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THE EMERGENCE OF BOKO HARAM: AN ANALYSIS OF TERRORIST CHARACTERISTICS

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Abstract

Boko Haram (BH) is a Nigerian extremist group which emerged only in the last decade, but has rapidly established a reputation for violence. This paper reviews the development and behaviour of BH in recent years, concluding that the group's activities meet the definition of terrorism as systematic use of fear-evoking violence against civilians to achieve political goals. This characterisation is justified in terms of four definitional elements of terrorism, and further supported by comparison of BH with contemporary terrorist groups such as Abu Sayyaf Group and Caucasus Emirate, which espouse an ostensibly similar ideology. BH should not be mistaken for a gang of criminals, freedom fighters or religious fanatics. The group is capable, driven, and should be understood as a modern terrorist organization.

Keywords

Boko Haram, Nigerian terrorism, terrorism characteristics, Abu Sayyaf Group, Caucasus Emirate

INTRODUCTION

Boko Haram (BH) is a complex organization which views itself as fighting a holy war against the Nigerian state. BH is now a persistent feature of the Nigerian threat environment, having pursued escalating campaigns of violence since 2010. This paper suggests that BH can be described as a terrorist group because it (1) pursues political goals, (2) is a non-state actor, (3) systematically uses violence against civilians, and (4) aims to spread terror in a target audience. Comparison of BH with contemporary terrorist organizations supports this assessment, militating against the simplistic characterisation of group members as freedom fighters or religious fanatics. BH should thus be understood within the context of modern terrorism.

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF BOKO HARAM

BH is by its nature a secretive group, and accurate reporting on its activities is lacking. Some reports suggest that the group was first formed in the 1990s under various names (e.g., Aghedo & Osumah, 2012; Onapajo & Uzodike, 2012). In 2003 and 2004, a precursor to BH attacked police and government targets in northern Nigeria (Onuoha, 2012). In late 2004, the remnants of the group began to consolidate under the leadership of Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf into what is now recognised as BH (Cook, 2011). Yusuf was a long-term Islamic activist, who promoted strict adherence to Islam and fostered a rejectionist group ideology (Onuoha, 2012). In July 2009, the group engaged in violent rioting that spread across northeast Nigeria and left 800 people dead, including Yusuf (Adesoji, 2010; Onapajo & Uzodike, 2012). After a year-long period of inactivity the group became active again (Cook, 2011), and since late 2010 has been engaged in more frequent and destructive violence.

The Hausa name Boko Haram has become popularised, but the group calls itself by the Arabic name *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Ladda'awati wal-Jihad* ("people committed to the propagation of the Sunnah and Jihad"; Onuoha, 2012). The *Boko Haram* epithet, broadly conveying "Western civilisation is forbidden", was evidently conferred by outside observers in an attempt to capture the group's anti-Western ideology (Onuoha, 2012; Waldek & Jayasekara, 2011). The group seeks to overthrow the secular Nigerian government and establish an Islamic state under Sharia law (Adesoji, 2010).

Although the group's ideology is framed in the discursive language of *jihad*, its motivation can be linked back to worldly grievances. Modern Nigeria is beset by endemic problems of corruption, poverty and political discontent, which are particularly prevalent in the northern states where the dominant religion is Islam (Lewis,

2011). Onapajo and Uzodike (2012) suggest that this creates a social climate in which discontented young men in the region are open to the radical solutions preached by BH. The group seemingly blames the corrupting influence of Western civilisation for Nigeria's problems, and advocates radical Islam as the panacea.

The presidency of Jonathan Goodluck can be cited as a "precipitant" of increasing BH violence (Crenshaw, 1981). The sudden death of President Yar'Adua in 2010 led to the accession of Vice President Goodluck, a native of the Christian southern region of Nigeria, going against the informal arrangement of alternating between southern and northern Presidents (Lewis, 2011). Goodluck retained the presidency against contender Muhammadu Buhai in the 2011 elections. Some sources (e.g., Adesoji, 2010; Aghedo & Osumah, 2012) have also suggested that northern politicians have encouraged and exploited BH's Islamist and anti-Christian agenda for political gain. Taken together, these factors have likely contributed to the relatively rapid radicalisation of the group.

The emergence of BH was driven by this convergence of enabling factors, religious ideology, and underlying socioeconomic and political grievances. BH is of particular interest to the study of modern terrorism as a relatively new group, which has escalated to high levels of violence in a short space of time. BH has also emerged in a country where Islamist rebellion and insurgency have historical roots (Adesoji, 2011), but similarly motivated terrorism largely does not. The emergence of this group can therefore provide some insight into the character of modern terrorism.

