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Nigeria

Boko Haram: caliphate and rentier state

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The April 2014 kidnapping of almost 300 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok, in the extreme northeastern Nigerian state of Borno, made the name ‘Boko Haram’ notorious overnight. A global call to “bring back our girls” quickly became one of the highest-profile social media campaigns ever, with even leading celebrities and high-profile politicians joining in.

Nevertheless, the organisation behind the kidnapping remains poorly understood. Officially called Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’Awati Wal-Jihad (‘People Committed to the Prophet’s Teachings for Propagation and Jihad’), the militant Islamist movement’s shorter and more familiar name translates as ‘Western education is forbidden’.

Boko Haram was founded in 2002, in Maiduguri – the capital of Borno state – by Mohammed Yusuf. Yusuf reportedly used the existing infrastructure of a popular conservative Islamic sect, the Izala Society, to recruit members, before breaking away to form his own movement with the goal of creating an Islamic state. He established a religious complex with a school, attracting boys from poor Muslim families from across Nigeria and neighbouring countries, and becoming a recruiting ground for jihadis.

The Council of Ulama advised the Nigerian government and the Nigerian Television Authority not to broadcast Yusuf’s preaching. Their warnings were ignored, and gradually the movement began to gain ground. Today it claims perhaps 5,000-10,000 adherents – double the estimates of just two years ago.

Boko Haram’s initial success is as much to do with poverty, inequality and corruption as with the attraction of the religious teachings of Mohammed Yusuf. While Nigeria’s southern and, to a lesser extent, western and central regions have generally grown wealthier in the past decade or so, the north and east have remained very poor. As the UK-based Economist explained, if Nigeria’s northern states were independent countries, some of would rank at the very bottom globally, despite the fact that Nigeria is OPEC’s seventh largest oil producer: “Nowhere else in the world are more children out of school. Fewer than 5 per cent of women in some parts can read or write. Estimates put three out of four residents in the north east below the poverty line, around twice as many as at the southern end of the country.

The growth and spread of Boko Haram is not only a *consequence* of the region’s extreme poverty, inequality and corruption; it has also become an exacerbating *cause*. The movement has long financed itself through plunder and kidnapping for ransom; the Chibok kidnapping was just one example of something that has been going on for more than a decade. Now, it raises revenues from extortion and looting, and from terrorising local officials, shopkeepers and other businesses in the towns, and farmers and villagers in the countryside. It also collects ‘taxes’ from traders and transporters at roadblocks and checkpoints.

Recent recruitment has often been by force, but in reality not much coercion is required since those who join often see little alternative. Agriculture has collapsed in parts of the northeast, and in many places fields lie empty and markets are deserted – even in areas still under government control. It is estimated that the combination of economic collapse and insecurity has driven more than half a million people from their homes.

Boko Haram itself may have killed between 5,000 and 15,000 people in the past five years – at least 2,000 in the first half of 2014. One source suggests that 650,000 people had fled the conflict zone by August 2014 – an increase of 200,000 since May. In September, a Boko Haram group attacked the villages of Kubi and Watu in Adamawa State to the south of Borno. Houses and small shops were looted, plundered, and torched, and many local people were slaughtered. State security forces failed to show up. At a newly established refugee camp in Yola, capital of

Adamawa State, most arrivals reported having fled from Boko Haram.

With its recent substantial growth, Boko Haram now appears capable of securing its own territory in the northeast. In recent months it has taken control of at least two-dozen towns in Borno and the neighbouring states of Adamawa and Yobe. Gwoza, a hill town of almost half a million people in Borno, some 100 miles southeast of Maiduguri, is the capital of the self-declared caliphate. Few outsiders dare visit this stronghold.

The movement has also managed to acquire armoured personnel carriers and antitank weapons; it even has some tanks and artillery, and may have the capacity to bring down aircraft with anti-aircraft missiles: in October 2014, claims began circulating that it had downed a Nigerian fighter jet and beheaded the pilot.

