



Boko Haram: Framing an Islamist Insurgency

Executive Summary

The Nigerian government has been engaged in a narrative struggle with Boko Haram in order to win popular support and end the insurgency. The struggle at the narrative level mirrors the struggle at the combat level, with Nigeria possessing significantly greater opportunities, resources, and allies to win the war against Boko Haram. That the war has not ended nearly five years after it first began, suggests that Boko Haram's narrative strategy connects with northern populations, which in turn has helped it recruit fighters despite the high attrition rate of its forces. Two historical conditions have helped Boko Haram's messaging campaign. First, the narrative taps into deep national divisions (ethnic, religious, political, regional, economic) that have prevented Nigeria from achieving nationhood, almost 100 years after the north and south were joined together. Second, it has exploited Nigeria's political history, especially the visceral antipathy toward military dictatorships, which offers a cautionary tale of oppression, force, corruption, and ethno/regional favoritism and created suspicion and hostility between the military and civil society. This history continues to challenge civil/military relations, allowing Boko Haram to win the support of a tiny but resolute segment of northern society.

Boko Haram has benefitted immensely from the combat environment, especially the proximity of the northeast states of Borno and Yobe to Nigeria's porous borders that is the gateway to the Sahara and Sahel. The ability to recruit fighters from Niger, Chad, and Cameroon as well as the ability of its fighters to move relatively easily across national frontiers have boosted Boko Haram's messaging, enabling it to maintain a straight line between the message, the objective, and the activity. It is this factor – synergy between objectives, message, and activities – that has helped Boko Haram to win the sympathy and at times support of a small segment of the population. The vulnerability of local populations to Boko Haram's messaging is likely to increase if that population is:

- Anti-Sufi and support the implementation of strict sharia
- Mostly illiterate, economically poor, and rural
- Strongly oriented towards informal, madrasa-style koranic education
- An economically deprived community with little or no state presence and associate the socio-economic condition with southern political domination
- Threatened by the apparent Christian coloration of the state, or
- Experiencing negative 2nd and 3rd order effects from the state's counterinsurgency program or resents the way the counterinsurgency is being conducted

The last point is crucial, especially as groups including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have accused Nigeria's security forces of abuses including the extra-judicial torture and killing of hundreds of possibly innocent Muslims from northern Nigeria. The heavy-handed tactics of the military validates the perception of a segment of northern Nigeria Muslims that the government has an ethno-sectarian cleansing agenda and of the government as illegitimate. This behavior also constitutes an overarching narrative for Boko Haram who continues to organize around the 2009 extra-judicial

killing of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, and hundreds of his supporters. Boko Haram frames the government as an illegitimate occupying force carrying out a hidden agenda against northern Muslims. Inconsistent military operations that may violate human rights gives credence to this perception and has created tensions between the military and civilian populations while helping Boko Haram to recruit more fighters.

However, Boko Haram's often indiscriminate attacks, which have disproportionately killed Muslims and led to economic and social paralysis in Borno and Yobe states, has significantly diminished support for the sect among northern populations. This has helped the military's framing of the sect leaders as crazed, illiterate, atavistic sadists sponsored by foreign Islamists in order to sow chaos and lead innocent "good" northern Nigeria Muslims astray. Based on this framing, the government has deployed a mixture of force and persuasion to disconnect the base from Boko Haram's leadership. While force has led to the establishment of the 7th Infantry Division in Maiduguri to take the fight to the insurgents, persuasion has led to the establishment of a Presidential Advisory Committee on Amnesty to work out the feasibility of granting "amnesty" to Boko Haram. The combined effect of these approaches have led to greater collaboration between the state and local populations as exemplified by the formation of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF).

While these steps are commendable, the government clearly needs to do more to end the conflict. First, it (especially the security forces) must renegotiate the social compact with northern Nigeria communities, based on mutual respect, accountability, and trust. Second, it must address the economic, political, and cultural fissures that render northern youths vulnerable to radical Islamist messaging. Many northern communities are essentially ungoverned spaces witnessing very minimal government presence in terms of infrastructures and economic opportunities. Some of these communities are also continuing to battle the encroaching desert (without assistance from government), which has eroded farmlands and rendered thousands of peasants homeless and without sustainable means of livelihood. Third, it must also engage with local communities and the media (local and international) and avoid conflict between its messaging and its actions. This is crucial, especially considering Chinua Achebe's compelling argument that "until the lion tells his own story, the hunt will always glorify the hunter." In this 21st century of the communication super highway, Nigeria's security forces must not depend on others to tell its story; instead, it must seize the initiative and tell its story using the communication tools available even to its detractors, including the internet. The military must not only create blogs, open Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr accounts and post to as many people as possible, it must also engage the various specialty blogs to get its message out. This is immensely important as empirical research has shown that the Internet is widely used in the radicalization of would be terrorists and extremists, and often lends itself to efforts to counter these elements or the threats they pose.

Introduction

In the last several years the Nigerian media space has been dominated by news of the activities of the deadly Islamist terror sect, the *Jama'atu Ahliss Sunnah Lidda-awati Wal Jihad* (Movement for Sunna and Jihad) otherwise known as Boko Haram. The activities of the group have resulted in thousands of deaths and the almost complete paralysis of social and economic life in the northeast states of Borno and Yobe. The deaths and the wider context of the conflict have prompted a range of governmental reactions including calls for amnesty and negotiation, indiscriminate arrests and detention coupled with extra-judicial killing by the police and army, the declaration of "state of emergency" (SOE) in three northeast states - Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe - and the formation of a new army division – the 7th Infantry Division – in Borno state that replaces the previously active Joint Task Force (JTF). While these efforts may have slowed down the activities of the group considerably and led to high-profile capture and killing of top leaders of the sect, it has not stopped their activities, which have escalated in the last several months. The inability of the state to end the despite committing huge human and material resources to the process, continues to be a source of worry, locally and internationally.

One possible reason for the state's limited success is its inability to effectively counter the jihadist messaging of Boko Haram, which continues to reach local and international audiences. The effective transmission of its message is crucial to the group's objective of intimidating northern Muslims into collaborating with the group or to win their sympathy and support. The fear or love of Boko Haram is critical to the group's recruitment strategy. One implication of this is that in order to defeat the group, the Nigerian government must evolve more innovative ways of countering the Boko Haram messaging, which so far has been very successful. Thus, if the Nigerian government must be successful at eroding local support for Boko Haram, it must improve its resources for: (a) understanding Boko Haram's narrative structure, (b) determining the link between this structure and the group's objectives, (c) determining the extent to which the group's messaging has increased or eroded popular support for it compared to popular support for the counterinsurgency efforts of the Nigerian government, and (d) determining the factors – including narrative styles, access to the formal and informal media, alignment or disagreement between stated objectives and actions, historical divisions (economic, political, religious, cultural) between the north and south, and northern perception of a crisis of legitimacy in the President Goodluck Jonathan administration – that have helped to sustain or constrain the insurgency.

There are several reasons why understanding the communication strategies of Boko Haram and the Government of Nigeria are important in the ongoing war between both forces. First, according to Berelson (1948) "some kinds of communication on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions have some kinds of effects." Thus, the press, all over the world, has always been involved in the formation of public opinion, definition of social norms and reality, perception of social policy, presentation and clarification of values and goals, and transformation of culture and society. How the mass media has lent itself to competing communications from Boko Haram and the Government of Nigeria in the battle for the "hearts and minds"

of Nigeria's northeast populations, is important in shaping public perception and ultimately popular support for either party.

