

**TERRORISM IN WEST AFRICA IN THE 21ST  
CENTURY: A STUDY OF BOKO HARAM IN  
NORTHEAST NIGERIA 2009-2021**

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**Abstract**

*Terrorism has posed serious challenges to regional and global security and stability. The security and development of the West African Region have been grossly affected by terrorist activities. This paper examines the phenomenon of terrorism in West Africa during the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a particular focus on the activities of Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria between 2009 and 2021 when the group was most active. Apart from ethnic/religious intolerance and religious extremism, which informed the rise of terrorist groups, issues ranging from weak government institutions and structures, poor policies and weak implementation, corruption, scarce economic resources, political marginalization, inequality, injustice, poor infrastructural development, neglect and lingering unresolved issues among others had been adduced to be largely responsible for the rise of violent insurgency which degenerated into terrorism. The effect of terrorism has further crippled the weak economy as apart from the destruction of existing structures and disruption of normal activities, resources which are supposed to be used for development are channeled into combating terrorism and insurgency. The study adopts the interdisciplinary approach utilizing both primary and secondary sources for the qualitative analysis. The study examined the nature of crises in the country and the activities of Boko Haram in destabilizes regional stability and development, among others. The study emphasises the need for transparency and accountability of government in every sector, strengthened institutions, inclusivity, independence of the judiciary, effective law enforcement, religious regulation, development of*



*indigenous systems for job creation and good governance generally as a panacea for stability in the region.*

**Key words:** Boko Haram, Terrorism, Nigeria, Security, West Africa

### **Introduction**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed increased violence and death associated with terrorism unprecedented in human history. Terrorism attained its peak in 2014 globally, with 95 countries attacked by terrorists, with more than 60% of the attacks and 78% of all fatalities in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and Nigeria.<sup>2</sup>

The quantum of terror unleashed in terms of scope and dimension has tended to undermine human capital and development. The fight against terrorism has become the highest priority of most states in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it undermines the sovereignty of states, destroys existing structures and has hampered further developments in states because resources, which should be used ordinarily for other sectors, are being channeled to security issues. Whereas the resources for state development are being diverted to combat terrorism, the mismanagement of these resources (human capital and natural resources) are partly the problems that stir up violent actions that often time lead to terrorism, among other forms of violence. This is true of terrorism perpetrated in the African continent.

In 2021, Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 48% of global terrorism deaths. The region is acclaimed as the home to the world's fastest-growing and most-deadly terrorist groups, with the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Shabaab, among others inflicting terror in the continent at large and Boko Haram, notably in Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> The effects of the activities of these groups go far beyond the nation-state where they originate. Apart from the psychological impact on humans, terrorist activities distort existing development, undermine fundamental human rights



and hamper long and short-term human capital development as well as social-cultural, economic and political goals. <sup>4</sup> Not only do they generate refugee problems and massively displace persons internally, but they also result in the incidence of cross-border attacks by local militias and influence smaller armed groups against neighbouring countries. It is the recognition of the devastating effects of terrorism and the global influence of terrorist groups that the United Nations, in partnership with other regional organizations and states, has come up with different strategies to curb this menace. Understanding the causes of terrorism would enable states better tackle its effects and attend to the core needs for sustainable developments.

### **Conceptualisation of Term: Terrorism**

Terrorism is an age-long instrument used in the past to coerce; the word terrorism was first used in the eighteenth-century French Revolution to describe the reign of terror when the “revolutionary government drafted violence and harsh measures against citizens suspected of being enemies of the revolution.”<sup>5</sup> The revolutionary wars in Europe in earlier times, the events of the First and Second World Wars as well as the Cold War all contributed to the advancement of terrorism. Its global outlook was intensified in the 1980s and 1990s following the revolution in information and communication, which rapidly integrated the world into a global village. Triggered subtly by the Cold War, the disintegration of the Soviet Union changed the outlook of warfare and terrorism, with increased non-state actors hijacking and employing modern technologies to wreak havoc at the national and international levels.<sup>6</sup> Ranging from the people’s will and assassination of political leaders to indiscriminate attacks and suicide bombings, terrorists have adopted different technology, techniques and tactics and used different arms, rifles, bombs and explosives to cause chaos in various societies.<sup>7</sup> While there is no universally accepted definition of terrorism, as it has become difficult to differentiate it from other armed group and political violence which often overlap in their activities, existing



declarations and conventions provides for protection against terrorism and proscribe punishments against states and non-state actors who employ the use of terror against their targets.<sup>8</sup>

