

COMMENT: Boko Haram and Violence in the Name of Religion

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Boko Haram is a clear case of violence being used in the name of religion. Boko Haram is an Islamic terrorist organization in Borno, Nigeria. Like many terrorist organizations, Boko Haram claims that the acts of violence they commit are in the name of Islam, but that is not true. Members of Boko Haram are not regular Muslims – they are fundamentalists. Fundamentalists are a sector of any religion that takes their beliefs to an extreme level, and often incites violence in the name of religion. Boko Haram contributes to Islam’s negative reputation and misuses the religion to incite violence in Nigeria, as well as neighboring countries.

The foundation of Boko Haram is a bit of a mystery. Some theorists claim that the organization was founded in the mid-1990s, but the most popular theory does not put the groups formation until 2002, when it was created by a man named Muhammad Yusuf. According to this view, the group was formed in the town of Maiduguri in northeast Nigeria, where the locals nicknamed its members “Boko Haram” – a combination of the Hausa word “boko,” which combines “Western education” and the Arabic word “haram” (which figuratively means “sin” and literally means “forbidden”) (Adibe, 2014). What began as a group of extremists sharing their ideologies, mostly peacefully, quickly became a deadly Islamic terrorist organization in 2009. After concerns grew about Muhammad Yusuf leading a group of fundamentalists that wanted to create their own state, he was killed by police in 2009 in a raid that led to the death of almost 80 members of Boko Haram. After this attack, the Nigerian government claimed that the group was over. However, Boko Haram came back into society in 2010 and became deadlier than ever (Walker, 2020).

Following the death of Muhammad Yusuf, Boko Haram transitioned from a fundamental Islamic group to a terrorist organization, led by Imam Abu Muhammad Abu Bakr bin Muhammad (Shekau). Shekau was Muhammad Yusef’s deputy, and a much more violent individual. Declared dead several times (for example, in August 2015 by the president of Chad), he continues to resurface and remains the

leader of the sect. Shekau is a ruthless leader who has the final say on every decision in spite the existence of a Shura (decision making) Council (Afolabi & Yusuf, 2019). Under the leadership of Shekau, Boko Haram has not only expanded their area of control in Borno, Nigeria, but they have also become a violent terrorist organization, with their main source of terror being the kidnapping of school children (Adibe, 2014).

So how does Boko Haram use religion to justify violence? Boko Haram believes in a fundamentalist sect of Islam known as Jihādī-Salafism. One of the biggest aspects of Jihādī-Salafism that Boko Haram follows is the praise of the Jihad, which is the idea that one must destroy the enemies of Islam. The following of this extreme religious view was a huge factor in the creation of Boko Haram, as the group started out as a fundamentalist teaching group that taught the Jihādī-Salafism (Kassim, 2015). Although the history of Jihad in Western Africa is extensive, Boko Haram has taken their beliefs to an extremist level, even for the Jihad. Boko Haram is an important example of the development of organizations claiming to be a true jihad platform, but attempts to create a new version of the Jihad. In Western African history, Boko Haram is just one of many militant oppositions to rulers being non-Islamic and rejecting the practices and customs that align with true Islam. What makes Boko Haram different from other groups in history is that it is not just militant Islamism, it was created by the emerging radical beliefs, known as Salafism. To help further prove this point, in 2015, Shekau pledged Boko Haram's allegiance to the Islamic State (Voll, 2015).

The Jihad tradition has long standing ties in Western Africa dating back to the 1500s. Originally, Jihad was meant to defy unjust rulers and use violence if necessary, even against other Muslims. The goal of the Jihad has always been to create a safe place for followers of the Jihad to leave in peace among other believers. To achieve this safe place, there are four elements of the Jihad: First a group of students must be dedicated to one teacher, then the group of students retreats from the inevitable prosecution they face, next they begin using violence to spread the message, and finally they create a Jihad run state. Under the original leader, Muhammad Yusuf, Boko Haram was able to complete the first two phases and was slowly becoming violent. Under the leadership of Shekau, the group is well into the third phase – inciting violence – and is attempting to complete the fourth stage, to create a Jihad-run state (Prieto Curiel et al., 2020).