Second, in past conflicts between the state and insurgents, the effective use of the media as avenue to create and disseminate insurgent and anti-insurgent narratives has often been the difference between success and failure. For example, during the Nigeria-Biafra war, the effective use of propaganda by Biafra was instrumental to winning international sympathy for Biafra, for boosting the flagging morale of Biafran soldiers, and for prolonging the war. The effective deployment of counter-narratives by the Nigerian government after several false starts eventually proved to be one of the deciding factors for its victory. Third, in modern warfare, which typically occur asymmetrically within states and involves invisible "citizen soldiers" with little or no visible assets and government forces with lots of visibility, governments are at great disadvantage and must shrewdly exploit the formal and informal media to diminish the capabilities of insurgents and restore law and order. Finally, Boko Haram's continued ability to stage high-visibility, high-impact attacks such as the Benisheik attacks, despite the massing of security forces against it, suggests a continuing ability to recruit fighters and to elicit support from a segment of the population.

Considering the intense militarization of the entire northeast region, Boko Haram's recent battlefield successes against Nigeria's military suggest that its messages have salience with a segment of the Nigerian population. This means that the Nigerian government, if it is to seize the momentum from Boko Haram, must show force as well as seek to positively influence the cultural space, especially the dominant cultural institutions that shape, transmit, and reproduce information critical to winning the hearts and minds of northern Nigeria Muslims. In the light of the above, this paper examines the objectives of Boko Haram and the linkages between these objectives and its messaging. It explores some of the known channels through which Boko Haram has spread its messages and how the messages have helped the group to sustain its violent campaign in northern Nigeria. In addition, the paper examines the state's reaction to Boko Haram, especially the tension between what it says and what it does and how Boko Haram potentially exploits this.

The Message

Boko Haram is a dynamic jihadi organization, which broad objectives and the structure of its messaging are in continuous flux. This character makes it extremely difficult to isolate the group and destroy it. In its early days, Boko Haram's primary objective was to Islamize northern Nigeria by encouraging and enforcing the practice of "pure" sharia. The sharia is a body of Islamic canonical law based on the teachings of the Koran and the traditions of the prophet (the Hadith and Sunna). Through the pervasive enforcement of its version of the sharia – a very strict and conservative interpretation based on the teaching of the radical medieval Islamist, Ibn Taymiyya, who arguably has had the greatest influence on radical political Islam – Boko Haram hoped to purge Islam in

northern Nigeria of its troubling strings to Western secular modernism, which had produced unwanted adulterations in the practice of Islam.

Thus, in order for the political authority of the state to be legitimate, that authority must be based on the Koran and the Sunna (acts) of the prophet. The implication of this is that Boko Haram considers the authority of the Nigerian government led by a southern Christian, Goodluck Jonathan, as illegitimate. It also considers the authority of Muslim but secular political leaders in northern Nigeria who it believed have failed in their personal and public lives to uphold the tenets of “pure” Islam, as illegitimate. Consequently, it argues that it is the duty of all “true” Muslims to overthrow these illegitimate governments and institute unadulterated Islamic law everywhere in Nigeria. The construction of cultural logics and political rationale for this ideology represents a powerful organizing principle for Boko Haram. It continues to frame Boko Haram’s messaging and is the primary (and most effective) tool for its mobilization and recruitment.

Boko Haram’s “Islamization” agenda is heavily predicated on messaging. Thus, it has leveraged its deep understanding of the structure of communication in northern Nigeria, particularly how ideas are transmitted in northern communities, to advance Boko Haram’s cause. For instance, it has exploited northerners suspicion of the south (and West), particularly the visceral apprehension about Christianity and the rising southern political influence to rail against what it calls the adulteration of Islam, which it claims is facilitated by the increasing transmission of Western cultural values through Western secular education. Boko Haram believes that the main consequence of the Western Cultural hegemony is that the north has lost its moral fiber and embraced immorality, including corruption, alcoholism, prostitution, criminality, drug addiction, etc. In essence, the north had become eternally damned, unless something was done urgently to reverse the trend.

The leaders of Boko Haram believed that the group was spiritually oriented to redeem northern Nigeria and save northern Muslims from eternal damnation. Key to this reordering is to force a moral and social rearmament through the strict implementation of the sharia and the simultaneous rejection of Western secular education. In place of Western-type schools, Boko Haram sought to institutionalize the pedantic or doctrinaire system of Islamic education, which typically involves Koranic memorization and recitation. It is this objective that has served to define the group. Its street name – Boko Haram – which loosely translated means Western education or more specifically use of English in education and local communication, is forbidden. This message, of Islamic revivalism, resonates with members of local communities, especially illiterate peasants that have historically favored the pervasive local practice of sending children to local Islamic madrasas for Islamic training and mentorship, instead of formal, Western-style schools.

This last point is an important one, especially considering that there is great convergence between earlier rejection of Western education – when it was first introduced in Hausaland – by indigenes who called it *ilimin boko* or “fake education,”¹ and Boko

Haram's new campaign. For instance, in Borno State, which is Boko Haram's birthplace, only 2% of children under 25 months are vaccinated; 83% of young people are illiterate; and 48.5% of children do not attend school. The fact that Hausa language is widely spoken all over northern Nigeria, even among the Kanuris of Borno and Yobe States, has ensured that Hausa is central to the communication process of Boko Haram, which further wins it sympathy and support from illiterate local Muslim populations. Moreover, certain northern political leaders, anxious about their apparent loss of national political power, were willing to fuse Boko Haram's campaign against "Western cultural hegemony" with its own rejection of southern political domination framed as an "identitarian quest in Islam."² As Mazrui argues, the sharia became the tool for mobilizing northern Nigeria against the political state led by a southern Christian. It is in fulfillment of this objective that Boko Haram has carried out indiscriminate attacks against schools, teachers, and students, which sends the message that it is against formal Western education, especially the use of English as the official language of instruction in schools. Similarly, its reconstruction of the Islamic principle of *takfir* enables it to delegitimize and attack Muslims who attend or work in Western-type schools.

In more recent times, especially following renewed efforts by the state to brutally suppress the rebellion – a measure that is consistent with its history of aggressive and forceful reaction to all forms of civilian dissent – Boko Haram's objectives and messaging have changed significantly. While still casting itself as victim of symbolic or state violence that systematically targets "true" northern Nigeria Muslims and their values and modes of cultural expression, Boko Haram has expanded its goals to include liberating northerners (particularly northern Muslims) from the political and cultural dominance of the south/West, protecting Islam and Muslims all over the world, defeating Nigeria's military, and seizing and administering territories in northern Nigeria. These objectives serve different functions: entrenching Boko Haram as a global Islamist movement worthy of the support of global Islamist movements; creating a south versus north or "we" versus "them" narrative that mobilizes and exploits historical divisions between the north and south; and framing Boko Haram as a legitimate and viable alternative coercive force or system of local governance. The last two points are crucial, especially since Boko Haram's ability to demonstrate itself as a viable and legitimate alternative coercive force creates a polarizing effect in which people are forced to choose between the apostate *kafir* state led by southern elements – with its *kafir* unprofessional security forces who unjustifiably kill innocent northern Muslims – and the genuinely Islamist pseudo-state, Boko Haram, which is dedicated to protecting and liberating northern Nigeria Muslims and to rule them "Islamically" and compassionately. To achieve this goal, Boko Haram must convey the message to the people that the south-led state would kill Muslims indiscriminately and disproportionately in an effort to entrench southern or Western-style secular, non-Islamic rule. In contrast, Boko Haram will only kill non-Muslims and marginal Muslims who collaborate with the *kafir* state to jeopardize the broader interests of the north, including the interests of genuine northern Muslims. Thus, with its attacks on churches, Christians, and government institutions, including the police and army, Boko Haram seeks to portray itself as the "defender" or "protector" of the northern interest and a moral alternative to the venal political state.

Strategy for Disseminating its Message

Several contending theories have emerged to explain Boko Haram's messaging or media strategy. One set of theories suggest that Boko Haram does not have a media strategy, implying that the sect does not deliberately create media narratives; instead, it stages attacks and uses the sensationalism of the attacks – which are frenziedly reported by the media – to reach the intended local and international audiences. Yet, even this non-strategy contains an element of deliberateness that suggests that the leaders of the group are media savvy and deploys narratives methodically to advantage their cause.

