) linguistics, Sharia or theology.

**Ideological Background and Objectives of Boko Haram**

Before 2002, the movement had no clear guiding principle. The ideological definition took place only after the attacks of 11 September 2001. The ideological struggle exploits the frustration of millions of young people in the North who are excluded from the education system and the state that funds it. Their logic

is reduced to the point of view: “I reject the system that rejects me.” This is particularly true for the so-called “unemployed of Maiduguri”, young people who are recruited by Boko Haram from very early on. The group finds it easier to convince people of their ideology by capitalising on the frustration of a destitute, marginalised youth under the pretext of fighting against the injustices of a “corrupt state”.

In reality, Boko Haram by no means places the defence of the population of the north or the Muslims against a discriminatory state in the foreground; however, the movement is most successful at recruiting people without access to government services or rewarding career options in the country. The movement primarily presents a religiously grounded ideology and tends to issue arbitrary demands in their discourse and most actions, which are supported by a rather confused message.

The hostile attitude towards the West and its fight against the “westernised” state is particularly expressed by Boko Haram’s modus operandi, which remains faithful to the ideological grounding from the founding period under Muhammad Yusuf. This is reflected in the destruction and attacks on the infrastructure of the contentious central government, but also on Christian churches. In the mindset of Boko Haram, the latter are the symbol of a religion that paves westernisation by way of Christianisation. This also explains why Christians make up a third of the victims of Boko Haram.

The same is true for the attacks against the civilian population, which stands accused of complicity with the information services, but also the murder of Muslims, which the movement approaches for failure to live by Sharia.

In addition to the intention of terrorist organisations to draw global attention and depict the state as being weak, the abduction of 200 girls from Chibok also has a definite ideological background, which can be understood only by immersing oneself in the scriptures and the mindset of Boko Haram. These girls were



attending a “Western” school and were therefore the perfect example of “cultural alienation” in the eyes of the movement. At the same time they were a symbol of the “corruption of morals” that goes along with this illegitimate form of education. The fact that they are being held and forced into marriage is based on another medieval idea: The concept of prisoners of war who were reduced to “jâriya”, concubines or slaves, whose possession is permitted by religion.

Sensationalised actions of this kind are also an expression of tangled relations between the movement, the state and the security forces.



Protests: It was not only in Nigeria that countless people went to the streets in 2014 to demonstrate for the release of nearly 300 schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram. [Source: © Joe Penney, Reuters.](#)

### **The Financing of Boko Haram**

The source of Boko Haram funding has been an unresolved question from very early on, since the foundation of the movement. Those familiar with African Islamist movements described Muhammad Yusuf as a descendant of a wealthy, propertied family that permitted him to secure funding for the movement from the outset. Others, however, claim the opposite and deny that Yusuf would have inherited any such fortune. One source close to Nigerian Islamism stated that members of Boko Haram in a number of northern states were forced to sell their homes,

businesses and even their wives' jewellery in order to "support the actions of the Jihad" at the beginning.

Western sources address the issue of Boko Haram funding in more detail, since their aim is to establish a connection between the level of Boko Haram violence and some recent developments in the equipping of its members.

A number of military analysts speculate that the movement was able to improve their logistics particularly by means of the following funding sources:



## *Kidnapping and Hostage-Taking*

Boko Haram is exerting great pressure on the Nigerian government while the militias of the different parties also use the movement to get rid of their enemies, especially in the 2015 pre-election period.

Moreover, Boko Haram also obtained funds in the amount of up to three million U.S. dollars in exchange for the release of a seven-member French family who had been kidnapped in northern Cameroon at the end of 2014, in addition to the dismissal of 16 imprisoned members of the organisation.

## *Theft*

Many Ulama (religious scholars) of the movement preach that theft is permissible under jihad, since it is considered “ghanâ'im”, or war booty, which is taken from the “wicked”. This entails different kinds of theft, including bank robberies. In November 2014, hundreds of banks, mainly in the northern states such as Borno, were subject to armed robberies. Revenue from thefts from 2012 to 2014 is estimated at around six million U.S. dollars.

**In November 2014, hundreds of banks, mainly in the northern states such as Borno, were subject to armed robberies by Boko Haram.**

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## *Extortion of High-ranking Public Figures*

Important leaders in the northern states had to enter into agreements for protection against attacks with the movement, and pay protection money. This phenomenon has worsened since 2004 due to the fact that Boko Haram controlled wide areas of the North, particularly in the vicinity of Maiduguri, from 2004 until mid-2013. Agreements facilitating the establishment

of base camps of the terrorist movement in this part of the country were concluded with the consent of the northern states' governors.