The violence that Boko Haram has inflicted has largely been in the northeastern state of Borno. According to a video by the British Broadcasting Network (BBC News Africa, 2019), Nigeria is primarily divided into two sectors based on religion and wealth. The southern half of Nigeria is mostly wealthier Christians, and the northern half of Nigeria is mostly poor Muslims. Despite this clear economic divide,

there is still some crossover in terms of religion. However, the poor economy of northern Nigeria creates a target rich environment for groups like Boko Haram. Because of the lack of policing or security, it has become very easy for Boko Haram to take over entire cities in Borno, and cause mass panic and violence. Over 30,000 people have been killed and more than 2 million displaced because of Boko Haram (BBC News Africa, 2019).

In 2014, Boko Haram made international headlines when they claimed responsibility for the Chibok kidnappings. On April 14, members of Boko Haram broke into an all-girls government Christian school in Chibok, Borno, and more than two hundred girls were kidnapped. Since that night, many have either escaped, been released, or been rescued in negotiation operations. According to both Boko Haram officials and some of the returned girls, the girls still in captivity have been held as sex slaves or been forced to marry some of the group's soldiers. This kidnapping led Boko Haram to make international headlines, and a campaign (#freeourgirls) was started. Upon the realization that kidnapping was what would gain them international attention, Boko Haram has done many other kidnappings, and Amnesty International (2017) estimates that almost 2,000 women, girls, and children have been kidnapped by the group.

One of the other biggest acts of terrorism that Boko Haram has orchestrated was the Baga Massacre. Between January 3-7, 2015, Boko Haram carried out a string of attacks and mass murders in the northeast town of Baga, in the state of Borno. Although the total number of deaths is unclear, with some reports saying no more than 150 deaths and some saying almost 2,000 deaths, it is clear that significant damage was done. Satellite images over Baga have shown that almost the entire village was burnt down. The massacre started on January 3, when members of Boko Haram stormed the military base located right outside the village of Baga. The military put up little resistance, and Boko Haram made their way into the village and began slaughtering civilians. As Boko Haram militants made their way towards the village, the Nigerian army was stationed to protect the villages that fled. As they were fleeing, the troops left their weapons, and all hope for defense, in the hands of a local defense group, the Civilian Joint Task Force. It is because of the lack of military defense that Boko Haram has been able to commit such acts of terrorism. The Nigerian military often fears that they are no match for Boko Haram's brutality, but that is only because they are not given the same resources as the military in the southern part of Nigeria (Muscati, 2020).

What makes groups using religion as the reason for their violence so difficult to overtake is because religion is one of the most powerful factors in a person's life. When someone is committing violence in the name of politics, it is difficult to stop them, but political ideology is not as life consuming

as religion. Being such a violent religious terrorist organization, it is difficult to negotiate any sort of treaty with Boko Haram because their members would die for the jihad. Söderberg Kovacs (2020) explains that “religion has the potential to transform secular conflicts over worldly issues such as power and recognition into a struggle between good and evil, which transforms the conflict in such a way that compromise is no longer an option” (p. 447). When a conflict is rooted in something like politics, they are fighting for political power, which is something that can often be negotiated. However, as Boko Haram is rooted in religion, they want to create an entire state based on the Jihad, which is not possible. Despite the legal principles of being a recognized state, the Nigerian government does not have the power to grant Boko Haram their own state. Also, even if the Nigerian government was able to meet this demand of Boko Haram, it would be a state full of human rights violations, therefore it would still be resulting in international conflicts. Unfortunately for Boko Haram, and the international community, there is no negotiation with a violent religious organization that would have a happy ending.

Boko Haram is the perfect example of religion being manipulated to justify violence and acts of terrorism. Since 2009, Boko Haram has grown increasingly violent, and shows no signs of stopping. Unlike other terrorist organizations, such as ISIS, Boko Haram tends to keep their violence in Nigeria, and sometimes Niger and Chad. This has caused them to not receive as much international attention. This lack of international attention has only fueled Boko Haram to become more violent. It is an unfortunate circumstance when religion is used in the name of terrorism because it creates a negative impact for all followers of the religion, even those who are not violent.

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