In contrast, this analysis is based on the theory that Boko Haram has a very sophisticated media strategy that is based on its capacity to instill fear and awe in local populations and confusion in opposing forces, especially the state. Thus, the mode of message transmission is determined by the specific intent and, often, multiple sources have been utilized to create the desired impact; suggesting that its leadership is far from the image of naïve, illiterate, crazed fundamentalists that many Nigerians have and which are often typified in mainstream Western analysis of Islamists and jihadists. Instead, Boko Haram's leaders and operatives are savvy, reflexive, and capable of great intellection as demonstrated by Abubakar Shekau's ideologically articulate video messages. For instance, when the group re-emerged in 2010 after the 2009 killing of its founder and 800 of his followers by the military, one of the first acts of Abubakar Shekau – as its new leader – was to change its name from *Ahl Al-sunna Wa-l-jama'a Wa-l-Hijra* (the people of the Sunna [of the prophet] and the community [of Muslims] as well as [those who accept the obligation] to emigrate [from the land of unbelievers]) to *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* (People for the Propagation of the Teachings of the Prophet and Jihad). As Loimeier observes, with the former name:

Boko Haram clearly claimed to be the supreme authority on the concept of Sunna as well as the question of who could be regarded as a member of the community of Muslims. The additional reference to the term “*hijra*,” by analogy declared the Nigerian state a heathen state that had to be left by way of emigration, as the prophet had done in 622, when he migrated from heathen Mecca to Medina.³

With the new name, Boko Haram signaled its radical shift from merely creating spiritual enclaves within northern Nigeria into which members could emigrate, to “expelling Nigerian Christians out of the North” through jihad according to the method of Salaf, which is the kind of armed struggle that followers of the prophet fought against Meccan and Arab unbelievers. As Mazrui argues, “if fulfilled this program would be a kind of sectarian displacement, otherwise known as ethnic cleansing.”⁴

Beyond the desire to actually implement the threat, Boko Haram shrewdly used this radical ideological shift as a polemic to mobilize the support of Muslim communities in the north, especially those that were already engaged in conflict with non-Muslims, typically non-natives, over access to markets, water, land, and other economic resources. Thus, the idea of expelling non-Muslim southerners was meant to polarize local

communities along visceral cleavages observed at the national level between the north and south. More importantly, the leaders of the group, being students of northern history, fully expected the idea of northern Nigeria for northerners to gain salience with some leaders of northern Nigeria who are familiar with and probably supported the “northernization policy” of the late Sardauna of Sokoto and former Premier of the Northern Region, Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello. This message was spread through local channels including radical Muslim preachers, community leaders, and segments of the northern political elite opposed to the emergence of Goodluck Jonathan as president, as well as the national press. While the use of informal local channels was meant to encourage northern Muslim communities to take ownership of the movement, the use of the national press, which sensationalized reports about this threat, was meant to create the type of panic that would deepen the ethno-sectarian division.

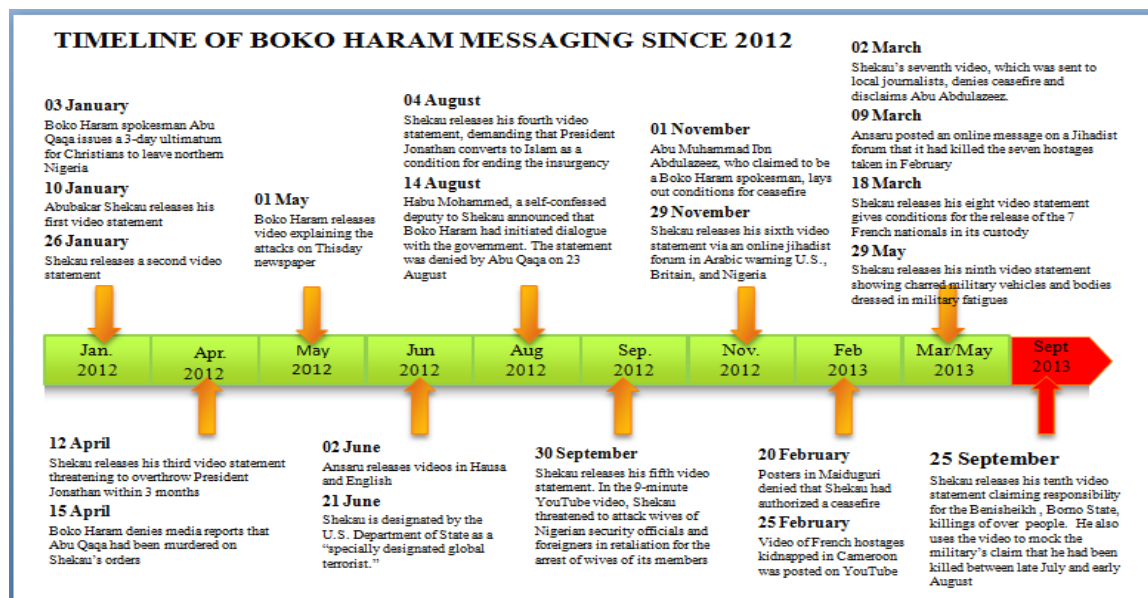
Over the next two years, Boko Haram would show its dexterity at exploiting Nigeria’s complex media space to achieve its desired objectives. For example, in order to demonstrate that it was capable of engaging and defeating Nigerian security forces, Boko Haram on June 16, 2011, launched a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack on the Nigerian Police Headquarters in Abuja, killing three people. The national and international press carried commentaries suggesting a spreading chaos that the government and security agencies were incapable of arresting. This view of state/institutional helplessness was reinforced by the earlier May 29, 2011, Boko Haram bomb attack on a beer garden in a military barracks in the northern city of Bauchi, which killed about 13 people. In a message to the Hausa Service of the BBC after the attack, Boko Haram’s spokesman, Abu Zayd, said “serving members of the Nigerian Army had been used to carry out the bombings,”⁵ a carefully crafted narrative suggesting that the Nigerian Army was experiencing severe internal crisis and torn between support for the group and loyalty to the state. This narrative, if it gained salience, had the potential to cause ethno-sectarian suspicions and paranoia within the army leading to the demoralization and possible defection of soldiers. A similar attack on the Demsa police station in Adamawa State on February 28, 2012, and reported as “breaking news” on *Sahara Reporters*, prompted an observer to say “Boko Haram has turned the table. The hunter has become the hunted.”⁶

In order to demonstrate its north-wide influence and to deconstruct suggestions that it is merely a northeast threat, Boko Haram staged attacks in the northwest, including the January 20, 2012, attack in Kano that produced over 178 fatalities and a smaller but more symbolic attack on Sokoto, the seat of the Sokoto Caliphate and spiritual headquarters of Islam in Nigeria, which killed four people.³ These attacks, outside of its traditional zone of influence, received tremendous local and international media coverage and greatly alarmed traditional leaders, local politicians, and the more influential Sufi Muslim establishment in northern Nigeria. These elites, worried by the potential impact of the violence on their authority and legitimacy, began to take the Boko Haram threat more seriously and to formally condemn their activities and cooperate with security forces. In some instances, local politicians stopped making monthly patronage payments to Boko Haram and the defection of former patrons of the sect, especially those who shifted their

ideological positions and encouraged authorities to take tougher measures against the group, led to the arrest of hundreds of Boko Haram members in the northwest region.

In reprisal aimed at frustrating collaboration between the traditional/religious institution and the state, Boko Haram began to target prominent traditional leaders. For instance, on May 31, 2011, it assassinated Abba Anas Ibn Umar Garbai, the younger brother of the Shehu of Borno, outside his home in Maiduguri. In a message delivered through the Hausa News Service of the BBC, Boko Haram spokesman, Abu Zayd, said Mr. Garbai was targeted because the traditional institutions were being used to track and attack them. In addition, Boko Haram also targeted the Emirs of Kano and Fika in carefully planned high-visibility attacks meant to intimidate northern traditional and religious leaders and millions of their followers.