DEFINITION OF TERRORISM

"Terrorism" is inevitably a subjective term (Cronin, 2003), but there is a need to attempt to define "terrorism" and evaluate its applicability to BH, not least because the use of this label by governments can have potentially serious implications for the group. Nacos (2008) defines terrorism as "political violence or the threat of violence by groups or individuals who deliberately target civilians or noncombatants to influence the behavior and actions of targeted publics and governments" (p. 33). "Civilians" includes all persons who are not military personnel, consistent with interpretations of the law of armed conflict (e.g., Henckaerts & Doswald-Beck, 2005, Rule 5).

Cronin (2003) further suggests that terrorism involves the use of extra-normative violence to create fear and provoke a reaction in an audience other than the immediate victims. Thus, terrorism can be defined by four key elements: (1) the pursuit of political goals, (2) the non-state nature of the perpetrators, (3) the use of violence against civilians, and (4) the intention of spreading terror and influencing an audience. This paper uses these four elements to analyse the character and activities of BH over recent years.

BOKO HARAM AS A TERRORIST GROUP

Political Goals

The pursuit of political goals (religious or secular) distinguishes terrorist use of violence and fear from other criminal uses (Nacos, 2008). An act of terrorism is motivated by a political goal which benefits a wider constituency. BH's ideology and rhetoric indicate that the group aims to effect political change, which it believes is in the interests of a Muslim constituency. This is reflected in the group name *Jama'atu Ahlis Ladda'awati wal-Jihad*, "people committed to the propagation of the Sunnah and Jihad". *Jihad* translates as "struggle", and BH's rhetoric uses the interpretation of *jihad* preferred by Islamist groups as meaning "holy war" (Bar, 2004). The reference to *Sunnah* indicates the group's preference for Islam as the model for social and political order.

In August 2009, a group spokesperson stated "we have started a Jihad in Nigeria which no force on earth can stop. The aim is to Islamize Nigeria and ensure the rule of the majority Muslims in the country" (Cook, 2011, p. 15). A later statement averred "these attacks we are launching... are meant to propagate the name of Allah and to liberate ourselves and our religion from the hands of infidels and the Nigerian government" (Onuoha, 2012, p. 147). These statements illustrate ideological commitment to political change through violent *jihad*, to create a better society for Nigerian Muslims. This is reflected in the group's choice of targets with political significance, such as government buildings, schools and politicians (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012). BH clearly

views violence as a means to achieve political change, which brings the group within the definition of terrorism with regard to political motivation.

Non-State Perpetrators

The status of the perpetrators as separate from the state is what distinguishes terrorism from other forms of politically-motivated violence (Cronin, 2003). It is fairly self-evident that BH is not an agent of the Nigerian state, not least because the group has violently attacked agents of the state on numerous occasions. From its earliest days the group has espoused an explicitly anti-state ideology (Adesoji, 2010; Aghedo & Osumah, 2012), and it can be asserted with confidence that BH is a non-state actor.

Violence Against Civilians

Societies place normative restrictions on the use of violence. It is the systematic use of violence against civilians which distinguishes terrorism from warfare, in which violence is permitted against legitimate parties to armed conflict (Cronin, 2003). “Civilians” includes state officials and police officers, who are a frequent target of BH violence.

BH began using violence against civilians as early as December 2003, when it was reported that group members murdered around 30 people in a local village (Cook, 2011). From late 2010 to the present, BH has directed waves of violence at civilians, often seeking mass casualties. For example, the group was reportedly responsible for coordinated attacks on Christian churches in Maiduguri and Jos on Christmas Eve 2010, killing 86 people (Onuoha, 2012). In January 2012, the group claimed responsibility for a string of simultaneous explosions across the city of Kano, killing over 200 people (Gourley, 2012). Forest (2012) estimates that over 700 civilians were killed by BH from 2009-2010. Notably, BH has also targeted critical Islamic clerics (Onuoha, 2012), and since 2010 Muslims have increasingly been targets of group violence (Cook, 2011; Forest, 2012).

Radical Islamist groups frequently interpret Quranic law as legitimising acts of terrorist violence in “self defence” (Venkatraman, 2007). BH likewise asserts that the targeting of “infidel” civilians is justified in protecting the Sharia and the Nigerian Muslim community against the oppression of the Westernised Nigerian state. This is reflected in group media statements:

This is a government that is not Islamic. Therefore, all its employees, Muslims and non-Muslims, are Infidels. This is a government which naturally fights Islam.... Mosques were destroyed and punishment for this is death. Therefore, we have the right to kill them all. (Cook, 2011, p. 19)

This discursive construction of its enemies as “infidels” is a form of dehumanisation, which enables group members to transcend moral inhibitions against the use of violence against civilians (Wright-Neville, 2004). Not only does the group frequently direct violence against civilians, statements like the one above would tend to indicate that the jihadist framing of non-Muslim civilians as enemies has also become a feature of the group culture. This systematic use of violence against civilians in defiance of societal norms justifies the description of BH as a terrorist group.

