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Note Nigeria

The Boko Haram insurgency and internal displacement

Presentation by Medinat Abdulazeez (Nigerian Defence Academy) at the SEM, 20 June 2016

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The speaker

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Ms. Medinat Abdulazeez was invited to present her research findings on the Boko Haram insurgency and internal displacement at the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) on 20 June 2016. The following text is a summary of her presentation. The transcript was reviewed by Ms. Abdulazeez and approved for publication. The views expressed in this document reflect the opinion of Ms. Abdulazeez and not necessarily those of the SEM.

1. Introduction: What makes Boko Haram so special?

Ms. Abdulazeez first heard about Boko Haram in June 2011, when the group carried out a suicide attack targeting the police inspector general in Abuja, Nigeria's capital city. It was the first time something like that happened in Nigeria and it caused a lot of confusion. Information on the group was very scarce at that time and the military was not prepared for this.

This attack symbolized how audacious the group was. Carrying out a suicide attack in the capital city showed that Boko Haram was prepared to take on the country as a whole.

Boko Haram has attracted more attention than any other insurgency in Nigeria. According to Ms. Abdulazeez, there are four main reasons for this:

- It is the longest insurgency Nigeria has had to battle with: it has been going on since 2002 (from the period of the Kanama disturbance). The Kanama group were the earliest group linked to Boko Haram and they emerged around the year 2000.
- It caused the highest wave of displacement (refugees and IDPs) in the country (much more than the 1967-1970 civil war).
- It triggered the highest raise in Nigeria's defence spending. For 2015, it went up to about 6 billion dollars, which shows how serious an issue Boko Haram is for the country.
- Boko Haram has put Nigeria on the list of countries that have to cope with terrorism.

Today, it is easier to find information on Boko Haram, but part of the story is missing from most accounts: Boko Haram's own perspective. As a researcher, it is important for Ms. Abdulazeez to present a picture of Boko Haram's emergence that is as balanced as possible.

2. Emergence of Boko Haram

2.1. Name

Boko Haram is not the name the group chose for itself. It was given by observers and outsiders trying to understand its ideology. Boko means "book" in Hausa and Haram means "forbidden" in Arabic. Taken together, Boko Haram means "Western education is forbidden".

For the group's members, the name "Boko Haram" is not representative of what they stand for and they do not like to be addressed this way. They call themselves Jama'atu Ahl al-Sunnah li Dawah wa-l-jihad, which means "People committed to the ways of the Prophet (Sunnah), Proselytization (Dawah) and Striving, Struggling or Holy War (Jihad)".

2.2. Ideology

Boko Haram belongs to the Wahabi school of thought. The creation of an Islamic state is part

of their ideology. They believe in a pristine version of Islam, Islam without any kind of innovations. They cannot get it in normal societies, where Muslims, Christians, Jews and other people practicing different religions are mixed. So they believe in the creation of an Islamic state in which they could practice their own version of Islam.

Boko Haram is against democracy. They believe that ruling with any kind of doctrines or legislation that are not Islamic law is adverse to Islam. They reject any kind of governance that is not based on Shari'ah or Islamic doctrines.

Boko Haram rejects Western education. They consider institutions, technologies and other forms of recreational entertainment antithetical to prior Islamic living. They are also adverse to the Darwinist theory on the evolution of man and to the big bang theory on the creation of the world, which are not part of what they know as Islam.

Boko Haram abrogated to themselves the power of 'Takfirism', which means "excommunication". As a group, they think they can determine who is Muslim and who is not. In their judgments, when they say people are not Muslims, it justifies spilling their blood, taking away their properties and their women as war booty. This is how Boko Haram justifies killing Christians and killing Muslims who do not practice Islam the way they think it should be practiced. They also use Takfirism to justify abductions.