Terrorism involves the systematic use of violence or the threat of violence, especially as a weapon of intimidation or a means of coercion.<sup>9</sup> It is usually adopted by armed groups (state and non-state armed groups), organizations or individuals in possession of arms as a tool to achieve a goal. Terrorism is commonly associated with all forms of warfare and can be a form of protest, rebellion or specialized tactics in warfare.<sup>10</sup> However, the Geneva Convention of 1949 defines terrorism as the illegal and indiscriminate use of violence by non-state actors against people or property to create an emotional response through the suffering of victims in furtherance of a political, economic, religious or social agenda.<sup>11</sup> It involves violence to a person's life, such as murder, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture, hostage-taking and violation of other human rights by non-state actors.<sup>12</sup> Whether adopted by states or non-state actors, terrorism inflicts psychological terror in victims and is by no small means a major threat to world peace and security.

Several armed groups have emerged that have inflicted terror on citizens through their actions going by the simple definition of terrorism. However, not all the groups have been categorized as terrorist groups. According to the Global Terrorist database, the criminalization of terror, the indiscriminate attack on targets and unlawful access to weapons are what makes terrorism different from conventional warfare and other types of violence. Terrorists target civilians and non-combatants as well as government officials, the police and military bases/personnel. They attack public places and structures such as markets, schools, religious places of worship, oil installations and airports, among others, and employ the tactics of abduction and hijacking of planes/trucks/boats (usually those containing food or arms) to sustain their existence.<sup>13</sup> Terrorists intend to coerce, intimidate or pass their message to a larger audience(s) than the immediate



target, thus challenging existing authorities.<sup>14</sup> Also, terror is used as a strategy to carry out criminal activities and terrorism is usually accompanied by but not limited to pre or post-attack statements of the perpetrators; through videos, letters, emails, phone calls or website/social media posts, among others, to claim responsibility for such attacks or their past behaviours, and the particular nature of the target including the victim, weapon used or the nature of the attack.<sup>15</sup> It is instructive to note that in prolonged terrorist attacks as well as when faced with counter-terrorism forces, terrorists adopt guerrilla tactics and other clandestine means to sustain their fight.

Over the last three decades, the United Nations listed terrorist groups, including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Taliban, al-Qaida and Hizballah, whose activities seriously threatened world peace and security.<sup>16</sup> Also, different political parties and organizations like the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been associated with terrorist activities in the past. Aside from its transnational attacks, the use of internet technology (online/social media) to propagate, recruit, manipulate and finance terrorist activities has led to the ranking of ISIL as the greatest threat to world peace and security.<sup>17</sup> While there are several national terrorist groups in different states in Africa, the activities of Boko Haram and al-Shabaab have also posed threats to world peace and security as they transcend national boundaries.<sup>18</sup>

Generally, terrorists have the ideologies and practices they propagate. These ideologies, which may include political, religious, or social-economic in nature, may be different but have similar characteristics. They utilize violence as their major tool to instil fear and pursue their agenda and try to hold quasi-states and territorial claims in their state of attack. The ISIL tried to establish strongholds in Syria, Iraq and Libya; al-shabaab's homeland is Somalia but embarked on a series of operations in Kenya and Boko Haram activities cut across the neighbouring



countries of Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon.<sup>19</sup> Terrorists also seek to recruit others to support their course and manipulate recruits to achieve their goals; this is especially so as reflected in suicide bombing. More so, they brutally terrorize all those who would not comply with their directives. They abduct, imprison, execute and carry out all kinds of cruel tactics indiscriminately against people regardless of their gender. These characteristics of terrorism have been manifested by the Boko Haram terrorists and its splinter groups in West Africa.

