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On the 27th of December 2015, 50 people were killed in the North-Easternstate of Maiduguri In Nigeria by two women wielding rocket propelled grenadesand suicide vests to.

It is estimated that at least 30 people were killed and more than 90 were wounded in overnightexplosions and shootouts1. These attacks were claimed by Boko Haram, anextremist group originating in the Northern region of Nigeria who from 2008 havebeen responsible for a series of coordinated attacks on civilians. This essay intends to use the Guardian article:” Boko Haram assault onMaiduguri leaves scores dead In Nigeria” as a platform tocritically analyse and examine in detail the Boko Haram assault on Maiduguriwith sustained emphasis on the group and its identity as a terroristorganisation. The aforementioned will be achieved by giving a brief overview ofthe article. An in-depth analysis of the Boko Haram sect will follow and consistof an exploration of the group’s modus operandi, motives, causes, legitimacy and its achievements.

Furthermore, it is my intent to argue thatBoko Haram is a religious terrorist group. As such, I will examine whetherreligion plays as central a role as is often portrayed by the media andNigerian government and other international bodies. This will be followed by adetailed discussion of the term terrorism, the role the media plays in definingthe term and how that influences the classification of Boko Haram under certainsubsections of terrorism. Subsequently, government responses to the attackscarried out by Boko Haram will be explored with emphasis placed on what hasbeen done and what can be improved upon. Lastly, I will make further referenceto the article in question and examine its tone, content and quality todetermine how effective the article was in describing the incident.   The article in question, written aday following the event, starts by reporting on the killing of 50 people in thecity of Maiduguri by Boko Haram. It is very descriptive in its tone and focuseson the casualties inflicted by Boko Haram referring to them as “ religious extremists.” 2 The author also provides littleor no information on the group, paying more attention to the victims and thecasualties involved.

Thus, the article employs an emotive writing style. Furthermore, the article does not delve into wider issues and fails to elucidate on theexact nature of the attack and the motives of the perpetrators.  Depending on how one interpretsthe group, Boko Haram can be viewed as a terroristorganization, freedom fighters, religious fundamentalist or religious fanatics.

3 My Intention is to assessthem as a terrorist organisation. As such, it is pertinent to consider the tactics and methods used by thesect to achieve its motives. Their recruitment process per Blanquart, involvesthe targeting of disillusioned youths, university graduates without jobs andstreet children known locally as Almajiris. 4  Their modus operandi revolves around the useof suicide vests and bombs which they usually detonate in public spaces toeffect maximum damage. Onuoha seconds this argument by stating that the groupcarry out targeted killings, kidnappings and the use of improvised explosivedevices (IEDs) which are carried out almost exclusively in public spaces and targetedat civilians and politicians alike.

5The description above fits the attacks carried out in Maiduguri as reported inthe article.  Identifying the methods ofviolence utilized by the group distinguishes them from Moses Duruji’s suggestion. Their use of violence to influence the government placesthem firmly in the category of a terrorist organisation, rather than a group ofradicalised youths – ventingfrustrations at the government ineptitude on the Nigerian people.

6  However, the labelling of Boko Haram or anygroup carrying out political violence as a terrorist group is extremelydifficult. This is because the term is highly contested and there exists nouniversally accepted definition of the term. Cronin argues that “ terrorism is intended to be amatter of perception and is seen differently by different observers”. 7 With this in mind, Iintend to outline parameters in this essay which I believe constituteterrorism.  Terrorism refers to the deliberate use ofviolence by a group or individuals for the advancement of social, political andreligious goals or for the purpose of spreading fear and influencing thegovernment or civilians. James Lutz contends that for a group to be consideredterrorist in nature, it must constitute the following: “ The use of organized violence andthreats designed to generate fear in a target audience that extends beyond theimmediate victims and is designed to create power in situations where power waspreviously lacking.” 8 Boko Haram certainly fit all the parametersoffered by both myself and Lutz. Their use of suicide bombs, as was seen in theattacks in Maiduguri, were targeted primarily at civilians or ‘ soft targets’, but were also carried out indefiance of the government they seek to abolish.

The age-old platitude that ‘ one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter’9 cannot be applied to Boko Haram as theyinflict casualties not on oppressive regimes but on civilians. Even though theyperceive their victims as infidels or Kufar, and justify their acts as the will of Allah, the use of weapons and tacticsdesigned to inflict mass casualty on civilians is indefensible, irrespective ofthe cause that is being championed. 10 With that in mind it isimpossible from this author’s point to view to label BokoHaram as anything but a terrorist organization. Onuoha offers a different perspective towardsthe definitions of terrorism. He argues that a group becomes a terrorist groupwhen the state labels as such.

