**3 Nigeria: A Religious Framing of Grievances**

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**Introduction: background to the conflict and the main groups**

Boko Haram and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) emerged in different parts of Nigeria, at different times, as the products of different circumstances.

**Boko Haram**

Boko Haram – whose official name was Jamaat Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Dawah wal-Jihad (‘Group of the People of the Sunnah for Proselytization and Jihad’) before it was changed to Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyyah (‘West Africa Province’) when it declared allegiance to ISIL – was launched as an opposition movement in Northern Nigeria in the early 2000s. Its leader Mohamed Yusuf opposed what he saw as the corruption of Nigerian society and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small, southern Christian elite. His proposed solution was a state under Islamic law, drawing on the region’s history as an ‘Islamic land’ under the Kanem-Bornu Empire (c.1068-1900 CE) and Sokoto Caliphate (1809-1903 CE). He also drew on two very different contemporary traditions in Islam: Shiism and Salafism.

Boko Haram was originally a mostly non-violent religious revivalist group seeking to establish a purer alternative to Christian-dominated Nigerian society. However, Boko Haram was radicalised by a combination of excessive, militarised responses from the Nigerian state and internal changes of which the most important was Abubakar Shekau’s accession to the leadership after the death in police custody of the movement’s founder. Under the pressure of conflict, Boko Haram became progressively more violent and indiscriminate so that it is now, along with ISIL, one of the most lethal terrorist groups in the world. It also holds sway over large areas of north-eastern Nigeria, although it has also lost territory to a multi-national regional force.

**Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)**

In contrast, MEND is a coalition fighting the perceived exploitation and oppression of Niger Delta populations linked to the public-private partnerships created to process and export oil from Nigeria (Courson, 2009). It has sought to attract world attention to the environmental degradation and underdevelopment of the Niger Delta and the lack of benefits accruing to the population from the oil economy. The contrast between the two groups is stark, but this case study compares them in order to identify how Islamist violent extremist behaviour differs from that of other violent political groups in the region using, and what explains those differences.

**Aims and Objectives of the Groups**

The stated aims of Boko Haram were initially firmly entrenched in ideology (defined in this study as a worldview or set of beliefs that drives individual or collective action). Boko Haram’s creation was motivated by its leaders’ conviction that the Nigerian state has become filled with social vices, and that “the best thing for a devout Muslim to do was to ‘migrate’ from the morally bankrupt society to a secluded place and establish an ideal Islamic society devoid of political corruption and moral deprivation” (Onuoha, 2010). Ideology is often understood to be a unifying factor, bringing people together on the basis of a shared belief. In the case of Boko Haram, however, ideology was contentious from the outset, and has changed dramatically over time. In its early phases, Boko Haram was a largely non-violent group, although it became increasingly assertive in its challenge to the Nigerian state. Mohamed Yusuf promoted specific views on education, healthcare, employment and government. However, he did not live according to the principles he espoused (Onuoha 2010). Yusuf’s death in police custody in 2009 following a heavy-handed government crackdown sparked a new phase in the group’s evolution. This saw a more violent organisation emerge under its new leader Abubakar Shekau: from 2011 it mounted an intensive campaign of violence against the Nigerian state, winning and holding territory in the process. The shift has also been evident in the targets of attacks: Muslim communities were originally forewarned if attacks were planned in their areas, but after Yusuf’s death attacks became more indiscriminate. Its change in strategy reflected a more militant ideology, reflected by its declarations of allegiance first to Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and then to ISIL. Some Boko Haram fighters have been trained in AQIM camps, and the group made an offer of weapons and other support (AFP, 2012). However, despite rebranding themselves as the West African Province in mid-2015, there is no evidence of material support in either direction between Boko Haram and ISIL: some commentators argue that this was a mere rebranding designed to increase access to resources and publicity (Al Jazeera, 2015).

However, Boko Haram’s ideology is not only dynamic but also a factor in the fractiousness of the movement. Under Abubakar Shekau’s leadership, there have been internal divisions over ideology as well as tactics, resulting in the emergence of the splinter-group Ansaru, which condemned attacks against Muslims and innocent non-Muslims and vowed to “restore the dignity of black Africans” (Sahara Reporters, 2012). Although Shekau had always been part of the leadership, many of the older members saw him as too extreme (Zenn, 2012). While Shekau took the group in a new direction, many remained loyal to the original aims and objectives set forth by Yusuf.

In contrast, MEND’s ideology has been a source of strength, giving the group a clear focus and defined and localised aims which have encouraged cohesion – despite the breadth of the coalition which brought together many different ethnic groups. These remained unified by a common view of the grievances experienced in the region and a desire for equality and social justice. MEND’s violent strategy was consistent with its aims, resulting in the loss of a quarter of Nigeria’s daily oil exports (Courson, 2009). Its political strategy was equally consistent, as it began to articulate its demands to the Nigerian government for resource control, constitutional rights, and measures to mitigate social marginalisation, political repression and environmental degradation. The Nigerian response since 2006 has been to vacillate between a securitised response and the offer of amnesties (Boas, 2012).

