Scientia Militaria
2025, VOL. 53, NO. 1, 93-112
DOI 10.5787/53-1-1460

Boko Haram: At the Intersection of Regional Security Complexes, Islamism and Gender Dynamics

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Abstract

Boko Haram has been in existence since 2002. In its more than two decades, it has been the scourge of the region bringing death, destruction and displacement to vast swathes of Nigeria and neighbouring states. Despite strenuous efforts on the part of the Nigerian state, neighbouring countries and the international community, the carnage and breadth of human suffering have grown in intensity as Boko Haram and its offshoots have continued to extend their tentacles into new territories. Despite intense rivalries between Boko Haram and its Islamist rivals, and counter-terrorism efforts, the extremist challenge posed has escalated. Why is this so? Three factors contributed to this failure. First, the research on which this article is based, found that the phenomenon of Boko Haram needs to be understood beyond the borders of Nigeria – as part of a dynamic regional security complex. Second, because analysts under-played the importance of Islamist ideology, the nature of the beast was misunderstood. Policy measures undertaken, based on this misdiagnosis, were then bound to fail. Third, counter-terrorism efforts have also failed due to an important omission – failing to see the relationship between misogyny and extremism.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Extremism, Islamism, Misogyny, Muhamad Yusuf, Nigeria, Sahel, Women

Introduction

The Global Terrorism Index for 2024 is emphatic that terrorism has shifted away from the Middle East towards the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, the Sahel accounts for almost half of all terrorism-related deaths globally.[2] The unfolding tragedy in the Sahel is reflected in the inability of the Nigerian authorities, neighbouring states, the regional bloc and the international community to end the threat posed by Boko Haram for over two decades. In June 2011, then Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan established a Special Military Task Force consisting of the army, navy, air force, police, and the Department of State Security in an effort to defeat Boko Haram insurgents. Despite this mobilisation of 30 000 security personnel, Boko Haram continued to thrive.[3] Four years later, Chad and Niger jointly launched a military offensive. Following the retaking of 30 towns and villages from Boko Haram in 2015, citizens were informed that Boko Haram

was confronting imminent defeat.[4] Victory, however, proved elusive. As for the regional bloc – the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – they have been adept at issuing condemnatory declarations and statements against Boko Haram, but never had the counter-insurgency capacity to follow through.[5]

The international community fared little better despite the investment of billions of dollars in terms of the provision of weapons, training, and the establishment of forward operating sites (FOS) and military operating bases (MOBs). Boko Haram was established in 2002. This was the same year in which the United States (US) established the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), which involved stabilising Chad, Niger and Mauritania. Three years later, the PSI morphed into the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI), which now included Algeria, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal and Tunisia. The United States also funded various iterations of multinational military exercises, such as the Flintlock exercise, designed to enhance operability amongst the region's armed forces.[6] Still, Boko Haram continued to bedevil counter-terrorism efforts.

Why was this so? Unlike traditional counter-terrorism analyses with its focus on counter-insurgency,[7] the purpose of this article is to emphasise three aspects contributing to the strength and longevity of extremist movements, especially Boko Haram, in the Sahel. These are regional security complexes, the Islamist ideology, and the relationship between misogyny and terrorism. The research on which this article is based, adopted a qualitative method of analysis. Content analysis and the comparative method were employed to examine the evolution and trajectory of Boko Haram.

On Regional Security Complexes

What constitutes the geographic terrain called the Sahel? For some, it stretches from Senegal in the West, running parallel with the Sahara, to Sudan and Eritrea on the Red Sea.[8] What is interesting about this definition of the Sahel is that it excludes Nigeria, which is the West African behemoth. With a population of 237 million and an area size of 923 768 square kilometres, Nigeria also happens to share borders with so-called Sahelian countries, such as Chad and Niger.[9] Any attempt therefore to understand terrorism in this battle-scarred region while excluding Nigeria is bound to fail.