2.3. Appeal and attractiveness

One of reasons why Boko Haram gained so much attraction is because they used religion to justify their ideology. Nigeria is a country where religiosity is a way of life. According to a survey conducted in 2006 by the PEW Foundation, 76% of Christians and 91% of Muslims in Nigeria say that religion is more important to them than their identity as Africans, Nigerians or members of an ethnic group.¹ In Nigeria, religion is a part of self-being, so if somebody uses religion to justify something, it will draw attention.

Another reason for Boko Haram's appeal is the region they started in. Northeastern Nigeria (Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states) has some of the worst human indexes in Nigeria and in Africa: 71.5% of the population live in absolute poverty; more than half of them are malnourished; about 85% are illiterate; and 60% are formally unemployed. If you combine all this with religion, it is a time bomb waiting to explode.

Boko Haram's attractiveness can also be explained by the way it started as charity organization catering for vulnerable people. Its first leader Mohammad Yusuf had his own mosque. He gave start-up capital to unemployed youth and bought them motorbikes – which became an important symbol for Boko Haram. He provided for widows and orphans. As a member of Boko Haram, you were guaranteed that if you had no job, you would be taken care of and given a minimal start-up and in case you died, your wife and children would be taken care of. Mohammad Yusuf had a large farm where he allowed people to cultivate. He also had a court where he presided over as a judge and settled legal and litigation cases.

Boko Haram took on the economic responsibility of the state, providing access to basic amenities, in a context where Nigerian politicians were known for their ostentatious lifestyle and their corruption. According to John Burton's State Failure Theory, when the government is incapable of attending to the legitimate concerns and demands of their citizens, and provide political goods such as education, healthcare, infrastructures, employment opportunities, and a legal framework for law and order, the government loses its legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens, many of whom would then transfer their allegiances to more responsive authorities like religious or clan groups, or even go the extreme and resort to terrorism. Even if people did not believe in Boko Haram's ideology, they supported it because the group gave them access to basic amenities that the state did not provide.

Mohammad Yusuf also gained attention through the jurisprudential arguments he had with other Islamic scholars who did not believe in his ideology. Those arguments happened in mosques and were recorded, so many people were able to follow them. It made Mohammad

¹ Quoted in Pew Forum on Religion and Public, Washington D.C. Robert Ruby and Timothy Samuel Shah. Nigeria's presidential election: the Christian-Muslim divide. 21.03.2007. <http://www.pewforum.org/2007/03/21/nigerias-presidential-election-the-christian-muslim-divide/> (01.07.2016).

Yusuf known as a charismatic leader. He came to be the leader every other religious leader seemed to be 'against', which brought a lot of sympathetic attention to him and his group.

Boko Haram members cut across all age groups, all income groups and even all education levels: from semi-illiterate and unemployed youth to university lecturers, students, bankers, commissioners, and even state officials such as Buji Foi.

2.4. Funding

As Boko Haram gained importance in Northeastern Nigeria, politicians started seeking the group's support in elections. Mohammad Yusuf is believed to have allied with governorship candidates in Borno and Yobe states. In exchange for funding, he gave their election bids considerable boost by painting their opponents as apostates, as people who do not want the development of Islam. This tactic worked each time Yusuf supported a candidate.

Boko Haram also got funded through membership dues: members had to pay 100 Naira (about CHF 0.35) every day to help develop the cause of the organization.

Mohammad Yusuf's preachings were another source of funding: they were recorded and sold on CDs all over Northeastern Nigeria as well as across borders in Chad and Niger.

Boko Haram was also funded through Zakat, a Muslim charity that rich persons are supposed to pay to the poor every year. Rich members and sympathizers paid their Zakat to the organization.

3. Evolution of the insurgency after 2009

3.1. The events of July 2009

The events of July 2009 were a turning point in Boko Haram's evolution. After that, it stopped being a charity organization and changed into the terrorist group we know today.

The story starts with the 2007 governorship election in Borno state. Boko Haram's support was a pivotal decider to help the candidate Ali Modu Sheriff win the election. The agreement he made with Mohammad Yusuf prior to the election was that if he won, he was to pay 50 million Naira and give 50 motorcycles to the group. He also promised that he would implement Shari'ah in Borno and make it an Islamic state. After winning the election, he paid the money and gave the motorcycles. But Borno was not a Muslim-dominated state; it had about an equal number of Muslims and Christians. It was thus impossible for the governor to just implement Shari'ah as he had promised.