## *Foreign Terrorist Organisations*

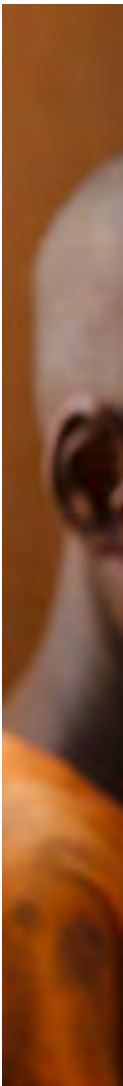
A number of regional and international Islamic organisations have previously funded Boko Haram in the scope of general aid to Islamic organisations in Africa via the networks of NGOs and charities with religious backgrounds. Other significant financial resources are sourced in the north of Nigeria, sanctioned by government officials and high-ranking personalities who pay protection money to the terrorist organisation.

The tracing of other financial channels leads to the Algerian branch of al-Qaeda (AQMI), but also indicates links with the Somalian Shabaab, which are ideologically linked with the Salafist and Wahhabist sheikhs and the Al-Haramayn Foundation, an organisation that is on the blacklist comprising the supporters of international terrorism.

## *NGOs and Foreign Organisations*

NGOs and foreign organisations are usually unarmed, do not tend to be directly involved in terrorist activities and enjoy an almost diplomatic status in many countries, even in the West. They regard their actions as guided by solidarity within the community with the aim of “supporting our Islamic brothers”. Many such organisations condemn terrorism sharply in their speeches and official statements, or enjoy observer status in the most prestigious international institutions. This also applies to two organisations that are identified as supporters of terrorism via countries such as the United Arab Emirates by an Arabic-language informational website:<sup>5</sup>

- the UK-based solidarity fund *çundiûq i'timâni*
- and the *Jam'iyyat al-Alam al-Islami* (perhaps identical with the Muslim World League *Râbitat al-'Alam al-Islami*), headquartered in





Saudi Arabia, with official branches in Africa and Europe. However, the representative of the Saudi Arabian offices openly condemns terrorism and all forms of violence.

### **Boko Haram: What Are the Strategies Pursued by the International Community?**

Following the widely reported death of Muhammad Yusuf, a spokesman for the movement addressed the Nigerian public to clarify that the death of the leader would in no way alter

the line of Boko Haram, or have adverse effects on its ability to act. A certain Umar II declared himself the transitional leader on BBC Radio, before declaring that the movement would “join al-Qaeda” in the future and that “a number of attacks, both in the north and in the south of the country are planned from August 2009” to render Nigeria “ungovernable as a country”.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the actions of the movement are aimed at the destabilisation of the state or even its destruction, with a view to the establishment of the utopian Islamic state, has previously been



Freedom: Hundreds of children and women, traumatised by their captivity by Boko Haram, are taken care of in specialised governmental institutions. Source: © Afolabi Sotunde, Reuters.

noted. Against this backdrop, the Nigerian Army would be forced to act against a movement trying to weaken the state.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the Boko Haram movement has emerged out of an environment of violence. For a better understanding of the willingness of Boko Haram to perpetrate

violent acts and massive attacks, the fact that there were armed conflicts since the founding of the movement is of significance, which started when a group of followers entrenched themselves in the villages Kanamma and Gaidam near the Nigerian border. They appeared suspect to the police, who responded with violence. This is where the cycle of attacks and counter-



Alleged Boko Haram members: The Nigerian military relentlessly arrests people, who are suspected of belonging to the terrorist group. Source: © Stringer, Reuters.

attacks began, which continue to characterise the deadlocked conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian security forces to this day. The success of the movement also spread to the northern states such as Kano, Katsina, Sokoto and Koba. The *Markaz* center in the quarter Ruwan Zafi (Borno) quickly became one of the ideological strongholds of the movement.

Following the massacres of July 2009 in the scope of Operation Flush Out on the orders of the Nigerian Government, which also resulted in civilian casualties, the population gradually began to develop a sense of solidarity with the members of Boko Haram. The police attack on a mosque where the followers of Yusuf held their meetings was sufficient to trigger hostilities on the night of 27 July 2009. The cycle of attack and retaliation was in full swing when Boko Haram activists launched an assault on a major police station and some office buildings in Damaturu, capital of Yobe, and continued in heavy street battles with the police. This brought the violence to the big cities of the north, including Maiduguri and Kano. The police forces encircled the Boko Haram insurgents in the village of Wudil (Kano), with the tragic sum of 700 dead, among them police officers, activists of the movement, but also civilians. 3,500 people were forced to flee to neighbouring areas.

### **Despite some symbolic progress, the Nigerian Army faces great difficulty in regaining control over the entire country.**

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During these clashes, the police and sections of the army attacked the mosque where Muhammad Yusuf was based and held his lectures, better known as the Ibn Taymiya mosque.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, the radicalisation of Boko Haram appears all the more worrying since it is emerg-

ing in a country that already endures strong ethnic and religious tensions, and is home to the highest percentage of Muslims of any African country. Despite some symbolic progress, at this point, when the Nigerian Army is having great difficulty in regaining control over the entire country, and there are concerns for the fate of the soldiers who deserted to Cameroon, the topic of Boko Haram is increasingly becoming a priority item on the agenda of the international community.