11 This state orientated andnarrow definition doesn’t consider the fact that statesthemselves, can be perpetrators of acts of terror. As such, it is perhaps more significant to analyse the Nigeriangovernment’s definition and determine as to whether thegovernment considers Boko Haram as a terrorist group. The Nigerian governmentdefines terrorism as:  “ Any deliberate act done withmalice or forethought which may result in serious harm or damage to the countryand is intended to unduly compel the government to perform or abstain fromperforming an act… Constitutes the use of violenceto seriously intimidate a population, or destabilise the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of the country.

“ 12  This definition is a condensed version of theacts stipulated in the Terrorism prevention act which constitutes terrorism. Whilst the act is too voluminous to quote in this essay, the definition goeseven further to include non-violent acts, knowing of a terrorist act and notreporting it and others. This, therefore, offers a very wide definition of theterm, making it difficult to effectively determine which groups are terroristand which aren’t.  Whilstthe Nigerian government has officially recognized the group as a terroristorganization, Isaac Sampson presupposes that any attempts made by the Nigeriangovernment to classify Boko Haram violence as terrorism creates a “ definitional quagmire” 13 under Nigeria’slegal regime due to such a broad definition. The implications of this will bediscussed further when examining government responses to Boko Haram.

Having established that Boko Haram is aterrorist organization, it is important to specify which category they fallunder. Onuoha arguesthat “ Themain philosophy of the sect is grounded in their interpretation of orthodoxIslam”. 14 Further buttressing thispoint is the fact that Mallam Sanni Umaru, the acting leader of Boko Haramsince 2009 after the death of Muhammad Yusuf, referred to the group as anIslamic revolution15  He further states that Boko Haram is “ opposed toall forms of western education” 16 and strives for “ Islamicsovereignty over Nigeria”. 17 BokoHaram harbour a hybrid of religious and political aspirations and pose a threatto the Nigerian government. As such, they can be grouped as either dissident orreligious terrorists. However, the fact that their actions are motivated firstand foremost by their interpretation of religious doctrine suggests that theyare a religious terrorist group.  Thiscertainly coincides with Gus Martin’sinterpretation of religious terrorism.

Martin states that: “ Religious terrorism is motivatedby the absolute belief that an otherworldly power has sanctioned the use ofviolence for the achievement of glory of the faith”. 18 Through an analysis of Boko Haram’s place on the terrorism spectrum, the overarching motive of the group becomesidentifiable as a complete overthrow of the Nigerian government and theimposition of Islamic sharia law. Freedom Onuoha, a commentator on Nigerianpolitical affairs, argues that the group’s motive is the removal of social vices which have corrupted theNigerian people.

19 He further argues thatthey believe the onus lies on them to create a model Islamic society free from politicalcorruption and moral corruption. 20 This is encapsulated in a statementissued by Boko Haram in 2011 which read: “ We are carrying out these attacks in order to propagate the name of Allah and toliberate ourselves and our religion from the hands of infidels and the Nigeriangovernment” 21  This essay contends, however, thatBoko Haram’s motives are much more layeredthan they appear to be. The suggestion that Boko Haram’s main motive is the imposition of sharia law is indeed tenable. Nevertheless, there are sustained suggestions that the group acts in lieu withcertain high ranking Northern politicians.

A prime example is that of Ali ModuSheriff, former governor of Borno state (where Boko Haram was formed anddeveloped), who was accused of not only funding but aiding and abetting BokoHaram activities. These allegations were levelled against him by the attorneygeneral and chief justice of Borno state and as such can be said to be comingfrom a credible source. 22Whist Sherriff completely denied the allegations, it raises uncomfortablequestions about Boko Haram and its relationship with the state. Furthermore, itbrings to light the possibility that Boko Haram could be used as a private apparatusto assassinate political rivals. Whilst the assertion that Boko Haram is in bedwith Northern politicians hasn’t beenofficially verified, it adds another political dimension to the motives of thesect. The causes of Boko Haram’s Islamic insurgency are equally as contested as their motives. Scholarsoffer a myriad of reasons as to why Boko Haram went from a non-violentreligious group to one of violence and insurgency in the space of a few years.

Ogunlesiidentifies the killing of Muhammad Yusuf in 2009 by Nigerian forces as awatershed moment with regards to the scale, proportion and methods of the BokoHaram sect. 23 Raymond Okoro on theother hand, argues that violence perpetuated by Boko Haram in the North regionof Nigeria is due to deep-rooted socio economic depravity in the region. 24He puts forward the notion that the lack of basic amenities, poor distribution ofwealth and the continued embezzlement of Nigerian wealth by state and federalpoliticians is the main reason for Boko Haram taking up arms and carrying thesort of violence which took place in Maiduguri. Perhaps a more telling argument is offered by Wisdom Oghosa who contendsthat the main cause for Boko Haram insurgency lies in pre-existing politicalconditions unique to the Northern region of Nigeria. 25His argument is therefore that Boko Haram were able to take root due topolitical opportunity –  or in otherwords a lack of political stability in the area. The insipid nature of governancecreated an environment for political and religious forms of terrorism to grow. Heargues that the key to understanding Boko Haram and other terroristinsurgencies in Northern Nigeria lies in an understanding of the NigerianPolitical climate. 26His argument is certainly valid as it supports the failed state theory whichsuggests that when a state loses monopoly over coercive violence there is oftena breakdown of authority and subsequently serves a s a breeding ground for actof terrorism.

