



Conflicts among Terrorist Groups in Nigeria Boko Haram as a Model

Ousmanou Adama

Researcher Specializing in Ethno-Religious Area Studies, and
Senior Lecturer at Maroua University, Cameroon

Terrorist organization Boko Haram has been committing assassinations and violent acts on a large scale in the Lake Chad Basin. The disappearance of Mohammed Yusuf prompted Boko Haram to change its operational policy in Nigeria. This article investigates the divisions inside Boko Haram by identifying the impact of international changes on the strategic choices of terrorist organizations in Nigeria and the consequent fragmentation of these organizations. It also attempts to understand the reasons of such conflicts and their impact on countering terrorism and peace restoration in the region.

Roots of the Conflict

Boko Haram proved to be one of the most flexible terrorist organizations. It developed rapidly and underwent a transformation in alliances even though its end was declared more than once. Its survival for almost two decades and its ability to maintain its structure is understandable given the changes brought about in its policies and strategic planning. This has prolonged its existence in various forms and through other branches as a result of conflicts within its internal leadership.

Boko Haram survived like other global terrorist movements such as terrorist al-Qaeda and Hezbollah. It was transformed from a local insurgency to a terrorist movement with an extremist ideology that committed violent attacks and that managed to adapt to the fluctuating circumstances and internal changes in individuals, funding, structure, equipment, and technology.

Regarding its origins, Boko Haram stemmed from a small group of young unidentified people in 2002 under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf, who established its headquarters in Maiduguri, Borno state in north-east Nigeria. Between 2002 and 2009, he managed to recruit a large number of young people aged between 17 and 30. Many

joined Boko Haram from impoverished families and unemployed young people from northern Nigeria and neighboring countries, such as Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Boko Haram developed social programs to help those in need and a popular discourse that defended the north against the wealthy and greedy who plunder its resources.

It went through a new phase following the murder of its founder Mohammed Yusuf in 2009, when Abubakar Shekau took over. Boko Haram has ceased to be one entity since 2011 after several factions have rebelled against the parent organization. Subsequently, Boko Haram split into three groups characterized by contradictions in ideology and practices: Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JASLWJ) (the original name of "Boko Haram") led by Abubakar Shekau and the Islamic State's West African Province (ISWAP), ISIS' branch. ISIS acknowledged this branch in 2016 and appointed Abu Musab al-Barnawi, Mohammed Yusuf's son, as its leader instead of Shekau in 2015. This led to the split of Boko Haram. Accordingly, most Boko Haram militants were led by al-Barnawi while Shekau led the remaining elements. Meanwhile, Ansaru, a third group, defected from Boko Haram in 2011 due to its members' opposition to targeting Muslim civilians and Shekau's indiscriminate violence, and has primarily targeted Western interests in the areas where they operate. Despite the variety of factions and classifications, the name Boko Haram is sometimes used to refer to them in general, especially when in doubt about who is responsible for a certain attack .

The murder of terrorist ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019 significantly exacerbated the state of terrorism in Nigeria. ISWA escalated its attacks to target civilian objects, which increased insurgency and division within the terrorist group in the Lake Chad Basin .

Leadership and Policy Conflict

The emergence of ISIS and AQIM had a profound impact on the fragmentation of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. To understand the complexity of terrorist organizations there, the interrelations between them and their leadership must be taken into consideration.

a) Abubakar Shekau's Faction

Shekau met Boko Haram's founder Mohammed Yusuf in 1990 and became one of his deputies. After Mohammed Yusuf's murder, he took over and married one of his former leader's widows. Shekau, however, was criticized for his erratic leadership .