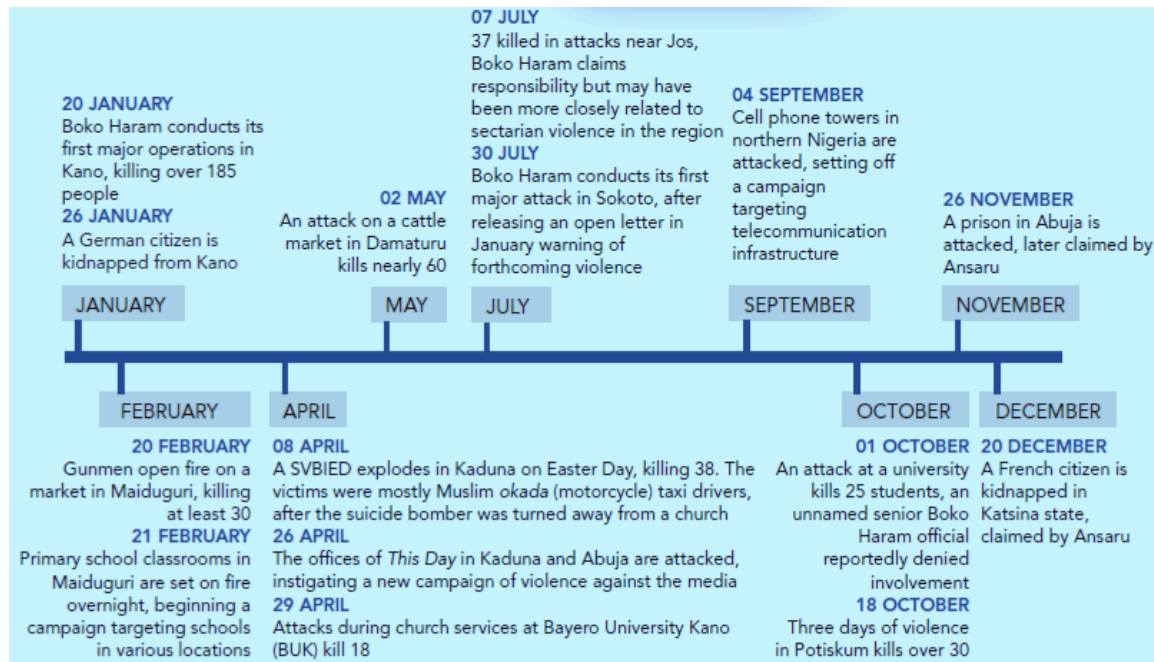
Figure 1: Timeline of Boko Haram messaging in 2012



Apart from attacks aimed at demonstrating its influence within Nigeria, Boko Haram has also staged attacks aimed at attracting global jihadist financing and support. In order to do this, it first expanded its objectives to include, the establishment of sharia in Nigeria and all over the world. Possibly bolstered by support from or prospect of receiving support from regional jihadist organizations such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) – Boko Haram fighters are believed to have trained or fought with AQIM and MUJAO in Algeria, Mali, and other Sahelian countries, which also explains Boko Haram's later evolution into kidnapping of Nigerian government officials and foreigners for ransom, – Boko Haram staged its most ambitious and visible attack against international targets with the 26 August 2011 bombing of the UN headquarter building in Abuja. That high-visibility, high-impact event, which was guaranteed to animate both local and international media, had the intended impact of establishing Boko Haram locally as a ruthless coercive force that could not be contained by Nigeria's security forces as well as

to demonstrate to global jihadist forces that it is a reliable and effective ally that should be supported. The attack occurring only a few months after U.S. Navy Seal Team 6 killed Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan, which dealt a huge symbolic and systemic blow to the global jihadist movement, may have created the impetus to explore other options for sustaining and or expanding the Al-Qaeda influence in the world. Boko Haram, with its attack on the UN and increasing jihadist rhetoric against Western nations, especially the United States, was positioning itself as one of these options.

Figure 2: Timeline of Major Boko Haram Attacks in 2012⁷



Conflating its domestic mission with its new international agenda, Boko Haram threatened to kidnap relatives of government officials and foreigners in retaliation for the arrest of wives, children, and other relatives of suspected Boko Haram operatives by security forces. On February 19, 2013, Boko Haram made good its threat by kidnapping a 7-member French family in neighboring Cameroon. In a video message on March 19, 2013, Abubakar Shekau said,

We are holding them for no other reason than that Cameroonian and Nigerian authorities arrested our brethren, they are holding them, they are humiliating them, including women and children ... Even in the war of infidels women and children are spared.⁸

And on May 7, 2013, Boko Haram invaded a police barracks in Bama, Borno State, and seized 12 women and children, prompting a Shekau video on May 14, 2013, showing the hostages and warning that if the security forces “do not release our wives and children, we will not release theirs.”⁹ Thus as before, Boko Haram framed the kidnapping not as a strategy to raise badly needed funds through ransom payments, but as reprisal against the continued victimization of members by Nigeria’s security forces. The kidnapping was

meant to pressure the government to release these people and to serve as deterrence against future arrests of the relatives of its members. It is in the same vein that Boko Haram distributed videos, through intermediaries, of the beheading of an alleged “Informant.”¹⁰ Possibly directed at Sheikh Muhammed Abdulazeez Ibn Idris, a self-professed top commander of Boko Haram involved in negotiating a truce with the Nigerian government, Shekau promised to severely punish Sheikh Idris if he does not stop parading himself falsely as a member of the group.

Frustrated by the volume and intensity of negative press reporting against it mainly by the southern press, Boko Haram has carried out carefully planned attacks to instill fear in the media. For instance, on April 26, 2012, Boko Haram bombed the offices of *Thisday* newspapers in Kaduna and Abuja. Although Boko Haram says it attacked the media outfit “because we will never forget or forgive anyone who abused our prophet,”¹¹ referring to the controversy surrounding the 2002 Miss World beauty pageant held in Kaduna, *Thisday* may have been targeted because of its strong support for President Jonathan who is from the same Niger Delta region as its publisher, Nduka Obaigbena. According to Qaqa,

We have repeatedly cautioned reporters and media houses to be professional and objective in their reports. This is a war between us and the Nigerian government; unfortunately, the media have not been objective and fair in their report of the ongoing war, they chose to take side.¹²

In attacking *Thisday*, which circulates over 100,000 copies daily and is the organizer of the annual *Thisday Awards*, a global event that hosts major international political and entertainment figures like former U.S. President Bill Clinton and the musician Beyonce, Boko Haram may have been sending the message that it is prepared to attack associates and kinsmen of the president and unfriendly media. Similarly, Boko Haram has targeted mobile phone companies for collaborating with security forces to monitor its members. According to industry experts, at least 24 mobile phone masts belonging to nine mobile phone companies across northern Nigeria were destroyed causing millions of dollars in damages.

Finally, Boko Haram’s message has been spread through *radio troittoir* or pavement radio. People who live in northern Nigeria, especially in the urban areas, know that the rumor mill is strong and keeps society abuzz. Pavement radio refers to the interpersonal, word-of-mouth circulation of rumors, a type of communication that resonates with local communities and privileges out-groups like Boko Haram, especially where the activities of the group are shrouded in secrecy. The stories that typically circulate often involve issues that the formal media ignore or cover scantily in coded language. Thus, pavement radio in terms of Boko Haram is underground news that thrives on anonymity and impersonality and everyone is a potential contributor. Some of the news that are spread about Boko Haram through pavement radio often begins from overheard snippets of information about the group that are only partially understood. Because the contexts of these discussions are usually lost to the purveyor of pavement radio, the entire message is

often twisted out of turn. Also, because of the pervasiveness of pavement radio, it is also possible for Boko Haram or its supporters to deliberately plant falsehood in order to discredit the government or the security forces. The purveyors of pavement radio often mix local folklore with contemporary events to interpret news about Boko Haram and or security forces within their own cultural framework. Since pavement radio in northern Nigeria takes its cue from the allusive power of the Hausa language and the oral traditions of northern communities, it is easy for false news about the persecution of northern Muslims to spread, gain traction, and inspire sympathy for Boko Haram. This is because in northern Nigeria communities, as with most African communities, the objective or the realm of day-to-day reality and the subjective or the realm of possibility, are far closer than any in the West. Thus, rumors are often indistinct from reality, which makes it more damaging to the Nigerian government. It is this situation that has often frustrated Nigeria's security forces and has inspired some of the excessive actions, including human rights abuses of security forces that interpret the failure by local populations to deliver sources as tacit (and overt) support for Boko Haram.

