

## **Boko Haram, the West, and the Power of Perception: Boko Haram's Actions and Western Responses**

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### *Resources, Militancy and Organised Crime Programme*

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#### **Abstract**

The recent Boko Haram kidnapping has increased the group's publicity and internationalized the conflict. Although it has become clear that Nigeria is unable or unwilling to handle the militancy on its own, there are issues that arise from internationalizing the conflict. These include the problematic narrative of the conflict in the West and shifting responsibility away from the Nigerian government. Also significant is the classification of Boko Haram as an international problem, naming the group a foreign terrorist organization, and sanctioning them as a part of al-Qaida.

*What had begun in 2002* under

Mohammed Yousef as a Northern Nigerian struggle to alleviate grievances and pursue the implementation of Sharia, gradually grew more violent and developed an increased focus on fighting the government. Boko Haram is now under the command of Abubaker Shekau, who has advocated increasingly violent methods.

The organization has gained more notoriety through a single act, the kidnapping of more than two hundred schoolgirls, than they have been

able to achieve through any other attack since the group's inception. Traditionally having only been concerned with the Northern Nigerian states, the recent kidnapping and bombing campaigns have highlights to the international community the group's gradual expansion of violent activity across borders and further South. This has been combined with a heart-wrenching story to create an imperative for the international community to act against the jihadists. So far, the US, UK and France have become actively involved and others such as China and Israel have also offered their help.

In this instance, there seems to be a lot of merit to the idea of the CNN effect: the idea that media can exert influence over foreign policy, either by demanding action, impeding it, or

forcing it to move quickly. Media has power over perception, it controls narratives and therefore exerts a degree of influence over the response to current events. The argument for greater Western intervention in Nigeria follows a familiar narrative about the responsibility of the West to protect vulnerable women and girls from violence and oppression delivered by 'bad' Muslims. However, despite public justifications of altruism, the US and others in

the international community have used such rhetoric to advocate intervention in the past, with disastrous results in Iraq and Afghanistan.



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Although it is a common trend for the media to declare that those who commit terrorist acts are insane or otherwise irrational, there is typically a perverse logic to be found in the violence. In the case of Boko Haram, it is particularly tempting to refer to members of the organisation as crazy and irrational when Abubaker Shekau has threatened to sell young girls into slavery and declared war on Abraham Lincoln along with almost every other Western leader<sup>1</sup>. However, that publicized video and others like it can be seen as part of a broader trend of theatricality and social media promotion among Jihadist groups. Essentially, terroristic violence requires both victims and observers to be effective. In their choice of a target, Boko Haram has made a calculated move. The significance lies in the

fact that the girls were supposed to be protected by their families, who were in turn supposed to be protected by their government. The rationality of the kidnapping can be explained as an act that was intended to be both coercive and humiliating to the people of Northern Nigeria and the country's government. Boko Haram has spread shame and victimhood to the whole of the community and has continued its objective of eroding trust and legitimacy of the state.

To this end, one can say that Boko Haram has been successful, especially considering the Nigerian government and military's slow response, which required internal and international pressure before it actualized. According to the Economist, "in the month it took the government to cobble together its pitiful response, many of the most recent victims will have been disbursed throughout the Sambisa forest, an inaccessible scrubland forty times the size of London, or taken over the border into Cameroon and Chad."<sup>2</sup>

In addition, even with international assistance, which is short of putting boots on the ground, the Nigerian Army is still badly equipped, poorly trained, corrupt, demoralized, and out-armed, making it exceedingly difficult to carry out a rescue mission. There is also evidence that attacks on schools had an effect on parents, as

many are considering removing their children from school, or have already done so<sup>3</sup>. Considering the fact that there has been a significant disparity between education statistics in the North and South of Nigeria, it is likely that continued attacks will continue to intensify the education gap<sup>4</sup>. In summary, violence employed by Boko Haram may be brutal, but it has thus far been effective.



*THIS IS THE FEAR OF MANY LOCAL NIGERIAN JOURNALISTS WHO HAVE ARGUED THAT THE #BRINGBACKOURGIRLS CAMPAIGN IS MERELY A FAÇADE OF ACTIVISM TO PLACE OVER JUSTIFICATION FOR A STRONGER US AND WESTERN PRESENCE IN WEST AFRICA.*

The recent kidnapping and upsurge in Boko Haram's bombing campaign has spawned an international demand for action. Although the US and others have

provided strategic assistance in attempts at recovering the girls, there are some who think that the US should be doing more. Among them, Senator John McCain who has said:

"If they knew where they were, I certainly would send in U.S. troops to rescue them, in a New York minute I would, without permission of the host country.... I wouldn't be waiting for some kind of permission from some guy named Goodluck Jonathan.... I would not be involved in the niceties of getting the Nigerian government to agree, because if we did rescue these people, there would be nothing but gratitude from the Nigerian government, such as it is."<sup>5</sup>

This is the fear of many local Nigerian journalists who have argued that the #BringBackOurGirls campaign is merely a façade of activism to place over justification for a stronger US and Western presence in West Africa. The other justifiable critique of the social media campaign to free the kidnapped schoolgirls is that the nominal support of politicians, celebrities, and other ‘hashtag activists’ will not accomplish anything other than giving the militants free publicity and increasing their notoriety.