27  Whilst all these arguments offerlegitimate causes for the rise of Boko Haram as a terrorist organization, thefact remains that without Muhammad Yusuf, Boko Haram may never have gone downthe path of religious terrorism. Onuoha, seconds this line of argument. Hecontends that the emergence of Yusuf served as a major factor with regards tothe transition of Boko Haram into a group with religious extremist ideals. 28Yusuf, who took leadership of the group in 2003, sought complete disassociationwith any form of western influence. Described as a charismatic individual, hesought to radicalize his followers and instil in them a deep antipathy forsecularization in Nigeria. Isa argues that by dissociating his followers fromsociety and by radicalizing them, Yusuf hoped this will ultimately lead to aviolent uprising against the Nigerian government.

29 Thus it is clear that through thegradual alienation of the sect from society by Yusuf, Boko Haram gradually becamemore radicalized. Despite his untimely death, the violent legacy of Yusufclearly still lives on, if anything it has served to further galvanize thegroup in its efforts as can be seen in the attacks in Maiduguri. The factors explored above offerup a varied analysis of the causes of Boko Haram’s religious extremism. However, it remains unclear as to how central arole religion plays in Boko Haram’s political violence. This Is because most of the causes of Boko Haramextremism put forward by political commentators rarely have religion at itsbase. Most causes, if observed critically, can be traced back to eithersocio-economic, political or psychological roots.

Dan Isaacs for example, argues that the huge disparity in wealth between the oil rich Christian southand the poorer Muslim North led to increased scepticism especially among youth aboutthe nature of western government in Nigeria as it served no benefit whatsoeverto them. 30 Isaacs’ article was written in 2003, around the time Muhammad Yusuf took overBoko Haram. Therefore, it is evident that Muhammad Yusuf would have found iteasy to recruit disgruntled Muslim youths, coaxing them with the promise of achange of government and an introduction of sharia law. This example helps tofurther augment the argument that religion while important, is not the mostcentral factor in relation to Boko Haram’s evolution into a terrorist organization.

It is evident that socio-politicalfactors not religion, contributed more to the sect’s development. Aghedo argues that the northern region has the highestlevel of unemployment especially among youths in Nigeria. He furthercorroborates the argument made above by postulating that the low level of humandevelopment in the area provides a fertile breeding ground for Boko Haram andother such groups31However, it is important to note that Boko Haram has over the years morphedinto a quasi-religious sect, using the disgruntlement in the northern region topropagate the use of sharia law for the whole country.  Having analysed the causes, methods and motives of Boko Haram, it is germane to the overall analysis ofBoko Haram to include a probe into the sect’s achievements or lack thereof. Gauging the success of a terroristorganisation is a difficult if not morbid task. Exploring the death toll accruedthrough the exploits of terrorist groups for example is a rather crude way ofaccounting for a terrorist’s success. Exacerbating this further, is the fact that due to the nature of terroristactivities, media outlets of both Nigeria and western countries rarely write onthe ‘ successes’ of terrorist groups.  Aconsidered approach will be to explore what constitutes success in the eyes ofthe terrorists whilst also looking at to what extent they have made headway inachieving their goal which in Boko Haram’s case, is the implementation of sharia law in the whole country.

Whilst the group has failed to implementsharia law across Nigeria, their increasing use of violence and the failure ifthe Nigerian government to properly handle the sect has led to attention frominternational bodies, thus allowing them to further recruit members and spreadtheir motives. An apt example of this is the kidnapping of 50 girls from the villageof Chibok. Whilst this did not get them any closer to implementing sharia law, they received international attention from this act and on social media werethe hashtag “ Bring back our girls” trended for months, with internationally renowned figures such asMichelle Obama joining in on the movement. 32 Onuoha argues that the fact that Boko Haramhave resorted to the use of violence in the name of Islam signals its “ growing strategic and operational maturityand the possibility of a tactical nexus with other jihadist groups in thefuture”. 33 Attacks such as the Maiduguri incident givetestament to Onuoha’s argument as the use of rocketpropelled grenades and coordinated suicide bombings suggest that they aregetting some form of training or sponsorship from abroad. However, there is no concrete evidence ofestablished operational links with groups such as Al Qaeda or the Taliban. 34  Furthermore the extreme nature of the sectsdemands, coupled with the fact that Boko Haram have perpetuated attacksprimarily on Muslims, means that the group has gotten very little support fromMuslims in northern Nigeria.