Moreover, the Sahel – stretching from the Atlantic Sea coast in the west to the coast of the Red Sea in the east – is too wide an area to provide any meaning or context to our attempt to understand terrorism in Nigeria or the broader region. For myself, the Sahel region constitutes the entire north-west Africa on account of the strong historic, cultural, political, religious and economic ties across the region. Moreover, there exists in north-west Africa – the Sahel – an integrated regional conflict system where sources of insecurity are intertwined and mutually reinforcing.[10] After all, Boko Haram operates across the countries of the region with its members spread across Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, and Mali. In similar vein, the collapse of the Gaddafi regime in Libya directly precipitated the crisis and rise of terrorism in Mali in 2012 when Malian Tuaregs in the Libyan armed forces together with weapons from Libyan arsenals made their way back

to Mali.[11] Moreover, as early as 2009, Boko Haram started purchasing weapons from Chad, Cameroon, and Niger.[12]

By 2015, the growing interconnections between Islamist groups were laid bare when evidence emerged that groups of 100 Boko Haram fighters at a time were receiving military training at camps in Gao, Mali, which were run by the Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). MUJAO broke away from Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in order to prosecute the Islamist cause solely in the Sahel/West Africa region. The training received could account for the growing sophistication of Boko Haram attacks from bows and arrows, machetes and Molotov cocktails to suicide car bombings and improvised explosive devices. Worse still, through AQIM and its parent body, Al Qaeda, Boko Haram fighters went on to receive training in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Iraq, Mauritania, and Algeria.[13] Its regional and indeed international connections allow Boko Haram to return to the battlefield after withdrawing when faced with an advancing Nigerian military or those from neighbouring states. Faced with a large counter-terrorism force, Boko Haram often retreats into neighbouring states, secures arms and finances through illicit means from there, receives training, and is able to secure recruits in these territories to replenish their ranks. The consequences of this are seen most graphically and tragically on the ground. In the Nigerian state of Borno alone, 1.8 million residents have been exposed to the violence unleased by Boko Haram. Meanwhile, Boko Haram violence has also engulfed citizens of Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.[14]

Exacerbating the regional security complex are cross-cutting issues, such as climate change. The Sahel region is warming 1.5 times faster than the global average, as the desert acts as an amplifier of the heat. This adds to the arid nature of the region, intensifying food insecurity and causing conflict between herding, farming, and fishing communities as the quest for water and arable land intensifies. Groups, such as Boko Haram, fuel these communal tensions and exploit popular alienation due to the inability of regional governments to assist local communities.[15] Another aspect of regionalisation of security lies in the fact that ethnic groups and their social organisations or polities were violently suppressed by the colonial state, and the newly independent states that border the region do not correspond to the delineation of restive tribes in the region. Two cases illustrate the point – the Tuaregs and the Kanuri. The Tuaregs reside in several Sahelian states: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, and Niger. Fiercely independent, these Tuaregs have sought to create their own homeland called Azawad since the nineteenth century. Moreover, for centuries they have violently resisted those who have tried to subjugate them – whether it was the French in the nineteenth century or the respective governments of Mali and Niger during the 1990–1995 and 2007–2009 rebellions.[16] In their quest to overthrow the yokes of a state they do not recognise, Tuareg groups have often forged common bonds with Islamists in the region, including Al Qaeda in the AQIM, Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) or the MUJAO. Like the Tuaregs, the Kanuri[i] do not recognise the authority of their own state. They had a thriving empire,

[i] The Kanuri want their own precolonial state and seek to unite all their ethnic kin across the different countries. Radical Islamist ideology is weaponised to achieve this purpose. Their purpose is therefore the precolonial state, and radical Islamic ideology is the means to achieve it.

and they seek to restore this pre-colonial empire, which spanned Nigeria, Chad, and Niger.[17] Like the Tuaregs, the Kanuri have made common cause with Islamists. Indeed, the top leadership of Boko Haram resides in Kanuri and Borno State where Boko Haram is most active while the Kanuri are most numerous. Moreover, Boko Haram recruits from its ethnic kin in Chad and Niger.