This led to an important fallout between the governor and Mohammad Yusuf. Yusuf started branding him as an apostate. In the beginning of 2009, Boko Haram started a campaign of civil disobedience. Mohammad Yusuf gave himself the power to decide which laws his followers would comply with and which they would not. The government realized that they were facing the emergence of a parallel state led by Mohammad Yusuf and Boko Haram.

In July 2009, the government passed a new law according to which people riding motorcycles had to wear helmets. Boko Haram members refused to comply with the law. Early in July, the police arrested Boko Haram members who went to a funeral procession without wearing helmets. Tensions were already very high and this was the tiny spark that blew everything off. Boko Haram started attacking police installations on July 26 and the police counterattacked. On July 28, the group's mosque was razed down by the police and a lot of their houses were burnt. Many members were arrested and killed. Mohammad Yusuf himself was arrested on July 30. Not long after his arrest, he was extra-judicially murdered without trial.

Many Boko Haram members escaped and went underground. Some of them went to Al-Shabaab training camps in Somalia. When they came back in 2010, they organized one of the most successful prison breaks in the history of Nigeria: they broke out all their members arrested in 2009 from the Bauchi prison. Boko Haram came out as a relaunched group using sophisticated weapons: improvised explosive devices (IEDs), suicide bombings, kidnappings. This is how they developed into the organization as we know it today.

3.2. Organizational changes

3.2.1. Leadership

After Mohammad Yusuf was killed in 2009, his second-in-command Abubakar Shekau became prominent as the new leader of the group.

3.2.2. Membership

Before 2009, people would become members of the group voluntarily. Some of them were motivated by the hope that they could create an ideal society and that an Islamic state would solve Nigeria's governance and corruption problems, others were motivated by the economic advantages they gained as members.

After 2009, the focus of the group changed: they started to use attacks and bombings in order to bring the government to the disadvantaged end of the negotiating table. They thus lost the sympathy they previously had in the society and it became impossible for them to gain free conscriptions. So they turned to other means like kidnappings and abductions. The best-known abduction is that of the Chibok girls. This might be the most popular of the abductions but it is not the only one: since 2009, Boko Haram has kidnapped more than 1500 women and girls from different communities in the Northeast. They were initially kidnapped as sex workers in order to ensure the procreation of new Boko Haram members. Later, kidnapped girls started to be used for suicide bombings against soft targets like market places. The group also kidnapped young boys to help them with the militant aspects of their activities. Beside this, they paid people to carry out attacks, using the economic incentive to attract membership.

3.2.3. Funding

As free donations were not possible anymore after 2009, Boko Haram turned to other means for funding:

- Criminality and bank raids – In 2011, 30 of 100 bank raids in Nigeria were done by Boko Haram, and they were always successful.
- High profile kidnappings for ransom – An Italian and a Briton were kidnapped in May 2011 in Nigeria, but they were killed during a failed rescue mission in March 2012. In February 2013, a French family was kidnapped in Cameroon. It was reported that Cameroon paid Boko Haram 3.14 million dollars to secure the release of this family. In addition to money, Boko Haram usually demanded the release of members imprisoned in Cameroon or Nigeria.
- Threats – Boko Haram wrote letters to communities and asked them to donate to the Islamic cause if they did not want to get killed. In this way, members of the community were pressured into giving money to the group.
- Attacks on communities – Boko Haram took over communities and razed down places to get food and cattle.

3.3. The question of international linkages

After 2009, there started to be assumptions about Boko Haram's internationalization and its linkages with jihadist groups outside of Nigeria, like Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the Sahel, Ansar Dine in Mali, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and later even ISIS. Because of the porosity of borders in the region and the proliferation of small arms from Libya, people believed it easily. But there is little evidence to support such assumptions.