Moreover, the recent United Nations decision to add Boko Haram to a list of Al-Qaida associated entities is regarded to be a symbolic move. Symbolic, because although Boko Haram has been subjected to an asset freeze and an arms embargo, there is little likelihood that this will have any effect on their finances. The jihadists do not operate within the formal economy and the group is mainly funded through criminal activities. Suggesting that the UN sanctions are more political than pragmatic, BBC’s Will Ross writes:

“The UN decision suits the Nigerian government which wants to portray Boko Haram as an international issue partly to deflect criticism. The insurgents cross borders but it is chiefly a domestic problem. The kind of travel ban that would suit the vulnerable people in the

north-east would be one which stops convoys of militants roaming freely, dishing out terror.”<sup>6</sup>

Although, Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda both can be considered jihadist organizations, they differ in structure. Boko Haram is largely decentralized into localized cells, making it extremely difficult for the Nigerian military or any Western country to successfully combat the jihadists. In spite of the fact that Boko Haram has received training from Al-Qaeda and AQIM, it has not been acknowledged by Al-Qaeda central leadership as an official affiliate organization<sup>7</sup>.

Recent events have also had a strong impact on the United States, which along with other countries, has sent a team to Nigeria to help locate the missing girls. In light of the current situation, the US State Department has been criticized for not designating Boko Haram as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) until late 2013. However, there seems to be widespread disagreement regarding the motivation of this move. In general, the intelligence community supported designating the group as terroristic back in 2011 because it became clear that the organization had links to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), would have made provision of support to Boko Haram illegal, and would have focused international attention on the group. The argument is that if the State Department, then led by Hillary Clinton, had designated Boko



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Haram as an FTO, the situation would not have spiralled quite so out of control. This argument relies on counterfactual information, hence, it is impossible to say what could have been done.

Johnnie Carson, who acted as assistant secretary of state for African affairs, said that giving the group attention also had the potential

drawback of making the situation much worse. Designating Boko Haram as a terrorist group could have lent the group greater legitimacy, publicity, and the ability to recruit from a wider base of potential militants. Moreover, it would have also aligned the US with the Nigerian security system, which had a history of disregarding human rights abuses<sup>8</sup>. By eventually recognizing the group as an FTO and offering help to the Nigerian government, the US has inadvertently given Boko Haram greater credibility among Jihadists and boosted its international significance. Criticism of the failure to designate Boko Haram as an FTO and the recent UN decision to associate Boko Haram with Al-Qaeda put pressure on the Obama administration to take a strong stance against the group. Of course, further incursion into the South also threatens US interests.

In conclusion, the recent publicity for Boko Haram has put the onus of responding to the group on the international community, and not

on the neglectful state in which the militants operate. The Nigerian state and its army have yet to be held accountable, domestically or internationally, for their lack of action and the corruption within their ranks. Although there

has been some limited overflow into surrounding states, Boko Haram is, in spite of some cross border activity, a mostly domestic insurgency. It is

therefore necessary that the state and Goodluck Jonathan's government be willing to make reforms and improve security in the Northern borderland in order to take control of their own country, even with available international assistance. As large an atrocity as the kidnapping was, it is a symptom of a greater problem: the state's unwillingness or incapacity to protect the North and its inaction thus far. There is a need to restore the rule of law, trust, and legitimacy to the Nigerian state. In the long term, this will mean that Nigeria needs to make a greater effort to combat corruption and build its capacity to respond to the insurgency through reform of the security sector. The recent kidnapping is not an isolated, random incident, but rather part of this wider problem.