This regional security complex was again highlighted in July 2024 when Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger broke away from ECOWAS to form their rival confederation – the Alliance of Sahel States. The immediate consequences of this were felt with these states ceasing cooperation with Abuja in the fight against Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin by the Multinational Joint Task Force, which has been in existence since 2015. In these circumstances, Boko Haram and other Islamist groups have thrived in the area of the Basin.[18] The importance of emphasising that Boko Haram is not merely Nigerian receives added impetus if one considers the notion of an ummah – the global body of Muslim believers which recognises no borders. Boko Haram's recruits span the entire region.

Policy Implications

Regional security complexes are difficult to untangle and respond to. As explained above, a Nigerian offensive on the insurgents might well merely exacerbate the challenge of insurgency over the border. Co-ordination is key, and co-operation amongst the border states is vital. No one state can respond to climate change, irredentism (the desire of one state to annex the territory of another), or terrorism in the region. At the precise moment when Islamist groups are merging and co-ordinating (despite the rivalry), the regional body is moribund and indeed risks disintegration with the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States. Even within states, there is little co-ordination between the different facets of the security establishment. Then there are the perennial coups in the region – nine in the last three years in West Africa with major divides between the political establishment and the military.[19] Moreover, going forward, the spill-over effect of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict is already having its impact on the Sahel region with the Alliance of Sahel States growing closer to the Russian Federation whilst the pro-West ECOWAS seems to be unable to arrive at some sort of co-existence with the likes of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. All this undermines the imperative for a common regional strategy to defeat terrorism in the Sahel.

On Islamism

In 2018, the late Prof. Jim Hentz and I edited a volume entitled *Understanding Boko Haram: Terrorism and Insurgency in Africa,* which brought together a number of African, European, and US scholars attempting to understand the phenomenon of Boko Haram.[20] Over the 300 pages of the book, authors wrestled with issues of ethnicity and economic deprivation coupled with poor governance to explain the rise of Boko Haram. Only one chapter in this volume focused on the religious ideological component accounting for the rise of Boko Haram. In retrospect, we were wrong to give so little attention to the

religious fundamentalist drive, which catapulted Boko Haram from an obscure rural cult into the regional menace it is today. It is this religious fundamentalism, which provides a common identity amongst all those recruited within its ranks. It provides them with the basis to regionalise amongst other like-minded religious ideologues across borders, and allows them to forge ties with other regional and international extremists.

To be clear, when referring to religious fundamentalism we do not refer to Muslims, the vast majority of whom go about practicing their faith peacefully. Rather, it is a reference to "Islamism". Islamism is a twentieth-century totalitarian ideology that seeks to mould Islamic religious tradition to serve narrow political ends of domination. Khaled Abou El Fadl refers to this as a "puritanical" tradition within Islam noted for its 'fanatical reductionism and narrow-minded literalism'.[21] All Islamists rejects secularism and a liberal polity. In the West, however, there exists a spectrum with Islamists seeking evolutionary change, which could take the form of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. This brotherhood is involved in both the political realm as well as socially in the form of various educational institutions and charitable foundations to the violent extremists as represented by the likes of Al Qaeda, Islamic State or Al Shabaab and Boko Haram. As this section will illustrate, it is this radical Islamist ideology, which lies at the origins of Boko Haram and drives it. Consequently, policymakers will need to reflect on policy implications of Islamist ideology.

If the Sahel is the new frontier of global jihad, then Nigeria lies at its epicentre with Boko Haram at its bleeding heart. Jama'atu Ahlus Sunnah Lidda' Awati Wal Jihad (Group of People of Sunnah for Dawah and Jihad) was established in 2002 by Muhamad Yusuf. Yusuf, a well-known preacher and proselytiser opened an Islamic complex with a mosque in Maiduguri where he preached a Salafist brand of Islam and rejected secularism. Across Africa, Islamist movements have expanded in areas where the state is absent, not responsive enough to ordinary people, or indeed behaving malevolently – including abusing citizens and stealing from national coffers. In this environment, the distorted Western-style government represented by Abuja comes to represent the secular government, which Yusuf and his followers found so appalling.