MEND’s narrative is explicitly based on grievances, whereas Boko Haram has subordinated grievances to religious and cultural opposition to the state. Religion – or more accurately a religious framing of the conflict – clearly divides the two groups ideologically. What they have in common, however, is that whatever the framing, both groups responded to and seek to correct social, political and economic grievances in marginalised regions far removed from the centres of power. While Boko Haram appears to have retreated from its grievance-oriented origins, its evolution into an ultra-violent ideology – in 2014 it overtook ISIL as the world’s most violent terrorist group (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015) – is also the product of governance failure, as Nigeria’s excessive militarised responses, combined with its failure to respond to marginalisation of the country’s north, radicalised the group (Comolli, 2015).

The activities of both groups are instrumental, in that they are designed to achieve the respective motivations and aims. This suggests that both groups act rationally. However, this is not how Boko Haram has been perceived by outsiders, especially in the West, and this perception derives from the relationship between ideology and action. The demands of MEND were supported by international advocacy concerning the damage caused by the oil industry, so their demands were seen by many as justified and their tactics as rational – even if there was strong disapproval of the latter. Many international NGOs have been outspoken about the ecological and social damage caused by oil companies and the need for reparations. Even individuals who were kidnapped by MEND reportedly understood its rationale for violence. In contrast, because Boko Haram frames its programme in religious and cultural terms, it tends to be perceived as irrational, uncompromising, or even psychopathic (Comolli, 2015).

**Tactics and Methods**

There are some superficial similarities between the violent behaviour of the two groups. Boko Haram’s ultra-violence and religious and cultural framing of activities do not necessarily mean irrationality. Both groups embraced guerrilla warfare, attacking political targets and Nigeria’s security forces, using tactics such as kidnapping, and choosing symbolic targets that expressed their respective ideologies (churches and oil installations for Boko Haram and MEND respectively) (Courson, 2009). Both employed a franchise system, delegating operations to semi-autonomous sub-groups (Osumah, 2013). However, such similarities conceal fundamental differences. MEND’s choice of targets has been more clearly instrumental: despite occasional bomb attacks in major cities, MEND has mostly restricted its attacks to the oil industry and the government’s supporting infrastructure in the Delta. It has generally avoided targeting civilians (although has mounted occasional attacks on hotels, cargo ships, and fishing vessels). It has not embraced the tactic of suicide bombing.[[1]](#endnote-1) Nor has it sought to acquire and hold territory.

By contrast, while Boko Haram initially targeted government forces and Christian institutions in northern Nigeria, its broadening of targets particularly after Shekau’s accession in 2010 resulted in less clarity over who exactly were its enemies. For example, in May 2011 a Muslim cleric who had criticized Boko Haram’s killing dozens of security agents and politicians, was himself murdered. This marked the beginning of a campaign of political murders targeting Boko Haram’s critics. At the same time, the group’s strategic shift to seeking territorial gains led to raids on villages that resulted in substantial civilian deaths. In the same year the group mounted its first suicide-bomb attacks, targeting the National Police Headquarters and UN Headquarters in Abuja, presumably in emulation of Al Qaida, with which Boko Haram was then in alliance. In 2011 and 2012, around twenty suicide attacks were launched against religious (both Christian and Muslim), military and other government targets (Roggio, 2012). In 2014 it mounted 36 suicide attacks (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015). From 2014, Boko Haram has also used women as suicide bombers as it has adapted to dealing with a more effective military response from Nigeria and a multi-lateral military force. This suggests a tactical pragmatism, as women in the movement had traditionally been assigned purely domestic roles in accordance with the group’s strict Salafist interpretation of Islamic law (Pearson, 2015).

More recently, Boko Haram has also developed its ability to maintain a sustained battle against the Nigerian armed forces. In addition to sporadic attacks and raids, it has fought against the military to gain territory and hold ground. Although it has since been pushed out of some areas by a regional military coalition, by early 2015 it controlled around 20,000 square miles of north-eastern Nigeria and was able to launch attacks into neighbouring Cameroon and Niger. In some respects Boko Haram’s violence has therefore been successful in enabling it to conquer territory, while provoking excessive security-force responses has helped it recruit in the thousands.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that its strategy or tactics are consistently sound. For example, the group does not provide any governance structures in north-eastern Nigeria, while its excesses have alienated communities. More fundamentally, it appears to have no long-term plan. What began as an attempt to enhance social welfare has mutated into an incoherent programme, and the group’s shifting allegiances appear to depend on trends in violent Islamism elsewhere. For example, following its pledge of allegiance to ISIL it reasserted its aim to establish a Caliphate, yet activities to meet the needs of supporters remain a low priority.