The African Union has understood that the need for international mobilisation is no longer up for debate in light of the humanitarian crises that have already erupted in the federal states of Borno and Adamawa, with inevitable consequences for Niger, Cameroon and beyond.

The UN, in turn, is strongly interested in addressing the Boko Haram issue with absolute international priority. The need for the establishment of an African army to stop the rise of Boko Haram is an emerging consensus, since the threat is leaving no country indifferent, particularly those of the Lake Chad Basin.

The Boko Haram phenomenon has reached proportions that were previously unimaginable. A climate of insecurity, distrust and fear is spreading, with denunciations and accusations driving divisiveness in the population even further.

Overall, the same situation continues repeat itself, which has already spoiled relations between the security forces and the civilian population in the northern regions of Nigeria. Here, the population openly takes sides with Boko Haram, which promises better protection than the army or the police of the “aloof” government.

The security situation, which is worsening by the day, has also reached the countries neighbouring Nigeria. Niger is mostly surrounded, and its border areas are already experiencing the rhythm of the conflict between Abuja and the Islamists of Boko Haram. Among the largely young population suffering the torments of per-





Chadian soldiers: Despite inadequate training and poor equipment, the participation of the armed forces of Chad and Niger is an important element in the fight against Boko Haram. [Source: © Stringer, Reuters.](#)

manent unemployment, occasional sympathy for the Islamists appears to flare up.

The presence of the Boko Haram group in Niger, which is home to some base camps, and where slight growth has been observed, confirms its target: control of the territories of Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad. This is exemplified by assaults on the army of Chad, which enjoys a good reputation in Africa.

In addition to its strategic location, the Lake Chad Basin brings certain symbolic preconditions as a place for the establishment of an Islamic state: the similarity of the surrounding ethnic groups, but also the religion among the population. The Government of Ndjaména is particularly concerned by the fact that thousands of Chadians who have studied in the

*madrassa* of northern Nigeria are joining Boko Haram. The recent recruitment of Chadians has alerted the country's authorities greatly. This concern has probably accelerated the deployment of the army, as if a pre-emptive war against Boko Haram were being launched.

Boko Haram is no longer just a Nigerian issue, but has now assumed a regional and continental character. The entire Lake Chad Basin is threatened and has even become partly occupied. Boko Haram has settled here, won much of the younger population with ideological speeches, and entrenched themselves in strategic retreat areas. Despite all the speculation about the real strength of Boko Haram and the state of their troops, the movement's clear aim is the control of the Lake Chad Basin, a strategic area, if only for the external supply with weapons.



In this light, the strategy of Boko Haram appears to be well thought-out, and not, as one might think, does not consist of arbitrarily repeated acts, involving the occupation of the Lake Chad Basin, and thus the positioning on a common natural border of four countries (Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger), the pursuit of strong economic pressure by controlling trade, and the gradual exploitation of the porous borders and weak armies. The movement has been able to spill the conflict – which was originally confined to Nigeria – over to other regions, and has thus become an acute threat to humanitarian security around a strategic basin that offers much fertile ground for the exploitation of symbols, ideas and religion to build the ideal of an “Islamic state” in the heart of Africa.

The imminent military intervention with a certainly chaotic outcome will not be capable of eradicating the “curse” of Boko Haram. Even if the symptoms of this Nigerian malady disappear with continental impact, this would not permanently solve the problem. The aim of the recently announced commitment of Boko Haram to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was mainly geared to attract the international community into the trap of intervention, and claiming the label of jihadism over other jihadist movements at the international level.

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- 1 Translated from Arabic.
- 2 This phrase can be found in all Salafist or faithful Islamic movements in the countries of the Sahel.
- 3 The Empire of Sokoto was founded by Usman dan Fodio in northern Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its capital was the city of Sokoto.
- 4 Written survey; for safety reasons anonymity is required for those affected.
- 5 Cf. Zahraa 2014: Supposedly terrorist organisations with links to the Emirates, 25 Nov 2014, in: <http://zahraa.info/node/997> [4 Feb 2016]. The struggle for influence in the Gulf between the Emirates and Qatar calls but to increased caution in the analysis of such information.
- 6 Cf. Boko Haram, Qabus Nigeria, al-Mashaheer, 17 May 2015, in: <http://almshaheer.com/article-874577> [4 Feb 2015].
- 7 Ibn Taymiyya is one of the strictest Muslim scholars; his theories inspired the Salafist movements, especially the Jihadis. In his book *Al-çârim al Maslûl*, for example, he calls for the killing of those who attack the Prophet of Islam.