Yusuf began to create an alternative state in Maiduguri. A shura (consultative) council was established which represented a legislative council enacting various policy measures. A religious police was established to enforce shari'a (Islamic law) – fashioned on what Yusuf witnessed in Saudi Arabia during his stint there, and an elementary welfare system was created. Microfinance loans were handed out to locals to begin their own businesses, and employment opportunities were generated by allowing locals to engage in farming on land, which was part of the complex. In the process, surplus food was handed out to the poor, which resulted in more recruits to the cause. Members were encouraged to marry each other, and money for the weddings was provided by Yusuf.[22] In these circumstances, it is understandable that the poor members of society gravitated towards Yusuf and the movement. Yusuf was not only attracting adherents to his interpretation of the Islamic faith from Maiduguri, but also from other parts of Nigeria, Chad, and Niger. One count had it that its membership stood at 280 000 at the time of his death.[23] Yusuf and 1 000 of his followers were eventually killed by security forces in July 2009 following a series of

violent confrontations between Boko Haram and the police. There are no recent estimates of how many fighters Boko Haram had at the time of the current research. Being a terrorist organisation and operating in cells, this is difficult to ascertain

Yusuf's extra-judicial killing by police in 2009 whilst in custody sparked an increased violent trajectory for the Islamist movement under his successor Abubakar Shekhau. Under Shekau's leadership, the group was referred to as Boko Haram[24] on account of their penchant to target schools.[ii] In one night in March 2012, for instance, 12 public schools were set alight in Maiduguri as Boko Haram expressed their revulsion of Western-style schooling.[25] In 2011, as a result of leadership and doctrinal differences, a split occurred within Boko Haram, with Abu Musab al-Barnawi establishing Ansaru. Five years later, in 2016, another Boko Haram splinter became part of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).[26] Boko Haram continued its killing spree, with the violence growing increasingly indiscriminate. On 12 January 2025, 40 farmers in Borno state were viciously murdered by Boko Haram fighters whilst in the fields.[27]

Any terrorist organisation however needs financial resources to pay recruits, pay informants, secure weapons and transportation, and so forth. Access to finance, therefore, is the veritable oxygen for any terrorist organisation. Boko Haram, its offshoots and many of the other terror groups operating in the Sahel, secure funds by the smuggling of contraband, taxing hapless citizens and increasing narco-trafficking. This is not, of course, a West African or even Sahelian terrorist phenomenon but a global one. Think here of the Lebanese Hezbollah, which is involved in intellectual property crimes, the diamond trade, cigarette smuggling, and narco-trafficking.[28] As a consequence of this "oxygen", Boko Haram has expanded its area of operations from north-east Nigeria into Chad, Niger, and northern Cameroon. This, of course, constitutes another aspect of the regional security complex and conflict system in existence in north-west Africa, as alluded to earlier. Boko Haram violence has resulted in over a quarter of a million people being displaced, 350 000 killed directly by the violence, and a further 314 000 who had died indirectly as a result of the Boko Haram activities.[29]

Policy Implications

This brief overview raised a question that has grave implications for policymakers attempting to contain or eradicate the insurgency engulfing Nigeria and neighbouring states, namely is Boko Haram largely the result of local conditions?

There is certainly some truth in this proposition. Historical precedents to Boko Haram go all the way back to 1802–1804 when religious teacher and ethnic Fulani herder, Uthman dan Fodio, declared his jihad to purify Islam. In the process, he established the Sokoto Caliphate, which exists to this day. More recent precedents to Boko Haram's goal of a shari'a-compliant state could be seen in the Maitatsine uprisings in Kano in 1982, in

[ii] The original meaning of "Boko Haram" was "Western education is forbidden". This is one of the reasons why they targeted schools, but there were also other reasons, as explained in the section dealing with extremism and misogyny and endnote 24.