Terrorism is arguably triggered by deep-rooted grievances caused by a combination of several factors, including inequality, marginalization, nepotism, oppression, injustice, corruption, uncontrolled radicalism and violent extremism, and underdevelopment, which are products of poor governance.<sup>20</sup> The inability of governments to build and strengthen their political institutions as well as make evidence-based policies/regulations that would enhance social cohesion and economic development and implement the same within the ambit of the law is at the core of all the vices that cause grievances in society. In Nigeria, lingering unresolved grievances that often time degenerate into violent reactions are at the core of violence that degenerates into terrorism. The underlying issues surrounding the Niger Delta Crises, despite the Presidential Amnesty granted them in 2009, and even Boko Haram terrorism, remains largely unabated.<sup>21</sup>

### **Boko Haram Terrorism in Northeast Nigeria Up to 2021**

The Boko Haram group, also known as *Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād* (JASDJ), was founded by radical Islamist Mohammed Yusuf in 2002, with a jihadist outlook aiming to purify Islam in Northern Nigeria and impose the Sharia law. However, some arguments trace the origin of the group to the 1980 Maitanisine uprisings in Kano.<sup>22</sup> Its tenet is akin to the Jihadist drive of Uthman Dan Fodio of 1804. The group was initially perceived as a local group of Islamic extremists and



armed men waging war against the Nigerian State. This was following its protests, riots and attacks on locals as well as disruptions of normal activities in the states, among others, in the 1990s, but later became more violent following the killing of some of its members, including its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009. Boko Haram group thereafter metamorphosed into an insurgent group and began incessant violent attacks in the country. They launched sophisticated attacks against government officials and structures, as well as indiscriminate attacks against civilians in communities. They attacked marketplaces, churches, mosques, schools, prisons, barracks, military posts/outlets and other public places, as well as kidnapping foreign nationals, nationals and school children. Also, foreign structures like the United Nations Headquarters in Abuja (on 26 August 2011) and the MNJTG headquarters in Baga were attacked by Boko Haram terrorists.<sup>23</sup>

The Boko Haram terrorists accompanied its attacks with pre and post attacks statements claiming responsibility for destructive actions.<sup>24</sup> Its leader Abubakar Shekau started threatening attacks on Western influence and the United States and solidarized, pledging allegiance with foreign terrorist groups via audio and video messages; al-Qaida (July 2010), Taliban (20 July 2014), the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL- March 7, 2015).<sup>25</sup> Boko Haram was hitherto linked to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb; in March 2012, the Deash (ISIL) accepted the pledge of allegiance to Boko haram. Boko Haram was also reported to have gained support from Al-Qaeda.<sup>26</sup>

By 2012, the group had shown increased operational capabilities, inhabited the forests and sacked and occupied villages in the northeast. They utilized sophisticated weapons, small and light weapons, vehicle/animal-borne improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and drones to carry out attacks on their targets. Boko Haram terrorists adopt guerilla tactics and suicide (sometimes female) bombings against their targets. The group also operated illegal checkpoints and tax systems in places, captured people



and regulated the affairs of the population. With the frequency and intensity of attacks reaching their peak in 2014, the Boko Haram group was termed one of the world's deadliest terror groups.<sup>27</sup> In August 2016, owing to internal crises, the group split into two factions; Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA) and Boko Haram. However, both groups' intentions remained the same, to target the Nigerian government and spread their ideology beyond the country.<sup>28</sup> By mid-2021, the Boko Haram attacks had begun to subside with a focus on intra-group conflicts over power struggles that led to the death of its leader Abubakar Shekau Boko Haram and later the ISWAP commander Abu Musab al-Bamawi.<sup>29</sup>

The absence of governance in the forest areas and weak government presence in local communities, especially in bordering and creek localities, had made the places attractive to the terrorists and insurgents. Ineffective public institutions and facilities, poor policing and security base, limited health facilities, schools, poor road network and weak court systems, among others in these places created a vacuum for the Boko Haram and other armed groups to naturally occupy.<sup>30</sup> Food and water shortage, unemployment, hunger, poverty, inequality, political corruption, marginalization and other social-economic and political grievances made the people in the northeast region, especially in rural communities, to become vulnerable to manipulation, attacks, and subjugation to not just the Boko Haram terrorist groups but other insurgents, militants, other criminal agents in their states. The insurgents, providing these basic needs to these communities, naturally aroused the sympathy and support of the people to their courses, but this was also a result of fear and violence adopted to intimidate the people into supporting their course.<sup>31</sup>

The Boko Haram terrorist, principally on religious fundamentalism, exploit the lapses in the rural communities and forest areas to launch massive terrorism in the country. Since 2009 when it began its insurgency to March 2022, Boko