35  Thus for every follower gained, Boko Harammake a thousand more enemies. One of the main reasons why the Taliban hasthrived to this day despite America’sconstant attacks is due to their ability to portray the Americans as the enemyand galvanize support from Afghani locals to fight a ‘ Holy war’ against them. Boko Haram do nothave that capacity as they have failed to garner support from locals as their goalof sharia rule across Nigeria is not popular among the Nigerian Muslim population. 36 As previously discussed, even though BokoHaram fits under Nigeria’s definitional parameters of theterm terrorism, the Nigerian government has struggled with the classificationof extremist groups like Boko Haram. The significance of this is telling, as theNigerian government has struggled to formulate a viable counterterroriststrategy and have over the years, been bogged down by an inability to formulatea response to the growing threat posed by Boko Haram.  Laquer argues that the Nigerian state finds itdifficult to classify violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram and as suchstruggle with methods to counter the sect. 37  The Nigerian government have primarily used amix of police and military force to counter the sect. The use of military andpolice forces to counter Boko Haram was widely used from 2003 up until 2011when the government created the Joint Task force, a unit created specificallyto counter Boko Haram insurgency.

The task force has however been accused of indiscriminateviolence and the use of excessive force by Borno state indigenes who are theprimary victims of Boko Haram violence. 38In a damning report, Senator Bakka Ibrahim accused the jointtask force of killing more civilians since its inception in 2011 than BokoHaram have done. 39Byno means do I claim to possess any form of superior knowledge to the Nigeriangovernment. However, their counter-terrorism strategy is clearly defective and needsto be improved.  Botha argues that rather thanstrengthen the state apparatus in response to growing terrorist threats, governmentsshould look to the underlying causes of extremist insurgency. 40This a strategy which I believe should be championed by the Nigerian government. Rather than use excessive force to flush out the extremists at the cost ofinnocent civilian lives, a more nuanced approach needs to be considered. Sampson proposes that an increase in political participation, increased socialamenities, and a general effort to improve the welfare of the poorer NigerianNorth is the appropriate response to boko Haram insurgency.

41I concur with Sampson’s reasoningbut also realise that there is a need for military action as it is unreasonableto suggest that the government should cease from trying to capture a group whohas killed thousands. This essay argues therefore, that while the use ofviolence is necessary to counteract the threat posed by Boko Haram, educational, economic and welfare schemes should be introduced to prevent thesect from further spreading in the long term. Having conducted an in-depthanalysis of the group and theorized on its motives, causes, tactics andachievements, it is apt to determine whether all the factors discussed aboverender their acts as legitimate. An important tool to use when determining thelegitimacy of a terrorist group is the just war theory, which comprises twodimensions- Jus Ad Bellum whichrefers to “ theconditions under which a party may go to war” 42  and Jus In Bello which “ controls the behaviour of any parties involved in war.” 43 Mosleyargues that the just war theory considers motives of war and physicalaggression to be as legitimate if itis “ a last resort, being declared by aproper authority, possessing right intention, imminent threat, having areasonable chance of success, and the end being proportional to the means used”. 44 As analysed above, Boko Haram’s motives are grounded in theirinterpretation of orthodox Islam, which in a nut-shell is the imposition ofsharia law in Nigeria.  they use as abasis to perpetuate violence “ in the name of Allah.” Given that Nigeria is a multi- religious state and allows for bothMuslims and Christians, it is improbable to view Boko Harm’s acts as anything butillegitimate as the religious- tolerance of the Nigerian state implies thatthere is no immediate threat to Islam.

Furthermore, the end which they seek(imposition of sharia law) is not proportional to the means used. Thekidnapping of 250 girls for example in no way constitutes a legitimate means toachieving sharia law as the girls aren’t policy makers and cando nothing with regards to achieving that aim. However, Malosowe contends “ thatit is easy to condemn acts of terrorism as illegitimate from the perspective ofthe condemner but is a different story altogether from the perspective of thecondemned” 45 Malosowe argues further, that “ the conceptof innocence is widely different to terrorist groups than that outlined in theJust war theory”. 46 Therefore, from the perspective of Boko Haram, both civilians and the government are sinnersand as such acts of violence carried out against them are perfectly legitimate. The lack of insight into boko Haram in the guardian article suggests asto just how little is understood about the sect.

Their motives, causes and howthe government should respond remain contested by scholars, politicians andgovernment officials alike. This essay has merely attempted to fill the gapsregarding the what’s and whys of the  sect. One thingremains clear however, until answers are provided attacks such as those carriedout in Maiduguri aren’t going to dissipate anytime soon.