Kaduna, Bulumkutu and Yola in 1984, and 1985 in Bauchi. All these uprisings represent an effort to impose a religious ideology on a secular Nigerian state in much the same way that Boko Haram is attempting to force Abuja to accept shari'a law across all 36 states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Between 1999 and 2008, no fewer than 28 religious conflicts were reported between Muslims and Christians. To exacerbate matters, religious identity is further reinforced by ethnic and regional divisions that serve to shatter the nation-state project.[30]

Should one accept this view – that Boko Haram is the outcome of local settings and histories beyond counter-insurgency – the issue is a more inclusive state. Such state would seek to engage in a common national identity project, and would further seek through better governance to create a more responsive state, one that will attempt to ameliorate the living conditions of ordinary citizens. Indeed, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is of the opinion that good governance is key in ending the scourge of extremism.[31]

While there is much truth in this, it is however also the case that Boko Haram has interacted with global Islamist extremism from its inception. The mosque complex that Muhammad Yusuf established was named after Ibn Taymiyyah, the fourteenth-century theologian who is regarded as the spiritual godfather of today's extremists. At its origins, Boko Haram was thus ideologically connected to others, professing a more militant version of Islam in the Middle East. This, too, is unique in that, with the exception of the approximately 10 million Nigerian Muslims who are Shi'a, the overwhelming majority of Nigerian Muslims practise Sufi Islam – a more inward-looking Islam trying to be better Muslims through their respective brotherhoods or tariqas.[32] In the case of Nigeria, these were the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyyah brotherhoods. Boko Haram, meanwhile, is avowedly opposed to Sufism, regarding them as apostates. In that sense, Boko Haram's own Islamist ideology is one that most Muslims find alien – one that is imported from the simmering cauldron of the Middle East. This influence of extremist Islamism is evident as one of the first structures Yusuf created was the religious police fashioned on similar organisations in both Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iran. The alien nature of Boko Haram's form of Islam was not lost on local Muslims who initially labelled them the 'Nigerian Taliban'.[33]

At its very origins, Boko Haram's ideology lent itself towards violence. Whilst some have argued that Yusuf's successor – Shekhau – took the organisation on a more violent trajectory, there is abundant evidence that this violence lay at its very origins. Just a year after their founding, in 2003, Boko Haram was attacking security forces in Nigeria.[34]

This ideological affinity between Boko Haram and other Islamist movements as well as their proclivity to adopt violence has resulted in dangers of potential collaboration between these groups. Former US AFRICOM (United States Africa Command) commander, General Carter Ham, warned about a 'clearly stated intent by Boko Haram and by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb to coordinate and synchronise their efforts'.[35] Mohamed Yusuf was also accused of receiving funding from Al Qaeda, while key figures in Boko Haram were understood to have met with Al Qaeda in the AQIM leadership in Niger.[36] Boko Haram has also claimed that it has sent its members for military training to Afghanistan,

Lebanon, Pakistan, Iraq, Mauritania, Algeria, Somalia, and Yemen while conducting training with MUJAO in northern Mali. Boko Haram's spokesman, on the return of some of their trainees from Somalia, went on to state:

> We want to make it known that our jihadists have arrived in Nigeria from Somalia where they received real training on warfare from those who made that country ungovernable … This time round, our attacks will be fiercer and wider than they ever have been.[37]

He was not wrong. The training received at the foreign camps accounted for the growing sophistication of Boko Haram attacks. From suicide bombings to synchronised assaults – such as witnessed in Mumbai in November 2008 – Boko Haram's newly trained fighters spread terror across the region through an increased lethality. The quality of the explosives used also demonstrated Boko Haram's increasing sophistication. Increasingly, powerful explosives such as pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN) and triacetone triperoxide (TAPT) were used in shaped charges designed to magnify the impact of the blast.[38] With the death of Shekau and his replacement by Bakura Doro in 2021, Boko Haram's tactics changed further with emphasis on the preservation of the lives of fighters. Consequently, there were no impulsive charges and the like, but the emphasis was rather on ambushes, targeted assassinations and so forth. By 2024, Boko Haram was set to move from a rural insurgency to target cities as well.[39]