It is this situation that may have led to the destruction of the fishing town of Baga on the shore of Lake Chad in Borno State in April 2013. Following clashes between Boko Haram fighters and Nigerian soldiers, over 200 civilians were reported killed and nearly half of the town was destroyed in an inferno that local residents say was set by the soldiers. The deaths, particularly the destruction of the town, sparked outcry from human rights activists, civil society groups, international NGOs, and foreign governments who called on the Nigerian president to empanel an investigation. It would appear that Boko Haram planned the operation using local residents as human shield as a way to discredit security forces who it has always framed as a brute occupier force intent on intimidating or killing innocent Muslims.

Despite Boko Haram's relative narrative success, its increasing intransigence, which indiscriminately targets Muslims and Christians alike contrary to its stated objective of protecting northern Muslims, coupled with its attack on the Hausa-Fulani dominated northern religious hierarchy, continues to alienate it from the majority of the northern population. The damage done to the Boko Haram brand is such that even its aggressive media (and populist) strategy, including the distribution of leaflets to warn of impending attacks and its audio and video messages, are failing to endear the group to local populations even to those who support sharia law. The failure of the group to transform into a populist movement and its inability to secure the type of legitimacy that the Sufi Muslim order has, have not only created a legitimacy crisis within the organization – as demonstrated by the emergence of splinter groups like Ansaru – but also hostility towards it from those it considers its primary constituency, Muslim youths in Borno and Yobe states, as demonstrated by the activities of the *Civilian Joint Task Force* (CJTF).

Table 1: estimated Odds ratios from Logistic Regression Analysis of Local perception on whether Boko Haram is a Positive Influence in Nigeria on Selected Independent Variables.

	Perceived Support for Boko Haram (1=Negative, 0=Positive)		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
OpUSA	-.310*	-.353*	-.338*
SupSha	1.248*	1.300*	1.236*
GovDeal		.503*	.493**
APPROVE		.111	.097
REL			-.078
EMPLOY			.047
REG			-.109
N	3439	3439	3439
-2 Log Likelihood	927.831	917.760	915.017
Nagelkerke R ²	.098	.109	.112

*p < .001

While support for Boko Haram among northern populations has continued to plummet, a 2012 survey suggests that support for the group is consistent with support for sharia, unfavorable view of the United States, and disapproval of the way the Nigerian government is prosecuting the counterinsurgency campaign. As Table 1 shows, respondents who have an unfavorable view of the United States (OpUSA), support the implementation of the sharia (SupSha), and disapprove of the way the Nigerian government has prosecuted the war against Boko Haram (GovDeal), have significantly higher odds of supporting Boko Haram, controlling for all other variables. This means that perceptions about the supposed anti-Muslim agenda of the West, implementation of the sharia, and the nature (including strategy) of the government's counter-insurgency operations – which many northerners believe is following an anti-northern Muslim agenda – are significant predictors of local support for Boko Haram. This confirms the relative success of Boko Haram's core messaging, which has been to ideologically and materially link the West and the Nigerian government together in the persecution of northern Muslims. It includes the argument that the Nigerian government led by a Christian from the south is attempting to supplant local Islamic cultures with a Western culture through the instrumentality of the formal school system, which prioritizes English as the language of instruction.

Support for the sect is also highest in the core northern states, especially Borno, and is consistent with lower levels of trust for President Goodluck Jonathan. This is not surprising considering that many of those who have sympathy for Boko Haram do so for political reasons, that is they see the group's activities as a specific challenge to the legitimacy and authority of the Goodluck Jonathan government, which they believe is delegitimized by President Jonathan's repudiation of the PDP's power sharing arrangement under which the presidency will rotate between the north and south. Many sources cite the growing disequilibria between the north and south in terms of access to social infrastructures and economic opportunities as examples of the effect of the north's

loss of national political power. For instance, Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics says, "relative poverty was most apparent in Muslim dominated northern states."¹³

It is reports like this that Boko Haram has exploited to mobilize support from local populations including the political elite. Boko Haram's messaging, which is aided by the nature of the political landscape, has been effective among a segment of the population – as its continuing ability to recruit and stage attacks suggests – although the vast majority of northern Muslim populations do not support it. For example, Ahmad Salkida suggests that Boko Haram may have infiltrated Nigeria's security services through new recruits who are not sufficiently vetted and are then posted to the northeast where they wreck havoc from within.¹⁴

In sum, Boko Haram has evolved from a disparate, rag-tag team of religious zealots motivated by crippling economic conditions, social change, and new political realities to seek a new moral order following the template of radical Islam. Its maturity from an amateur separatist sect to a full-blown insurgent organization has been shaped by the nature of the operational environment, which is characterized by extreme apprehension and hostility toward it, especially among the dominant Hausa-Fulani Sufi Muslim population. It has also responded to the massive deployment of lethal force by the state that has resulted in the death of over 5000 suspected Islamists in detention. In order to survive in that environment, Boko Haram has reinterpreted or reinvented certain core Islamic principles including *takfir* and *kafir*, which it used to justify the unprovoked killing of unsupportive northern Muslims.

In order to turn this penchant for violence into social and economic capital, it has deployed carefully crafted narratives, which though seek to portray it as a victim of Western cultural imperialism and unprovoked state violence, continues to emphasize that it is winning the war. The multiple re-incarnations of Abubakar Shekau after several widely publicized claims of his killing, has served to mystify him and to send fear to populations in northern communities who see his latest reincarnation and brutal Boko Haram, despite massive state onslaught, as evidence that the state may have reached its wits end and a signal that the hard fought battle to entrench peace is a long way from over.

The Nigerian Response to Boko Haram

The state's response to Boko Haram since 2009 has been characterized by extreme complexity, especially in regards to the relationship between federal, state, and local government levels, and the inevitable institutional tensions between security services – military, police, the State Security Service (SSS), and other governmental agencies – and civil society groups including traditional and religious institutions. This means that no clear coordinated response emerged until recently when the federal government appointed a new National Security Adviser (NSA), established an advisory committee to determine the feasibility of granting amnesty to Boko Haram, declared state of emergency in three northeastern states, dissolved the Joint Task Force – that had led the

state's fight with Boko Haram since 2009 –, established a new army division – the 7th Infantry Division – and encouraged (or supported) the formation of the Civilian Joint Task Force. Yet, there is the lingering sense that a gap exists between grassroots communities and the larger apparatus of the state, which has either prevented the government's message from getting out or has significantly diluted its import. Thus, while the state may continue to look for culprits, the larger question of local disaffection that is contributing to the apparent lack of communication between local communities and officials of the state as well as to continued sympathy and support for Boko Haram among a segment of the population is an important area for analysis.

The turning point of the Boko Haram insurgency occurred in 2009 after a four-day battle between Nigerian security forces and Boko Haram members in Bauchi, Kano, Yobe, and Borno states, all in northern Nigeria. The confrontation led to the death of over 800 suspected Boko Haram members including its leader Mohammed Yusuf and other high-profile supporters of the sect including Alhaji Buji Foyi, a former commissioner in Borno State, and Baba Fugu Mohammed, the 72-year-old father-in-law of Yusuf. The extra-judicial execution of Yusuf, after an interrogation by the police, and many Boko Haram members were video-recorded with cell phones and posted on YouTube and other social media outlets including Facebook. This strategic blunder, which initially helped to frame the activities of the group, following their re-emergence in 2010, as efforts to secure justice for their unjustifiably slain leader, has continued to constrain efforts by the state to thwart the insurgency. There are many in Nigeria (and in the diaspora) who believes that the extra-judicial killing of Yusuf as well as hundreds of unarmed civilian members of the sect by the state in 2009 pushed it toward violent extremism and gave Boko Haram immense narrative advantage over the state in the initial phases of the insurgency.