Ms. Abdulazeez draws attention to the possibility that Boko Haram's assumed international connections with terrorist groups were exaggerated for propagandist reasons. Both Boko Haram and the Nigerian government benefited from asserting that there were connections with AQIM, ISIS and other terrorist groups.

In 2012, Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to AQIM in a video posted on YouTube. Three years later in March 2015, Boko Haram shifted allegiance to ISIS and renamed itself "The Islamic State's West African Province". For a group which started as a local insurgency in Nigeria, being quoted in the same sentence as Al Qaeda or ISIS gave them prominence and

attention. Boko Haram wanted the world to talk about them, they wanted to be taken seriously, so they had an interest in people believing they had international connections.

The Nigerian government also had reasons to speculate about Boko Haram's international linkages:

- It was face-saving for them, as it justified their inability to successfully confront the group: the involvement of Al Qaeda or ISIS would be an excuse for their lack of success.
- It helped them gain international attention. Since 09/11, the United States' (US) government has been wary of anything that could be related to Al Qaeda, so they are prone to helping and giving security aid to countries facing terrorism.
- They were trying to frighten the group: if they said that Boko Haram had international connections and if the US were coming to help, they hoped that it would make the group give up and come to the mediation table.

It is important to understand that Boko Haram, ISIS and Al Qaeda are three distinct organizations: they have no historical antecedents or similarities in organizational structures or in their cause.

- Al Qaeda is an anti-Western and especially anti-US organization supporting insurgent groups to fight US-backed governments across the world. They would not kill Shiites or other Islamic groups, because they think it would be detrimental to the broader Jihadist project.
- ISIS is an offshoot from Al Qaeda, which they believe is not brutal enough. They play on sectarian divisions between Sunnis and Shiites and would not hesitate to kill both. Their major concerns are the 'apostate' regimes of Abad in Iraq and Assad in Syria.
- Boko Haram was a local insurgency which became a terrorist group. Their initial resentments were against the Nigerian government – which they believed murdered their first leader without trial – and all its representations. They have haphazard targets, ranging from school children to religious leaders and even former allies. They are concerned with bringing Nigeria to the disadvantaged end of the negotiating table.

While it is possible that these organizations have some kind of uniformity in trying to create an Islamic state, it is not enough to say that they are connected with one another or are extended branches of one another. Al Qaeda and ISIS are actually competing for the allegiances of smaller jihadist groups. We should be careful about thinking that Boko Haram is an extension of any of them. It would need a lot more evidence before we can make such assumptions.

3.4. The response of the Nigerian government

When Boko Haram became prominent, Nigeria's president was Goodluck Jonathan, a Southerner from the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). The government's first response to the insurgency was highly politicized.

They first presented Boko Haram as a northern problem: as long as it stayed restricted to the north, then it was not 'a national problem'. Then they started accusing northern elites and politicians of fueling Boko Haram's attacks in order to make the country ungovernable for Jonathan's government. This can be linked to the preparation of the 2015 presidential campaign: Goodluck Jonathan's main opponent was a Northerner, Muhammadu Buhari from the All Progressive Party (APC). In reaction, people from the north started accusing Southerners of using Boko Haram to disrupt elections. If there was chaos in the north, elections would not take place there and there was no way Buhari would win.

This sort of politicized response stalled any kind of successful analysis of what the group was really about. It stalled any response that could have prevented Boko Haram from becoming the terrorist group it is today. It gave the group the leverage to continue its activities and the footing they needed to instill fear in the population and eventually in the security apparatus.

Eventually, the government woke up and realized that these political assumptions were not true and not working. In May 2013, a state of emergency was declared on the three most affected states: Borno, Yobe and Adamawa. The government started a typical military response: they introduced fighter jets, put down telephone lines and set up the Civilian Joint Task

Force (CJTF), made up of both military and civilian vigilantes. Approached by Cameroon whose borders were endangered, the African Union decided to set up a Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF) to fight Boko Haram. But this military response was not very effective at the start.