The external influence over Boko Haram was also evident in the changing choice of targets. On 26 June 2011, the headquarters of the UN in the Nigerian capital Abuja was targeted. Until then, Boko Haram largely focused its attacks on Nigerian government officials, police stations, and the like. This change of targeting may well have reflected Boko Haram going global in much the same way that Al Shabaab had. It could also reflect the influence that these external groups were having over Boko Haram. In 2006, AQIM similarly attacked the UN offices in Algiers.[40] Fast forward to 2022,and following Ansaru's reaffirmation of its pledge of allegiance to Al Qaeda, AQIM once again militarily supported Ansaru's campaigns in Nigeria. With the support of AQIM and forging alliances with local bandits and interestingly enough securing weapons from Boko Haram, Ansaru's military campaign gained momentum throughout 2022 and 2023 and now de facto controls large swathes of territory in Kaduna, Katsina, and Zamfara states.

Boko Haram, meanwhile, has been strengthening its ties with Al Qaeda in the Lake Chad Basin area and deeper into neighbouring states.[41] Its regional expansion has not only been aided by Al Qaeda but also by its rapidly increasing war chest through extortion of local communities. Those who did not or could not pay, such as hapless rice farmers in Borno State throughout 2024, were summarily executed. With its expansion, Boko Haram has been emphasising its grievances against the Nigerian state less, and more its global Islamist identity.[42] ISWAP, the other Boko Haram off-shoot, is meanwhile engaging in greater collaboration with other Islamic State franchises, notably ISGS. This synergy between the two kindred organisations was seen throughout 2022 to 2024 in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Togo and Niger. Interestingly, what cements this collaboration is the international Islamist takfiri[43] doctrine, which both organisations share.[44]

The regionalisation and internationalisation of Boko Haram and its franchises hold significant policy implications. This makes the conflict hard to resolve. In keeping with regional security complexes, the regional dimensions of the conflict means that Nigerian policymakers cannot hope to resolve the challenge of Boko Haram without –

- Neutralising Boko Haram camps in the region outside the Nigerian border;
- The smuggling of contraband across borders;
- The financial support and weapons Boko Haram receives from regional Islamist franchises; and
- The support Boko Haram receives from international Islamic parent bodies, such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Whilst a political ideological disposition makes it hard to find compromise between conflicting parties, religious ideological positions are notoriously difficult to deal with since fundamentalists conflate their own position with that of God. A dogmatic and doctrinaire position makes any possible negotiation as mooted by some, impossible to achieve.

The second issue confronting policymakers relates to how one can defeat Boko Haram when they operate like a social welfare organisation thereby ensuring the loyalty of locals and constant recruitment into the organisation. Yusuf, we observed, provided food and jobs for the poor and money for young men to get married.[45] Ansaru is following this tradition, and has been providing food and cash to residents as well as fertilisers, pesticides and other agricultural products to farmers. Whilst the Nigerian government has lost the minds and hearts of locals, given its dereliction of its duty to its citizens, thereby tearing up any social contract between political rulers and those being governed, it is clear that Ansaru has taken the time and effort to build a sustained presence in the region and has developed a rapport with locals. To be sure, there is also intimidation of residents living in areas controlled by Ansaru. They are forbidden from participating in any secular political party activities and anything that may be construed as the promotion of democracy. Ansaru regards democracy – like secular education – as antithetical to Islamic precepts of governance. Even this compares favourably with Nigerian security forces engaging in dragnet arrests, extracting confessions through torture, sexual violence, and stealing from locals.[46]