Intent to Terrorise

The final, decisive characteristic of terrorism is the intention to terrorise and influence an audience other than the immediate victims of violence (Nacos, 2008). Terrorists employ violence calculated to inflict maximum psychological impact (Cronin, 2003), which enhances the utility of terrorism as a strategy of influence. A group statement made in August 2012 illustrates such attempts to coerce the Nigerian state:

We are calling on the government to know that once it is not Sharia law that will be adopted in Nigeria, and Quran as book of laws in Nigeria... then the government should not dream about peace in Nigeria [sic]. (Konyehi, 2012, para. 3)

BH employs violence in ways that are calculated to have psychological impact. This is seen in the use of unpredictable and indiscriminate bombings in public spaces: four bombs were detonated in a market in Jos in

December 2010, killing 38 people; a roadside improvised explosive device was detonated in Bauchi in November 2011; an armed attack on a market in Maiduguri in February 2012 killed at least 30 people (Forest, 2012). Random attacks like these give rise to a sense of universal vulnerability.

This is also seen in the use of forms of violence that are outrageous or horrifying, and create fear by “shock and awe”. BH is also the first group in Nigeria to use suicide bombings, with the first attack in June 2011 being followed up by several others (Cook, 2011). Suicide bombings are used because they are particularly shocking and create public apprehension over future attacks (Pape, 2003). The group has also crossed normative societal boundaries by attacking religious services (Onuoha, 2012) and even a children’s playground (Forest, 2012). BH has used motorcycles to stage drive-by shootings and bombings on numerous occasions (Forest, 2012): though this choice is likely motivated in part by operational efficacy, it should be noted that motorcycles are the primary means of travel for many Nigerians (Cook, 2011), and so their prolific use in terrorist attacks could be intended to cause people to become fearful of something they encounter on a daily basis. BH clearly intends its violence to intimidate or terrorise particular target audiences, and this draws the group within the definition of terrorism.

BOKO HARAM AND OTHER TERRORIST GROUPS

BH clearly meets the definition of terrorism as outlined above. It would be instructive, however, to examine how BH compares with contemporary terrorist groups. The United States Department of State maintains lists of designated terrorist groups, which while far from authoritative provide a starting point. In June 2012, BH leader Abubakar Shekau was listed by the Department of State (2012a) as a “specially designated global terrorist”. A comparison of BH against other groups listed by the Department of State further substantiates the characterisation of BH as a terrorist group.

Abu Sayyaf Group (*Grupong Abu Sayyaf*, “group of the father of the swordsman”), based in the Philippines, was formed at some point in the 1980s under the leadership of Abdurajak Janjalani, a charismatic Afghan *mujahid* veteran who advocated an Islamist ideology (Banlaoi, 2006; Filler, 2002). The group emerged as a radical alternative to other separatist groups active in the southern Philippines (Fellman, 2011), and was listed as a “foreign terrorist organization” in 1997 (Department of State, 2012b)

Caucasus Emirate (*Imarat Kavkaz*), based in the Caucasus region of Russia, was created in 2007 by Doku Khamatovich Umarov as an Islamic proto-state (Shlapentokh, 2008; Souleimanov, 2011). In reality, the group seems to operate as an umbrella for a number of regional militant and terrorist groups formed during the Chechen wars (Stewart & West, 2010). The group’s ideology appears to be a calculated attempt to mobilise supporters from a range of Caucasian ethnic groups under a pan-regional Islamic agenda (Souleimanov, 2011), broadening the scope of the Chechen separatist movement. The group was listed as a “specially designated global terrorist” in 2011 (Department of State, 2011).

Comparison of Terrorist Characteristics

Political Goals

The three groups are broadly similar in terms of motivation. Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) is associated with the (predominantly Islamic) Moro peoples of the southern Philippines, and claims to seek justice for the socioeconomic and political grievances of this constituency (Fellman, 2011; O’Brien, 2012). Like BH, ASG views Islam as a solution to worldly problems, and seeks to create an Islamic state in the southern Philippines through violent *jihād* (Banlaoi, 2006). Unlike BH, however, ASG has also frequently engaged in kidnap-and-ransom activities, and exhibits characteristics of both politically-motivated terrorism and selfishly-motivated criminality (Donnelly, 2004). ASG can still be justifiably described as a terrorist group, because these kidnap-and-ransom activities are directed towards raising funds, and thus can be separated from acts of violence intended to terrorise a victim population. ASG also differs from BH in the way that it draws on Moro ethno-nationalist sentiment, in combination with radical Islam (O’Brien, 2012).