In March 2015, the Northerner and former General Muhammadu Buhari won the presidential election. One of his first moves as president was to shift the military base from Abuja to Maiduguri in Borno State. He coordinated military efforts with other countries and started an anti-corruption fight in the military. These are some of the reasons why the military now seems to be making headway with fighting Boko Haram.

But the Boko Haram insurgency will not be totally eradicated by a purely military response. The government needs to combine it with non-military approaches if they want to eradicate Boko Haram in the long run. They also need to pay attention to the proliferation of arms in the Northeast and to the management of the CJTF and of vigilantes, who could become a nuisance to the society.

4. Humanitarian displacement

4.1. Distribution of displaced persons

As of October 2015, the Boko Haram insurgency had led to a displacement of 1.9 million people in total. The spatial distribution was the following:

- 1.6 million IDPs in Maiduguri, the 'safest' part of Borno state;
- about 144'000 IDPs in Yobe state;
- about 135'000 IDPs in Yola, Adamawa state;
- 44'800 refugees in Cameroon;
- 15'000 refugees in Chad;
- over 105'000 refugees in Niger.

Cameroon also hosted displaced people from the Central African Republic, which means the country had over 200'000 refugees in total. This is a strain on social, political and economic facilities in the country. Cameroon, Niger and Chad do not have the same economic indexes as Nigeria, they do not have the means to take so many refugees.

From 2015 onwards, Cameroon and Chad started returning refugees to Nigeria, against the non-refoulement principle of the refugee Convention. Cameroon claimed that Boko Haram was infiltrating its borders as refugees and carrying out attacks in the country, which was an excuse. The people were returned to areas in Nigeria which were not safe enough for them to live in, so they became IDPs in Nigeria. This means that we should be careful with numbers, as they are very fluid and are continuously changing.

4.2. The management of displacement

The majority of persons displaced by the Boko Haram insurgency stay in host communities. They do not have to go through a complicated documentation process. Internal migration in Nigeria is very easy: when you move to a new place, you do not have to register to the city council or to make yourself known to the authorities.

The process is more difficult for displaced people who do not stay in host communities and need to be absorbed into camps. They first have to find a camp, and then there is some kind of documentation to go through: this is the only time they need to register themselves.

Only 10-11% of IDPs from the Boko Haram insurgency actually stay in camps. As the country does not have a single building that has all the necessities and requirements of a displacement camp, IDPs are sheltered in other buildings and institutions like schools, palaces of traditional rulers, churches and mosques, Youth Orientation Camps, tertiary institutions, government buildings and so on.

The government agency NEMA (National Emergency Management Agency) is responsible for the management of displacement in Nigeria. They are supported by international organizations

like the UNHCR, IOM, the Red Cross, UNICEF, Médecins sans frontières and USAID.

4.3. Living conditions in the camps

This part is built on the results of an ethnographic study Ms. Abdulazeez carried out in IDPs camps in Nigeria in 2014. She focused especially on the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) camp in the heart of Maiduguri. She chose this camp because she had military contacts who could ensure her safety there. As the security situation was very tensed at that time, she did not really have another choice.

4.3.1. Shelters

The NYSC camp is made of permanent buildings originally built for youth orientation camps once a year. There are also tents provided by NEMA, the UNHCR, UNICEF or other international organizations.



NYSC camp: permanent buildings and tents, 11.04.2015 ©Medinat Abdulazeez

Those who cannot stay in buildings or in tents build their own makeshift tents individually. The camps are overcrowded and the access to living spaces is very scarce.



NYSC camp: makeshift tents & inside the shelters, 11.04.2015 ©Medinat Abdulazeez

4.3.2. Food and nutrition

The government is supposed to provide the basics. Some camps are lucky enough to have government-employed cooks, but it was not the case in the NYSC camp: displaced women were organized into cooks. Government officials say they feed displaced people three times a

day with assorted nutritional meals. But in reality people are usually fed only once in a day and they eat the same things every day.