The social welfare activities where Boko Haram and its offshoots are engaged, are in keeping with their efforts to create an Islamic caliphate.[47] By engaging in such welfare activities, peoples' loyalties shift from the state to these Islamist militants. Here, Abuja is particularly vulnerable on account of its uncaring attitude towards its citizens and its endemic corruption. Consider the fact that, despite its vast oil wealth, Nigeria occupies the low end of the latest Human Development Index coming in at an appalling 161. Life expectancy in Nigeria is a mere 53,6 years, and the expected years of schooling is a paltry 10,5 years.[48] According to Nigerian governments statistics, 63 per cent of Nigerians may be classified as multidimensionally poor – with the majority of these in north of the country where the majority of Muslims reside providing a regional and religious dimension to poverty. These are also the areas, of course, where the Islamists operate.[49]

Of course, what the Nigerian militants are doing is not unique. Hillel Fritsch refers to Hamas as a 'social welfare government' given its propensity to assist Gazans with food, health care, educational facilities (with the support of the United Nations) and assistance for weddings and the like.[50] In retrospect, this is hardly surprising, since this is how the Muslim Brotherhood[51] operates. In doing so, Hamas – as an off-shoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza – has managed to secure, retain and expand its support in countries, such as Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood operates. In Lebanon, Hezbollah meanwhile provides subsidised or free medication to the elderly and the poor. Hezbollah has also started a new grocery chain, called "Al Nour Supermarkets", which provide low-cost food products to the populace. Given the financial crisis and meltdown of the economy, which has seen the value of the Lebanese pound decline precipitously, this is generally welcomed by struggling Lebanese.[52] Boko Haram's tactics[iii] therefore fit into the playbook of other Islamist groupings globally.

At the heart of social contract theory – from the times of Protagoras through Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau and to John Rawls in the contemporary era – lies the truth that people agree to be a part of a polity and willingly surrender their sovereignty in exchange for certain goods from the state, whether physical protection or social welfare.[53] The Nigerian state, however, exists as a predatory and oppressive one where wealth is extracted for the benefit of a tiny political elite.[54] In such a context, the state can make little to no progress winning hearts and minds of citizens. In this context, Boko Haram and its offshoots will continue to gain ground as citizens transfer their allegiance from Abuja to these militants who will continue to develop proto-states and expand these at the expense of the state.

The implications of the growing engagement between Boko Haram and its offshoots with criminality need greater attention from policymakers. Given the abundant profits to be made from criminal enterprises in the region, these Islamist groups have started clashing each other. ISWAP, the Boko Haram offshoot, initially took the offensive against Boko Haram following the death of its leader Abubakar Shekhau in 2021. Under its new leader, Bakura Doro, Boko Haram however regrouped and transformed their military arm from one focusing on an urban terror campaign to engaging in rural guerrilla warfare. Unlike ISWAP, which has been focusing on having a relationship with citizens and attempting to govern them in exchange for taxes and preventing their militants from engaging in raping and pillaging, Boko Haram fighters are known for their brutality, their extortion of local residents, and their stealing and sexual violence (more on this in the next section). The fear, which their behaviour has instilled among residents and their rivals, resulted in their launching multiple offensives, which has resulted in their being in control of the Lake Chad Basin, the Sambisa Forest and the Mandera Mountains.[55] From here, of course, they can further their expansion into Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. Unlike ISWAP, Boko Haram – under Doro – does not even seem to want to attempt to govern or provide an alternative to the secular Nigerian state. Terror now exists for the sake of terror with

[iii] Boko Haram's tactics of donating food, providing rudimentary governance of the regions they control (brutal as it may be), providing cash to young men to marry, and teaching them skill sets therefore fit into the playbook of other Islamist groupings globally.

the murderous takfiri ideology at its core. This ideology casts even practising Muslims out of the Islamic fold if they do not subscribe to the radical Islamist ideology described earlier. This means that they can be targeted to be killed.