Ethno-nationalism is also a feature of Caucasus Emirate (CE). This group can be understood in terms of the confluence of socioeconomic and political grievances, radical Islam, and ethno-nationalism (Souleimanov,

2011). CE aims to establish an Islamic state in the Caucasus through *jihād*, and in fact claims to be the new legitimate authority in the region (Stewart & West, 2010). CE blames the Russian state and corrupt local elites for the suffering of Caucasian Muslims, and these grievances are framed in religious terms (Knysh, 2012). BH, ASG and CE share similar political motivation, although the former does not experience the same strength of ethno-nationalist sentiment in conjunction with its Islamist agenda.

Non-State Perpetrators

Whereas the non-state character of BH is unambiguous, this is not so for ASG and CE. Banlaoi (2006) cites some sources as claiming that ASG was created or controlled by the Philippine government. On balance, however, the fact that the Philippine government has aggressively pursued and killed group leaders (Fellman, 2011; Filler, 2002), would tend to indicate that ASG is not an agent of the state. CE, by contrast, makes the explicit claim of being a legitimate, independent Islamic state exercising authority over the north Caucasus. However, the legitimacy of CE has been vehemently denied by other sections of the Chechen resistance (Shlapentokh, 2008), and CE does not exercise control over territory, and has not received international recognition. It can be asserted that CE and ASG are demonstrably non-state terrorist groups, which BH fits alongside.

Violence against Civilians

BH, ASG and CE each have developed a reputation for ruthlessness. ASG has consistently targeted civilians since its inception, and one source claims that from 1991-2000, ASG carried out 378 attacks killing 288 civilians (Banlaoi, 2006). In February 2004, the group was responsible for the bombing of Superferry 14, killing 116 people and injuring over 300 others (Banlaoi, 2006; Fellman, 2011; O'Brien, 2012). Likewise CE has claimed responsibility for a series of attacks, including the bombing of the Nevsky Express in November 2009, killing 30 people, and the suicide bombing at Domodedovo airport in January 2011, killing 37 people (FSB Claims Foiled, 2012; Stewart & West, 2010). Very little further evidence is required to demonstrate that the groups use violence against civilians in similar ways, drawing BH further into the terrorist fold.

Intent to Terrorise

ASG and CE, like BH, clearly intend for their attacks to influence an audience other than the immediate victims. This is evident in the groups' choices of tactics and targets. For example, ASG carried out simultaneous bombings across three cities in February 2005, killing 10 people and wounding 150 others (Fellman, 2011; O'Brien, 2012). These bombings were likely intended to convey to the public a sense of unpredictability and ubiquitous vulnerability. CE's intent to terrorise is evident in its use of different strategies in different regions. In the north Caucasus, CE uses "diversionary" attacks to single out target groups without harming local supporters (Souleimanov, 2011). Assassinations of local officials and unsympathetic Islamic clerics have been favoured for this purpose. In Russia itself, the group uses indiscriminate mass-casualty attacks, as seen in the Moscow underground bombing of March 2010 which killed 40 people (Stewart & West, 2010).

Discussion

The above review clearly demonstrates how BH fits within the context of other contemporary terrorist groups. In all three cases, the terrorists' actions can be linked back to perceived socioeconomic and political grievances affecting a particular marginalised social group (Nigerian Muslim, Chechen, and Moro peoples). However, in these instances Islam was chosen as the vehicle for framing and expressing issues of social identity, insecurities, and worldly grievances (Juergensmeyer, 2004), and the conflicts are arguably not purely religious in nature. All three groups also emerged from the context of a longer historical trend of rebellion, which gives particular strength to the political motivation of these groups and likely contributes to the terrorists' willingness to engage in violence against civilians.

In definitional terms and in terms of similarity to other terrorist groups, BH can be characterised as a terrorist organization. The group claims to be fighting for the liberation of Nigerian Muslims from oppression but seems

to lack legitimacy with its own supposed constituency (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012). This would tend to undermine any claim that the group members are freedom fighters. While the group uses religious discourse to frame its grievances, it is fairly evident that the underlying grievances are socioeconomic and political in nature. This would tend to undermine any attempt to simply dismiss BH as a group of religious fanatics.

CONCLUSION

The labeling of a group as terrorist is always contentious, as terrorism is an essentially contested term. While a universally-accepted definition remains elusive, four core elements of a definition of terrorism can be identified. This paper argues that the activities of BH meet this definition of terrorism as the use of violence against civilians by non-state groups, where the intent is to spread terror and thus contribute toward achieving political goals. BH also has much in common with terrorist groups like Abu Sayyaf Group and Caucasus Emirate. BH can be characterised as a terrorist group, and should be regarded as such by the Nigerian government and the international community.

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