Sensing the enormous narrative disadvantage that Yusuf's killing portended for the state, the now deceased President Umaru Yar'Adua on August 3, 2009, ordered his national security adviser to investigate Yusuf's killing. The president promised that the report would be made available by the end of the week, which never happened. Nearly two weeks later, on August 13, 2009, Nigeria's Attorney General and Minister for Justice, Michael Aondoakaa, issued a statement to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva that the Nigerian "government does not condone extra-judicial killing or torture and condemns in its entirety, the unfortunate circumstances that led to the death of Mohammed Yusuf in police custody."¹⁵ Although, Aondoakaa assured the High Commissioner that "as soon as the investigative process is completed, those found wanting will be sanctioned accordingly,"¹⁶ no one was held to account until Boko Haram made a violent resurgence in 2010. The Nigeria police only formally entered charges against 7 police officers, including two Assistant Commissioners of Police for the killing in July 2011, and till date, no determination has been made about their culpability in the crime.

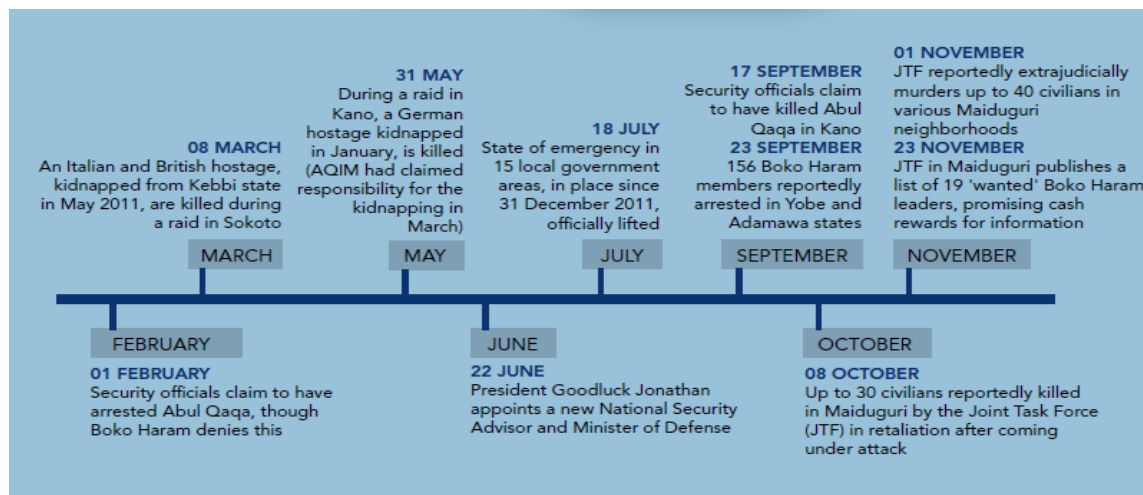
Thus, from the initial phases of the insurgency, the Nigerian government faced some strategic narrative deficits in attempting to frame the war against Boko Haram as a war against terror; instead, it allowed Boko Haram through sympathetic local and international media, opposition politicians, and strategically placed community/religious

leaders, to define the government as a reckless and brutish “outsider” force that perpetrates gross human rights violations against devout northern Muslim. The state-perpetrated killings are continuing to generate intense debate on social media – principally Facebook and twitter – among Nigerians who are regionally divided in terms of their support for or against the killings. Nigerians in the south generally side with the government (although many in the Yoruba-dominated southwest criticize the government) while northerners bitterly criticize the government. In the more elitist Nigerian online media, opposition to the killings is almost unanimous and elite writers with lots of followers are acerbic in their criticisms of the government’s counterinsurgency operations.

When Boko Haram re-emerged in 2010, it had a new leader, Abubakar Shekau, believed to be more radical and violent than Yusuf. In his early statements, Shekau promised to avenge the 2009 killing of Yusuf and his supporters. He also began to make clear anti-West or Anti-American statements, which suggest was an attempt to link Boko Haram to the international Jihadist movement. In accord with its threat, Boko Haram increased its operations within Nigeria by attacking police stations, churches, schools, media houses, telecommunication companies, bars and brothels, and local politicians. Boko Haram’s choice of targets clearly showed its determination to match words with action, especially its stated objective of Islamizing northern Nigeria (hence its targeting of churches and Christians), attacking the secularity of the state (hence its targeting of the paraphernalia of the secular state such as the police, army, prison, government officials, etc.), and rejection of Western education (hence its targeting of schools, teachers, and students).

The spread, celerity, and severity of the attacks rattled the Nigerian government and its security forces, which had no immediate coherent response for the attacks until mid-2012. In fact, the government was so rattled that its immediate response was contradictory. For example, government initially blamed the violence on disenchanted opposition politicians in the north who were ruining their loss of national political power. This gave a partisan and sectional twist to the conflict instead of creating a broader, bi-partisan national narrative that mobilizes the entire nation against the Islamists. Then, the president announced that Boko Haram had infiltrated his government and the security forces; which is a code word for saying northerners within the government support Boko Haram. General Owoeye Azazi, the National Security Adviser, corroborated this by accusing the ruling PDP of being behind the insurgency. Many Nigerian’s saw Azazi’s claim as an indictment of the government, which further bolstered Boko Haram’s narrative that it is fighting a war to protect Muslims from the rampaging Western secular modernity intent on eviscerating the Islamic culture of the north. Analysts also began to draw parallels between President Jonathan’s absolving of the Niger Delta insurgent group *Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta* (MEND) for the October 1, 2010, independence day bombing at Eagle Square, Abuja, despite MEND’s claiming responsibility and his willingness to tag Boko Haram as the handiwork of opposition northern politicians (without any proof) as evidence that the government was pursuing a hidden agenda.

Figure 3: Timeline of Major Boko Security Forces/Government Action against Boko Haram in 2012¹⁷



This inarticulate messaging created enormous credibility crisis for the Jonathan government, which was increasingly pilloried by opposition movements within and outside northern Nigeria. In order to reverse the damage done to it especially following General Azazi's damaging expose, President Jonathan on June 22, 2012, sacked General Azazi, an ethnic Ijaw like President Jonathan, replacing him with Sambo Dasuki, a retired colonel and former *Aide de Camp* (ADC) to General (rtd) Ibrahim Babangida, a former military Head of State. Sambo Dasuki is also the son of the former Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki, who was deposed in controversial circumstances by late General Sani Abacha in 1993.¹⁸

Colonel Dasuki's appointment was supposed to be a significant game changer for the counterinsurgency in several respects. Firstly, by appointing a respected, high profile Hausa-Fulani Muslim to lead the fight against Boko Haram, President Jonathan hoped to counteract the Boko Haram framing of the conflict as a southern (Western), Christian-inspired attack on Islamic culture and practice in northern Nigeria. Secondly, it was supposed to help the government mobilize the crucial but otherwise elusive support of northern traditional and religious institutions against Boko Haram. Thirdly, his appointment would leverage the historical rivalry between the Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri to alienate youth support for Boko Haram, which was dominated by Kanuris. Finally, the appointment had a "feel good" quality to the extent that it suggested to the critical public that government was actively working to defeat the insurgency.