**Recruitment and Motivation**

Boko Haram is estimated by the CIA to number around 9,000, but other estimates are significantly higher. Although the leadership of Boko Haram has been drawn from Islamic clerics and students, professionals and students of tertiary institutions, many recruits join for money or because of a lack of other opportunities. For instance, lookouts are recruited to report on the military presence in towns across the north and are paid 5000 naira.[[2]](#endnote-2) Boko Haram has also recruited gang members from Diffa in Niger and other towns near the Nigerian border to carry out specific acts, demonstrating a pragmatic willingness to prioritise utility over ideological purity (Fessy, 2014).

Heavy-handed government responses that victimise populations have also contributed to Boko Haram’s recruitment. Establishing itself as the protector of these communities and as a fighter against the oppressive authorities, Boko Haram is able to recruit from a broad base of willing individuals. In particular, Yusuf drew on the narratives of anger at the perceived Western support of the country’s south and the perceived failure of the Islamic leadership in the north (Pantucci and Jesperson, 2015).

In this respect, Boko Haram appears to be similar to MEND, whose constituent groups attract individuals in protest at the socio-economic conditions in the Delta. However, the cohesion of MEND has ensured that leaders and followers were essentially united and were fighting for the same goal. Boko Haram has shown significant divisions between leaders and followers as well as a high degree of diversity among the latter. Many followers are driven by grievance and may not even understand the religious ideology propagated by the leadership.[[3]](#endnote-3) Not all fighters are willing participants either, as an increasing number are coerced, at least partly as a result of the group’s increasing estrangement from the northern Nigeria’s predominantly Muslim population. While the kidnap of the Chibok girls was widely publicised, many boys are also kidnapped to become footsoldiers of Boko Haram.[[4]](#endnote-4) But others are likely to have been drawn in by the group’s propaganda, which has played on a range of motivations in order to draw as many into the group as possible, using not only religious appeals but also historical narratives, such as the legacy of colonialism, and deeply-rooted ethnic and cultural divisions (Barkindo, 2014). While MEND members can agree on their economic grievances, in Boko Haram there is variation in motivations and worldviews which means the group is inherently unstable. Rather than coming together on the basis of shared belief, the vehicle of Boko Haram is used by different members to pursue different goals.But the leadership has consistently framed its propaganda and recruitment drives around local issues, activating the dissatisfaction deriving from neglect by central government.

In both cases, then, militancy among followers is manifested in different ways but at root is a response to deprivation and lack of access to state services as state structures are almost non-existent in many parts of northern Nigeria. As such, it is unclear how many actively support ideals such as an Islamic Caliphate.

**Conclusion**

A crucial and illuminating difference between the two groups is their potential willingness to negotiate. As its participation in Nigerian politics demonstrates, MEND is a fundamentally political actor, and one whose demands could only granted by the Nigerian state. Although its violent tactics targeted the state, its aim was to negotiate with its enemy from a position of strength. The group’s political orientation thus made it a willing party in negotiations, which resulted in a successful political settlement.

While the level of support for an Islamic Caliphate across Boko Haram is unclear, repeated calls for the Caliphate presents a much more fundamental challenge to the state than MEND. States are rarely willing to relinquish territory, particularly in response to extremist violent tactics, even if this is sometimes the outcome of political processes. But the ideological claims of a Caliphate challenge not just the territorial limits but the very foundations of the Nigerian state – a state whose authority cannot be recognised by Boko Haram’s leaders even if it sought to compromise, as Boko Haram claims to reject its principles (including democracy) as well as its practice. In this case it appears that there is no space for compromise.

However, the divisions within the group, particularly the different motivations of leadership and followers, means that some factions may be more open to negotiation. This may be particularly the case with followers who are motivated by grievances, where material or political settlement may be enticing. In contrast, leaders are unlikely to consent to the kind of settlement that worked with MEND, when an amnesty was agreed that included a stipend to militants. The amnesty was linked to their demands by contributing to their economic needs and returning some of the benefits of the oil industry to the region. This may appeal to Boko Haram members frustrated at the lack of socio-economic development in northern Nigeria.

1. As we have noted elsewhere, suicide bombing is not – as commonly believed – restricted to Islamist or even religious groups, as demonstrated by its widespread use in previous decades by groups such as the LTTE and the PKK. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Interview, international police liaison officer, Abuja, August 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Expert comments at joint DfID-FCO Workshop on Conflict and Countering Violent Extremism in Nigeria, 10 Sep 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)