NYSC camp: cooking area, 11.04.2015 ©Medinat Abdulazeez

4.3.3. Health and hygiene

There was a camp clinic at the NYSC camp. What was constantly available were immunization kits for children. But aside that, there were hardly any drugs for specific ailments, not even for the most common ones like fever, malaria, diarrhea. Very serious health cases were transferred to the government hospital, but as drugs are not free, people would have to sell their supplies to be able to get access to healthcare.

The next picture shows a water source next to a bin and close to living quarters, which is very unhygienic for a place already overcrowded. Health issues in the camps are not taken care of seriously.



NYSC camp: hygiene conditions, 01.02.2015 ©Medinat Abdulazeez

4.3.4. Security

Before you enter the camp, there are armed guards who interrogate you. They are especially weary of researchers and journalists, because there are things going on in the camps that they do not want people outside to know. If you are a researcher or an analyst, they do not allow you to be free to do research in the camps.

Security soldiers outside also search people going in. But this organized security situation did not prevent bomb blasts to happen in camps, for instance in Malkohi camp in September 2015 and in Dikwa camp in February 2016, which means that people are not kept safe.

4.3.5. Education

As many former schools are used as camps, education has stalled in many places. UNICEF has introduced the shared school initiative and it is going on in most of the camps. They provide books and educational material for IDPs. But the conditions are difficult: pupils are crunched into places and age grades are mixed.

4.4. The limits and opportunities in the camps

There are different problems with the way displacement is managed in Nigeria. IDPs lack access to relief materials. Funds for the camps are embezzled by state and camp officials, who swell the number of IDPs to get even more funding. Human trafficking is taking place in the camps: many women, young girls and children are trafficked outside the country.

However, many IDPs have found unexpected ways to cope with their predicament. For instance, selling their relief material for some time allowed some of them to have a startup and develop some kind of economic activities in order to sustain themselves. People develop coping mechanisms. There are stalls in camps where people, especially women, sell tiny things to be able to survive.



NYSC camp: coping mechanisms, 11.04.2015 ©Medinat Abdulazeez

5. Boko Haram's impact on daily life

Boko Haram made terrorism and violent extremism to become the first identity that Muslims are known for in Nigeria. It takes other kinds of identities away from them. As a Muslim in Nigeria, you now have to assert yourself. It is a hard task to convince other people that being a Muslim does not mean that you support Boko Haram. People in Nigeria have battled with religious crises and religious differences for long, but Boko Haram brought this religion issue much more into the consciousness of social relations.

Social relations and everyday life in Nigeria have changed totally. You would very rarely see a military uniform on the streets before Boko Haram in Maiduguri, Kano, Kaduna, Abuja, Jos and other northern cities. Now there is a military checkpoint every 20 meters. If you are a woman wearing hijab or even a man wearing a turban, people think you are a Boko Haram member and you are hiding a bomb somewhere. Nigeria has become this tensed militarized society where you see military people everywhere. There is a continuous feeling of uncertainty and of not being safe in your own community.

But at the same time, life just goes on and people find coping mechanisms. One day in Kaduna, Ms. Abulazeez passed through a place where they had been a bomb two hours earlier. She could not have guessed that there had been a bomb, because life had gone back to normal again. The police had come and cleared everything. People have put it in their consciousness that life must go on. They had to incorporate this security situation into their daily lives and now they are somehow coping with it.

6. Doing research in the camps

When she decided to do ethnographic research in IDPs camps, Ms. Abdulazeez did not realize how difficult it would be to gather data. Access to camps was difficult and access to people much more. The fear of being ejected from camps by officials prevented displaced persons from sharing freely their experiences, especially when camp officials were present. A lot of suffering in silence was going on in the camp and the people's helplessness was palpable. Camp officials and government officials were also not amenable to share distinct details of their operations and activities especially against the back-drop of corruption, embezzlement and diversion of relief and non-relief materials going on in most camps.

Ms. Abdulazeez learned to listen to what was not being said. She learned the act of 'actors observation' and seized opportune moments to get unguarded conversations with actors involved.