Despite the above, Dasuki's appointment did very little to end the insurgency. In fact, shortly after his appointment Boko Haram increased its militant activities in the northeast and especially in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states. The attacks increasingly became more indiscriminate and producing high Muslim fatalities. To counter this, Colonel Dasuki visited the troubled states and met with leaders of thought in the region. He also claimed to have received the contact details of Boko Haram's leaders and promised to establish dialogue with them.¹⁹ But despite his efforts or because of it, Boko Haram became a hydra-headed monster, difficult to contain. It wantonly attacked and sacked security installations in the northeast but also seized large swaths of northern territory,

which it administered directly. The hopelessness of the situation compelled President Jonathan who had earlier refused to grant amnesty to Boko Haram to set up a committee to work out the feasibility of granting amnesty to the group. The inconsistent record of the government such as the tough talk not to grant amnesty and then capitulating after worsened under Dasuki and further alienated support for the government's efforts.

Desperate to stem the widening influence of Boko Haram, the government declared "State of Emergency" (SOE) in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states on May 14, 2013. Before the declaration of SOE, Boko Haram had overpowered local administrators and law enforcement in northern Borno close to Nigeria's border with Cameroon, Chad, and Niger and taken over Marte, Magumeri, Mobbar, Gubio, Guzamala, Abadam, Kukawa, Kaga, Nganzai, and Mungono Local Government Areas (LGAs). After the declaration and the massive deployment of soldiers to the region, Boko Haram continued to operate relatively freely and seized additional seven local government areas. While support for the SOE was high in the south, there was little support for it in the north and many northerners criticized it as potentially ineffective as was the ongoing SOE in 15 LGAs in Borno that had failed to stop Boko Haram. Even the establishment of the 7th Infantry Division in Maiduguri, which generated a lot of praise for the government, only temporarily put Boko Haram on the back foot. The group soon regained momentum and won many battles against Nigeria's military.

Under Dasuki, Nigeria's military approached the counterinsurgency by prioritizing Boko Haram attrition or body count over a smarter, more integrated approach. Unfortunately, this approach is producing unanticipated effects in local communities. The idea that if the army kills enough Boko Haram fighters and their supporters, say 500 a month, their recruiting efforts will not be able to keep pace and the army will ultimately prevail, is also succeeding in alienating local communities who bear the brunt of the army operation. For example, the army's search and destroy operations has caused huge numbers of civilian casualties and inevitably increased Boko Haram's capacity to recruit. On September 20, 2013, for instance, the SSS raided an uncompleted building in Asokoro Abuja and killed 7 civilians that it claimed were members of Boko Haram.²⁰ Many people including eyewitnesses (especially survivors of the shooting) have repudiated this claim insisting that the security forces killed innocent poor squatters who had no connection to Boko Haram.^{21 22} This extra-judicial killing, like many others, including the Baga incident²³ is angering Nigerians and to some extent legitimizes the Boko Haram narrative framing of the conflict i.e. that it is fighting against the marginalization and victimization of northern Nigeria Muslims. It also has the potential to boost Boko Haram's ability to recruit new fighters.

The government's focus on the ratio of soldiers to insurgents, following the assumption that successful counter-insurgency requires as much as 10 government soldiers for every insurgent, is a critical flaw that may further alienate local communities. Although this logic is only approximately validated by history, applying it too rigidly with the creation of a new army Infantry Division and the deployment of as many as 8,000 soldiers may distort reality and imbue the Nigerian government with too much confidence that it is winning or has won the war, with relatively little consideration paid to the quality of the

combat forces, their proficiency, and their relations with civilian populations. For example, there are indications that in Maiduguri, the command center of Boko Haram and the location of the new Infantry Division, the army has failed to inspire citizen trust and confidence²⁴ and trust for Nigeria's military is at an all-time low, especially in the states where SOE was imposed.

Finally, under advice from Dasuki, the Nigerian government is attempting to frame the counterinsurgency as a successful operation as it is "winning the war against Boko Haram."²⁵ Evidence for this claim is the capture and killing of many Boko Haram operatives and the destruction of Boko Haram camps in the Sambisa mountain area. The government has also on several occasions claimed the killing of Abubakar Shekau. But Boko Haram has countered more forcefully with claims of its own successes against the security forces by showing footages of its encounter with Nigeria's military, including sophisticated military hardware it captured from fleeing Nigerian soldiers. It has specifically used the government's claims that Shekau had been killed to refute claims that the government is winning the war. In a widely published video after the latest claim of his killing, Shekau taunted the government and insisted that Boko Haram is winning the war against the Nigerian military.²⁶ The re-emergence of Shekau coupled with the many successful post-SOE Boko Haram attacks in the northeast has led many Nigerians, especially those in the north to express strong doubts about the government's ability to crush the rebellion. Yet, allegations of gross human rights abuses, including extra-judicial torture and killing of detainees, has done the greatest damage to the government's image and the efforts to deal with the insurgency under Dasuki.

The Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have said that hundreds of detainees have been killed in government detention facilities. Many northerners, especially in Borno State, believe that most of these detainees are innocent. The frustration and anger that such abuses generate is helping Boko Haram recruit new fighters. In this context, the reported encounter between the journalist Ahmad Salkida and a victim of state violence is prescient. According to Salkida, a woman approached him with a simple quest:

I was told that you have access to Boko Haram, please take my telephone number and give it to them. I lost my husband and two of his brothers in the hands of some soldiers' right before my eyes and the trauma made me to have a miscarriage. I want to kill as many soldiers as possible before they kill me.²⁷

It is widely reported sentiments like this, which enjoys longevity in pavement radio that continues to frustrate genuine efforts by the Nigerian government to defeat Boko Haram.

Conclusion

The Nigerian government continues to struggle, compared to Boko Haram, in how it frames its counterinsurgency campaign. This problem is in part self-inflicted and part

inherited. Historically, Nigeria's military has a tendency to use force to quell all opposition to government. This tendency, which was borne out of recruitment and training deficits created enormous communication challenges for the military, which came to be seen as a collection of "zombies"²⁸ or "mad dogs"²⁹ possessing only the "kill and go"³⁰ mentality. Although since the death of Sani Abacha in 1998 the government has tried to restructure the military, including an ideological shift away from excessive aggressiveness that is the hallmark of an unprofessional military, the change in ideas has not matched the material condition of soldiers. Nigerian soldiers are some of the lowest resourced in the world, lacking effective equipment, decent wages, and motivation for the onerous task of defending the fatherland. The change in ideas has also not vibrantly engaged the critical public who continue to hold unfavorable views of the military not based on recent encounters but its sordid history.

The government's narrative disadvantage is also self-inflicted, being the result of lack of a strong governance narrative that ideologically frames its governance strategy. Such a narrative becomes the basis for building or shaping a comprehensive counter-insurgency agenda. Unlike many other West African governments, even including the government of Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007) that created what Achille Mbembe calls "un etat theologique"³¹ or a theological state, the Goodluck Jonathan government has been uncharacteristically simple and lacking in ideological (or polemical) depth. For example, compared to the Obasanjo government that strove to convince Nigerians that its actions represent ultimate truth, which helped to reify or deify it (i.e. President Obasanjo was always right, which empowered him to take decisive actions that many criticized but were largely successful), President Jonathan has been shockingly bereft of ideological content, even of grandstanding. Perhaps due to the nature of his emergence – first in 2007 as an improbable Vice President and in 2010 as Acting President under a dying president – President Jonathan has been unable to craft narratives of grandeur and power separate from the image of humility (i.e. "as a boy I had no shoes"), which helped him to win the presidential election in 2011. In some circles, especially among critics of his government, this type of humility indicates weakness. This has made it easy for groups like Boko Haram to challenge the legitimacy of his government and to believe that conflict with the state is necessary and feasible. More importantly, the Jonathan government is unable to identify or clearly articulate a national ideology(ies) or ethos to unify a badly divided people and reduce inter-ethnic, inter-religious, sectarian, and religious suspicion and hate.