Nigerian security forces, despite being promised the resources to deal with this threat, are under-equipped, poorly organised and suffer from low pay and morale. The army has approximately 18,000 troops in the northeast – an area of some 10 million people, living in widely dispersed settlements, in rough and often densely forested terrain. Roughly half of that force remains in Maiduguri. The Nigerian forces have no air power, as Boko Haram destroyed much of the fleet in a major raid in 2013, leaving it relatively free to roam the region in vehicles looted mainly from military garrisons and police posts, and to deploy an impressive armoury against its enemies.

It is significant that Boko Haram has not only developed its own state-like characteristics, but that the Nigerian state for its part appears unable or unwilling to combat it effectively. A budget supplement of ?1 billion allegedly allocated to respond to the developing threat seems mostly to have disappeared into the pockets of senior military staff. So few of the allocated funds reach the front line that soldiers often go unpaid for months. Desertion is common and mutiny not unknown. Soldiers have shot at their own officers, and there have been a number of executions by firing squad. In the field, security forces tend to supplement their meagre or non-existent pay by bribes and extortion, stopping drivers of both private and commercial vehicles at checkpoints designed to raise money as much as to identify Boko Haram supporters.

Local police are also under extreme pressure and, lacking the equipment to confront Boko Haram directly, often resort to arrest and detention of locals as a way of extracting information. Abuse in detention is commonplace; some police stations have what is informally known as an ‘officer in charge of torture’ for the interrogation of detainees. Extra-judicial killings, by both the army and police, account for thousands of deaths in the north and northeast. Such practices only fuel Boko Haram’s recruitment. Boko Haram’s success is not only due to the fact that the region’s civilians are ‘caught between a rock and a hard place’. The movement is seen to offer a vision of some kind of alternative.

Radical Islam’s ‘purity’ – a crucial part of Boko Haram’s rhetoric – often seems attractive to poverty-stricken locals in contrast to the corrupt and dissolute status quo. The severe punishments meted out to those suspected of opposing the movement are seen by many as ‘rough justice’ rather than abomination. Resentment of the region’s economic and political marginalisation, as well as anger at its widespread poverty and backwardness, are powerful forces: the Nigerian state is easily seen as the problem rather than the solution, and locals may pursue alternatives rather than struggling for change within the existing system.

Boko Haram also sets itself against the ‘Western’ influences, which are seen not only by radical Islamists but also by many ordinary Muslims as deeply corrupting, and as ‘alien’ to the beliefs and practices of the Muslim peoples of northern Nigeria. The name ‘Boko Haram’ is no accident: for decades, Northern politicians and academics voiced their fundamental opposition to Western education. In a 2009 BBC interview, Yusuf claimed that Western education ‘spoils the belief in one God’.

If this sounds extreme, it should be recognised that the north of Nigeria has always been a Muslim stronghold, and the deep division between the Muslim north and the predominantly Christian south has a long history. Severe clashes with ethnic and religious dimensions – in which hundreds or thousands were killed and tens of thousands forced to flee their homes – date back more than a decade.

Islamic law –shari’ah – was imposed by local authorities beginning with Zamfara in the northwest as long ago as January 2000, and covered 12 northern states by late 2002. Yusuf believed that this effort had failed to prevent widespread corruption, and founded Boko Haram in response.

Boko Haram is undoubtedly influenced by the Wahabist tradition of Islam, and Borno’s Deputy Governor Alhaji Dibal has claimed that Boko Haram has received training and funds from Al Qaeda (through Al Qaeda in the Arab Maghreb – AQIM). But this is not confirmed.

Some sources suggest that even if Al Qaeda at one point had links with the movement, it broke with it when it decided that Yusuf was an unreliable person. In November 2013, Boko Haram was designated a terrorist organisation by the USA, which persist in the belief that it has links with Al Qaeda.

The violence of Boko Haram has also been linked to the militancy of the Arewa People’s Congress, the militia wing of the Arewa Consultative Forum, the main political group representing the interests of northern Nigeria. Significantly, Sagir Mohammed, co-founder of the ACF, has stated:

‘We believe we have the capacity, the willpower to go to any part of Nigeria to protect our Northern brothers in distress... If it becomes necessary, if we have to use violence, we have to use it to save our people. If it means jihad, we will launch our jihad.’

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