The Shekau faction of Boko Haram adopted a more violent approach, carrying out systematic attacks on Muslims and Christians alike. Moreover, Shekau killed his religious advisors, including Sheikh Abd al-Malek al-Ansari al-Kadunawi and Abu al-Abbas al-Bankiwani. He regarded all Boko Haram opposition as government supporters and as more likely to be targeted. His fighters engaged in violence and in abusing civilians, instigating popular groups to fight them, such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF). CJTF operates heavily in south and central Borno, Nigeria, especially Maiduguri, and across the Cameroonian borders. It also has bases in north-western Nigeria, especially in Niger .

b) Abu Musab al-Barnawi Faction

In August 2016, ISIS appointed Abu Musab al-Barnawi (born Habib bin Mohammed bin Yusuf al-Barnawi) as the leader of Boko Haram instead of Shekau, who refused to recognize al-Barnawi's authority and defected with a part of Boko Haram under its original name "Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JASLWJ)". Meanwhile, al-Barnawi became the leader of ISIS's branch in West Africa under the name the "Islamic State's West African Province (ISWAP)". Shekau's group comprised 1500 fighters and al-Barnawi's 3500. ISIS denounced Shekau on a large scale and considered him a Kharijite.

Reuters reported that United States Marine Corps General Thomas D. Waldhauser confirmed that almost half of Boko Haram's members had defected and formed an independent group because of their dissatisfaction with Boko Haram's compliance with ISIS's instructions. Shekau had defied ISIS orders to stop targeting children in suicide bombings as well as mosques and markets.

The disagreement between the two factions is rooted in al-Barnawi's perception of the population as Muslims as opposed to Shekau who perceived them as non-Muslims. Al-Barnawi promised not to target mosques or markets in northern Nigeria. He made statements to ISIS's media of his determination to eradicate non-Muslims by all means such as gunfire and bombings. Over the past few years, it has been proven difficult for either group to dominate the region under a single authority, even in the wake of several terrorist operations.

c) Ansaru Faction

In 2011, a faction defected from Boko Haram to form Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis-Sudan, also known as Ansaru, to be the most powerful in the northwest region. The

defecting faction comprised some leaders who operated with Shekau, such as military commander Abu Mohammed al-Bushawi, religious advisor Sheikh Abu Usama al-Ansari, and Mohammed Awwal Gombe who led the defected faction .

Nevertheless, several leaders and fighters stayed under Shekau's leadership, including military commanders Abu Saad al-Bamawi and Muhammad Salafi. Shekau came into conflict with Ansaru whereby its leader Abu Usama al-Ansari was killed. Then following the arrest of the remaining Ansaru leaders by the Nigerian government, the defected faction was no longer a substantial threat to Shekau's leadership of terrorist conduct in Nigeria, but rather went into hibernation in respect of what happened and its debilitating aftermath.

According to Terrorism Watch organization, Ansaru focused on the strategic recruitment of members of the most powerful, faithless, criminal gangs and groups in north-western Nigeria that operate in drug trafficking and training. This shift beckons to an alliance between criminals, bandits, and Ansaru in the northwest that became more threatened by terrorism than north-eastern Nigeria. This is due to the synergy between terrorism and crime, which allowed room for creating the most complex terrorist network in the history of Nigeria. Ansaru may not be the biggest terrorist threat in Nigeria, but its ability to resurface shows how dangerous its policy is, which is using the element of surprise in gaining power and subtle expansion in societies.

Conflicts and Community

Some papers show that the flexibility of terrorist networks is based on two things: bureaucracy and community support. Groups with a decentralized organizational structure are more likely to survive the loss of their leaders than hierarchical groups.

This applies to Boko Haram's survival in Nigeria as a terrorist organization. Al-Qaeda in Africa undergoes a certain degree of bureaucracy, where its leader is supported and held accountable by four members comprising the advisory council, each in charge of a different section. Boko Haram mimics only one model of al-Qaeda's factions .

As for community support, al-Barnawi faction has become significantly influential in the past few years and has a larger support group than Shekau's. Regarding the hierarchy and consultation council that was created by appointments and replacements, terrorist factions in Nigeria have enhanced their self-defense given the sudden changes in leadership.

Boko Haram works on shaping the future of terrorism in the Lake Chad Basin and spreading extremism in northern Nigeria. Boko Haram developed, restructured, and resurfaced after maintaining its presence by adapting its ideology, recruitment methods, and operations to the changes occurring where its members operate, despite their ineffectiveness. Despite all limitations and shortcomings, it continues to confront the military action awaiting it.