To compensate for this major deficit, the government's narrative framing of the counterinsurgency has been agonistically toned (similar to the Gowon government's war rhetoric in the Nigeria-Biafra war). Like much of the reporting on out groups, the agonistic tone of the government has been combative in its framing of Boko Haram. Agonistic narratives often center around the actions of foreigners on local populations or citizens. For example, the leader of the Maitatsine sect,³² Mohammed Marwa, was cast by the official media as an "illegal alien" from Cameroon who was sponsored by foreign entities to cause disaffection in Nigeria. Thus, Maitatsine was not "us;" "Nigerians do not do that type of violence or subscribe to that type of logic."³³ In the same way, Boko Haram is represented as a group controlled by global jihadists using uninformed, illiterate peasants in Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. It is this objective framing that has

produced the many reports that link Boko Haram to global jihadists as well as continuing movements of insurgents across Nigeria's borders with Cameroon, Niger, and Chad. Even when it has conceded that Boko Haram is a homegrown terrorist group, the government has framed members as misdirected and its leadership as hijacked by desperate local politicians and foreign entities. This agonistic technique deflects blame for woeful economic and political conditions and historical ethno-religious division (which created and fueled the insurgency) away from the government and unto *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb* (AQIM), *Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa* (MUJAO), Al-Shabaab, opposing northern politicians, etc. In essence, Boko Haram is framed as a destabilizing force propelled by outside forces using false logics to indoctrinate and lead "good" Nigerian Muslims astray.

Although this narrative framing is strong, it has not fully achieved the desired impact because it is in conflict with the material conditions of the conflict. For instance, why is the military killing thousands of Boko Haram supporters (not fighters) if it considers them to be merely "misguided" and "uninformed?" How is the government not attempting to prevent other good Muslims from embracing Boko Haram by dealing humanely with those who ignorantly joined the group? Dealing humanely with arrested members would involve disarming, demobilizing, and rehabilitating them; not destroying them. If the government's narratives must match its actions, it must be seen to go out of its way to preserve, protect, and secure the lives of the thousands of northern Muslims that are vulnerable to the logics of Boko Haram and tackle the material conditions in those communities that render youths and elders vulnerable to Boko Haram recruiting.

A government or group with "etat theologique" exercises symbolic hegemony over people and creates a world in which its vision is the only legitimate, logical, and viable one. This typifies the Boko Haram narrative strategy. Boko Haram seeks to establish itself as the principal of language, morality, and justice in northern Nigeria and through its radical proselytizing has attempted to produce consciousness that is reproduced in the media and puts a spin on the narrative. Thus, Boko Haram has argued since its founding and especially since 2010 that Islam is the only way in Nigeria. To this end, it has used traditional maxims (orally based wisdom) combined with misinterpreted Koranic (or Islamic) injunctions and threats to persuade people to support it. Its narratives have salience with a horde of peasants (and elites) who parrot them and fight its wars because they align (to some extent) with northerners concern about the potential cultural, economic, and political hegemony of the south or their material socio-economic conditions. The government, like other Nigerian governments (including governments controlled by the northern political elite), has neglected these material conditions effectively rendering large swaths of Nigerian territory "ungoverned spaces." Thus, opponents of continued southern rule (in a period otherwise reserved or "zoned" to the north), those genuinely concerned about the moral drift of northern society, as well as those affected by adverse natural and economic conditions, including poverty and desertification, are identifying with Boko Haram rebellion, at least covertly.

Boko Haram's mobilization and recruitment strategy is aided by the fact that it integrated ancient Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri symbols of cultural expression and power, including the

use of Hausa and Arabic languages as primary means of communication, the inclusion of “jihad” in its name, the use of knives or “dagger” in its beheading videos, the turban that its leader wears, references to the Koran in its messages, the constitution of a Shura council complete with a hierarchy of officials, and contemporary symbols of power such as the AK47. These symbols legitimize Boko Haram as a system of historically constituted and authentic Islamic local government. By calling up powerful Islamic symbols, Boko Haram has borrowed ancient authenticity, which enables it to overtly reject Western secular democratic institutions, including formal, Western-styled schooling and multi-party democracy.

In contrast to the government’s agonistic tone, Boko Haram has adopted aggregative logics, which is widely used in traditional oral communication to reach its audience. Thus, like ancient storytellers who used such aggregative terms as “beautiful brides,” “handsome princes,” “brave soldiers,” “ugly witches,” etc., Boko Haram has deployed narratives such as “evil West,” “infidel state,” “apostate northern leaders,” “kafir Muslims,” “biased journalists,” etc. The clustering makes it easier for its intended audience – typically illiterate northern Muslims – to comprehend and remember the issues for which it fights. Thus, the aggregative tendency that has been very useful for condemning out groups, aliens, and others are skillfully deployed to discredit the government, security agencies, non-Salafist traditional and religious leaders, moderate Muslims, and Western states such as the United States, France, Britain, and Canada, Christians, southerners, and all who support the present government. In labeling these as outcasts, Boko Haram seeks to treat them as enemies who do not belong in northern Nigeria while portraying itself as the genuine, homegrown, patriotic force committed to the protection and advancement of northern Nigeria Muslims and their communities. It tells its audience that it fights a war to protect local populations from the corrupting influences of the infidel state and Christianity.

In conclusion, it may be argued that the Nigerian government is failing to contain the Boko Haram threat because of inherent contradictions in terms of its objectives, strategies for winning the war (including its messaging), and the reasons that it wants to win the war. It says Boko Haram is a threat to the lives of innocent Muslims, the secular character of government, and the stability of Nigeria and her neighbors. As a result, it wants to defeat the group and win the hearts and minds of northern Muslims. Yet, its army is known to commit serious acts of human rights abuse against the same population it is sworn to protect. The Nigerian constitution protects the rights of free speech and expression, yet those who advocate sharia are labeled jihadists and summarily executed. The government earns a lot of revenue from oil production, yet ordinary people are not experiencing the benefits of oil production due to the gross mismanagement of oil wealth by present and past administrations. This means that until the conditions of dual sovereignty that makes individuals to violently contest power with the state are addressed, the country will continue to experience violence. Also, until the government’s messaging aligns with the material realities of the conflict, it will continue to fail miserably at winning northern hearts and minds and alienating support for Boko Haram.

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- ²⁷ See Salkida, A. 2012. "Reporting Terrorism in Africa: A Personal Experience with Boko Haram." *Sahara Reporter*, available at <http://saharareporters.com/article/reporting-terrorism-africaa-personal-experience-boko-haram-ahmad-salkida>.
- ²⁸ The late Afro-beat musician, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, used the word "zombie" as a metaphor to describe the nature and methods of the Nigerian military. In Fela's narrative, the zombie has a one-track mind but has no "sense." Because of this, he is an unintended instrument of destruction manipulated at will by a corrupt degenerate political class who can use allies in the military to command zombie soldiers to "go and kill" or "go and die." This also portrays the "kill and go" mentality of Nigeria's military. See <http://www.discogs.com/Fela-And-Afrika-70-Zombie/master/113995>.
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³² The Maitasine uprising started the northern city of Kano in December 1980 and spread through five northern states, eventually ending in 1985. The Maitatsine was a Muslim extremist sect led by Mohammed Marwa, an immigrant from Cameroun, which was ideologically opposed to all forms of modernization especially Western civilization. Marwa got the name "Maitatsine," which in the Hausa language means "he who curses" from local populations because of his provocative teaching against moderate Muslims that he considered to be infidel and officials of the Kano state government. Members of Marwa's radical sect went on rampage killing Christians in several northern cities. In only several days of fighting, 4,177 people were killed in Kano alone before spreading to other northern states including Kaduna (Zaria), Bornu (Maiduguri and Bukumkutu), Gongola (Jimeta, Dobeli, Zango, Yelwa, Va'atita, Rumde, and Nassarawa), and Bauchi (Pantami). By the time it ended in 1985, over 10,000 people (mostly Christians) had been killed and property valued at billions of naira destroyed.

³³ See Okonofua, B.A. (Forthcoming). *This Troubled Land: The Structural Bases of the Boko Haram and Niger Delta Insurgencies*. New York: Page Publishing.