Haram is reported to have killed about 35,000 persons in Northern Nigeria and displaced an estimated 3 million people in the Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states as well as in other parts of the Lake Chad Basin with over 336,070 refugees domiciled in states across Chad, Cameroon and Niger.<sup>32</sup> The group have carried out over seventy-eight major terrorist attacks in Nigeria, notably in Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Bauchi, Jos, Kano and Kaduna states, as well as in Abuja and, much later, Katsina state.<sup>33</sup> Boko Haram expanded its terrorist attacks into states in the north-central region of Nigeria, including the Federal Capital Territory as well as Plateau and Niger States.<sup>34</sup> Although the Boko Haram Terrorists Group operate largely in Nigeria and has carried out several attacks in the country, their activities and attacks transcend the boundaries to neighbouring countries with grave consequences for the region.<sup>35</sup> They have carried out several attacks and kidnaps, as well as killings and displacing civilians in northern Cameroon, Chad and Niger, and later in Burkina Faso, with attendant varied socio-economic effects on the countries and security consequences for the entire West Africa region.<sup>36</sup>

### **Effects of Boko Haram on Nigeria and the West Africa Region**

Boko Haram's aspiration to establish a Sharia State in Nigeria and its intention to extend it to West Africa and topple legitimate governments is evident in its trans-border attacks/kidnaps and affiliations/support of other terrorist groups, which aroused great regional and global concerns. The splitting of the Boko Haram group led to the multiplicity of terrorist groups in the region with a tendency to influence insurrections and cross-border attacks by local militias against the states.<sup>37</sup> Although the existence of armed groups naturally poses serious threats to the security and legitimacy of the state, Boko Haram terrorism instigates and emboldens other armed groups to launch intensive attacks against the government. The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria was followed by a surge of violence and other criminal

activities elsewhere in Nigeria, including banditry, ethnic conflicts, armed robbery and farmer-herder conflicts. The prolonged existence of terrorists and other armed groups and ineffective counter-terrorism lasting over time have made violence culture to become entrenched in society.

The Boko Haram terrorism has led to the loss of huge human capital and resources, thus undermining long-term and short-term human capital development. The massive attacks and displacement on communities in affected states, destruction of facilities and structures, raiding of crops and disruption of farming activities, among others. Boko Haram terrorism has contributed massively to food crises and famines in the northeast and Nigeria in general, and by implication, inflation in the West Africa region. Although some countries in West Africa appear to be relatively stable, such as Ghana, Benin Republic, and Togo and do not suffer direct physical attacks from the Boko Haram terrorists groups, the indirect consequences of the attacks loom large; inflation as a result of food shortage, massive emigration from affected states, and deepened weakening of the security of the region. Boko Haram terrorism has led to the displacement of about 3 million people, thereby increasing the number of internally displaced persons and refugees in the region as well as asylum seekers in the world, with attendant humanitarian crises.<sup>38</sup>

The destruction of existing structures and the persistent nature of attacks creates insecurity that discourages both foreign and domestic investors and thus threatens national development. It also disrupts other developments as more funds would be diverted to the defence and security sector to the neglect of other viable sectors; health, education, and economic sectors, among others. The war against terrorism is not without a heavy toll on the Nigerian economy, as the nation's defence budget and spending continuously increased in the last nine years. Between 2015 to 2022, the defence budget rose above 11 trillion naira

despite the declining impact of such budgetary virtues and accrued huge debt as a result of the same.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, terrorism poses serious threats to the ecosystem, aggravating the problems of climate conditions. The use of bombs and explosives by the Boko Haram terrorists not only affects humans but added to the environmental challenge and climate change. Studies have shown that climate change does not directly lead to a higher level of conflict, but climate pressure does. It also shows that countries enduring conflict are less able to cope with climate change because their ability to adapt is weakened by such conflicts.<sup>40</sup> Also, forced migration as a result of famine caused by encroaching desertification has increased the struggle for land, food scarcity and hunger, among others which exacerbate conflict, especially in other regions in Nigeria.