Any international intervention in Nigeria, to assist in the current kidnapping crisis or with the broader problems created by the insurgency, ought to be sensitive to local perspectives and needs, and will require



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consent. Greater efforts to be sensitive to Nigerians' fears of a protracted international intervention are necessary to the legitimacy of any international actions. Moreover, it remains to be seen what effects internationalization of

<sup>1</sup> Nossiter, Adam (05/05/2014), "Nigerian Islamist Leader Threatens to Sell Kidnapped Girls," *The New York Times*, available online at:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/06/world/africa/nigeria-kidnapped-girls.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/06/world/africa/nigeria-kidnapped-girls.html?_r=0)

<sup>2</sup> *The Economist*, (16.05.14), "The Odds are Bad", *BaoBab Africa Blog*, available online at: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/baobab/2014/05/nigerias-kidnapped-girls>

<sup>3</sup> *Al-Jazeera*, (10.05.14), "Boko Haram fuels fears for Nigerian education," available online at:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/video/africa/2014/05/boko-haram-fuels-fears-nigerian-education-201451043247177533.html>

<sup>4</sup> Coleman, Isobel and von Wendel, Sigrid (10/05/2014), "Beating Boko Haram", *Foreign Affairs*, Council on Foreign Relations, available online at:

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141409/isobel-coleman-and-sigrid-von-wendel/beatng-boko-haram>

<sup>5</sup> Tapper, Jack and Pham, Sherisse (09/05/2014), "McCain on Nigeria: I would've used every asset, satellite, drones, to go after Boko Haram," *The Lead, CNN*, available online at:

the conflict, increased publicity and notoriety, and international persecution of the jihadists will have on the development of Boko Haram's goals and the means of violence that they use.

<http://thelead.blogs.cnn.com/2014/05/09/john-mccain-boko-haram-nigeria-kidnapped-girls/>

<sup>6</sup> *BBC News*, (23.05.14), "UN committee imposes sanctions on Nigeria's Boko Haram," available

online at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-27529566>

<sup>7</sup> Principato, Brian (2013), "Boko Haram: A Look Inside the Group Trying to Topple Nigeria's Government by Terrorizing Its Citizens," *PolicyMic*, available online at: <http://www.policymic.com/articles/50907/boko-haram-a-look-inside-the-group-trying-to-topple-nigeria-s-government-by-terrorizing-its-citizens>

<sup>8</sup> Gordon, Michael R. (08/05/2014), "Schoolgirl Abductions Put Scrutiny on U.S. Terrorism Strategy," *New York Times*, available online at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/09/world/africa/schoolgirl-abductions-put-scrutiny-on-us-terrorism-strategy.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/09/world/africa/schoolgirl-abductions-put-scrutiny-on-us-terrorism-strategy.html?_r=1)

## **ABOUT OUR PROGRAMME: RESOURCES, MILITANCY AND ORGANISED CRIMES IN WEST AND HORN OF AFRICA**

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### Brief Background and Scope

Africa's GDP is the most rapidly growing of any continent but corruption, crime, and militancy are rife. Much of this centres on the continent's wealth of natural resources, including petroleum etc.

Foreign investment in Africa has grown exponentially over the last decade and will continue to rise.

Consequently, foreign & African governments and criminal/militant groups' interests and sphere of influences will clash with increasing intensity over the coming years. This will have direct

implications on energy, regional and global security agendas. Furthermore, areas such as West and

Horn of Africa regions are strategically located, which enhances their role in the international trade system through shipping routes and transnational linkages etc. The creation of AFRICOM reflects the rising global importance of the region, with the exportation of oil only expected to drastically increase from the continent by 2025. Yet with the region still lacking institutions of effective governance and reliable security structures, the levels of violent insurgency have jeopardised economic development in countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Mali and Nigeria etc. Different militant groups finance their operations through employment of traditional criminal enterprises, such as smuggling and drug sales. Resources are also exploited for revenue by both criminal organisation and militant groups. Militant organisations such as Al-Shabab and other Jihadists and nationalist movement operating primarily in Somalia & Sahel – have exploited the security vacuum that exists in the regions. In addition, issues such as piracy continue to effect maritime security whilst increasing costs for counter-piracy measures. The implications of above is severe on all three fronts i.e. Energy security, regional security and global security. To address these problems and develop solutions, we must now confront all three facets holistically, with due appreciation of their interrelated attributes.

### **Programme's Deliverables:**

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1. Mapping the interplay between resources, militant groups and the dynamics of organised crime in West/horn of Africa.
2. Conflict forecasting and risk analysis of the current and future dynamics of militancy, resources, organised crimes and their repercussions on energy security, regional and global security.
3. Situation analyses on above issues, regional positioning and global powers interests etc.
4. Alternative policy analyses that may serve in policy making on regional and global governance levels
5. Creating a useful guide and knowledge base for stakeholders and public for future oil, gas and aid endeavours in West/Horn of Africa.

### **ABOUT US**

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IISA is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create trans-Islamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends,

issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations and addresses strategic and socio-political issues/crises of the Islamic-world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

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