Violence associated with terrorism and other armed conflict has been indicated as the major obstacle to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).<sup>41</sup> It has also been indicated as a factor to watch if the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 will be achieved. In this regard, the effective collaboration of governments is needed to root out terrorism. Also, leaders at different levels of society should work and mobilize human and material resources to effectively root out terrorism. Terrorism triggers criminality, robbery, kidnappings, extortion, drug trafficking, money laundering, and arms trafficking, as exemplified in the Boko Haram terrorism. Other effects of Boko Haram terrorism include the psychological impact on people and violations of fundamental human rights, among others.

### **Efforts at Curbing Boko Haram Terrorism in Nigeria**

Several efforts have been made to curb Boko Haram Terrorism, which has both national and regional colouration. At the national level, the government of Nigeria adopted different measures to curb the menace of Boko Haram in the country. These have been mostly military intervention and counter-measures



attacks; declaration of a state of emergency in three northeast states, namely Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states and shutdown of mobile phone coverage in 2013; assembling of a Joint Task Force (JTF) of military, police and customs officers and several deployments of troops for internal security operations since 2009 and police investigations and trials and since 2013, the incorporation of community security, the Civilian Joint Task Force into its security framework to effectively identify and prosecute the war against terrorism through local intelligence gathering and surveillance among others<sup>42</sup>. The attack on the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) office and other attacks in the region led to a reorganization of the sub-regional security cooperation in 2015 to counter the terrorists. <sup>43</sup>The MNJTF, which had been since 1994 to check trans-border crime and security issues around the Lake Chad Basin States, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Benin, was revived to counter the Boko Haram terrorist.<sup>44</sup> Also, the Nigerian government sought other regional collaborations and international assistance; Joint Trans-Border Security Committee between Nigeria and Cameroon in February 2012; assistance by the US troops training, reconnaissance and airborne intelligence using predator drones, and deployment of personnel to carry out operations as well as Intelligence, surveillance; equipment support to the Cameroon military from US AFRICOM; US, Target acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) training in Chad and Niger respectively; training support provided by France and UK and other support from China and Columbia. The United Nations provided humanitarian support for refugees and other displaced persons, likewise many INGOs. The Nigerian government simultaneously committed to an upswing in defence spending between 2009 and 2022.<sup>45</sup> However, terrorism remains the bane of peace and security in the country. The problem of inadequate equipment and facilities, inadequate synergy among relevant security agencies, poor intelligence and weak citizenry support, among others, have contributed to the ineffectiveness of the counter-terrorism/insurgency drive in the



country.<sup>46</sup> Also, the root causes of the problem are yet to be addressed. The intense use of kinetic means without addressing fundamental issues such as corruption, weak institutions, poverty, social exclusion, marginalization, religious extremism, poor infrastructure, nepotism, human rights abuse, injustice, desertification and climate change, among others, has made the kinetic intervention nearly futile. It has further increased distrust for the government and further weakening of the state. However, it should be noted that intensive collaborations among several agencies and security services in the northeast region have led to the de-escalation of Boko Haram terrorism as an increased number of terrorists have laid down their arms and turned themselves for rehabilitation and integration into society in the ongoing Operations Safe Corridor. Also, the region is gradually resuming its agricultural activities, among others.<sup>47</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed the greatest threats to world peace and security associated with terrorism. The debilitating effects of terrorism have led to the largest global and regional coalition of governments, non-state actors and military efforts to curb terrorism and terrorist threats. The Boko Haram terrorist have consistently threatened the peace and stability of Nigeria and the West Africa region for over a decade despite national, sub-regional and foreign intervention military and technical intervention. The realities in the fight against Boko Haram terrorism revealed the weak socio-economic and political structures of the country to combat threats to its sovereignty which in itself was the cause of the rise of insurgency that degenerated into terrorism. The weak economy was further crippled as resources which were supposed to be used for the development of other sectors were channeled into the fight against terrorism. Poor leadership, weak law enforcement, politicization, ill-equipped and undertrained security operatives, and inadequate modern technology, among others, hindered the effective fight against terrorism and other security threats in the



country.<sup>48</sup> The northeast region continues to be characterized by poor infrastructural base, porous borders and weak security architecture to be able to anticipate and manage risks and respond timely to security threats, among others. The Nigerian state should review its political leadership recruitment process, harmonize the human and natural resources for development, and provide holistic and evidence-based practicable policies and programmes to address the lingering and emergent problems in the varied states in the northeast and the nation-state at large.<sup>49</sup>



## Endnotes

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