The relationship between misogyny and extremism

For far too long, the issue of gender and its relationship to terrorism has been ignored by mainstream scholarship on terrorism. Recent research, however, is increasingly drawing on the relationship between misogyny and terrorism. By misogyny, I mean the 'belief in man's innate role in the protection of women and in the rightness of women's subordination'.[56] In 2024, the British Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, cogently drew the connection between violent misogyny and Islamist and far-right extremism.[57] On this basis, the British government now treats extreme misogyny as a form of extremism. Utilising datasets from the Pew Research Centre[58] as well as the United Nations Development Programme's 2023 Gender Social Norms Index,[59] the great Austrian political scientist, Prof. Arno Tausch, concludes that gender social norms are the decisive factors leading to the support of terrorist activities.[60] Why is this so? Practically all religions hold conservative positions about women with similar roles they must fulfil. In the Bible, for instance, Genesis 1:28 speaks about going forth and multiplying. Islamists, however, are more prone towards patriarchy and misogyny than other faiths for reasons outlined below. [61]

It was in the Ancient Near East, the birthplace of all three Abrahamic faiths, where patriarchy developed between 3100 BC and 600 BC. Speaking about this period, Gerda Lerner writes, 'Men learned to institute dominance and hierarchy over other people by their earlier practice of dominance over the women of their own group.'[62] This is important since it makes clear the intrinsic connection between authoritarianism generally and the subjugation of women. Patriarchy thus remains entrenched today across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region[iv] reinforced by faith, culture, and a closed political and economic system. Only 24 per cent of women in the MENA region are employed, compared to 77 per cent of their male counterparts who are employed. Of Algerians and Egyptians, 80 per cent believe that men are better political leaders than women.[63] Whilst the European Reformation provided the impetus for the emancipation of women in Christendom, there have been no similar reforms of the Islamic faith – despite valiant efforts to this end.[64] Consequently, as these statistics convey, the status of women lags far behind that of men.

As in the MENA region, patriarchy is deeply entrenched at all levels in Nigeria with authority invested in men who serve as custodians of their cultures. These custodians also serve to enforce compliance with certain cultural and social norms. Sanctions are then applied to those who perceive to transgress these norms. Commenting on this, Adejuwon Soyinka states:

[iv] The following countries are normally included in MENA: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Palestine, and Yemen.

> [Patriarchy and misogyny in Nigeria is seen] in the denigration of the female gender, social, cultural and political subjugation of females, exclusion of the female gender from public office, sexual exploitation and aggression against females; and denial of female rights and agency. These forms of patriarchy create inequality between the gender groups and result in unequal access to rights and privileges.[65]

Whilst this is true of all Nigeria, it is worth noting that patriarchy and misogyny are more intense in the largely Muslim north than in the overwhelming Christian south, which happens to be economically more developed and more liberal than Muslim north.[66] With the enactment of shari'a law in 12 of 19 northern states in Nigeria, and the ideological shift from Sufi Islam to extremist Islam, the position of women in northern Nigeria has further deteriorated. With the most restrictive form of shari'a law adopted in these northern states, women have been transformed into second-class citizens with their civic participation, socio-economic empowerment, property rights and inheritance all severely restricted.[67]

It is in this bubbling cauldron that one needs to understand Boko Haram's own misogyny. Boko Haram, from its very origins, systematically exploited women and committed acts of sexual violence under the guise of religiously sanctioned marriages – often repeated "marriages". Abubaker Shekau justified the "marriage" of girls between 9 and 12 on religious grounds arguing that Aisha, the wife of the prophet, was this age when she married.[68] The early age of marriage of young girls was also the main reason for Boko Haram systemically kidnapping young girls from school. According to Shekau, the attendance of school was a violation of their Islamic role as women, being wives and mothers.[69]

This systematic rape – for that is what it is – serves the purpose of rewarding its own members for their loyalty, and can be a useful recruitment tactic for young men as well as to spread fear amongst local communities. Through repeated rape and gang rape, Boko Haram fighters deliberately tried to impregnate women. This was justified on Islamic grounds through a distorted and self-serving interpretation of a hadith,[70] which states, 'every infant is born with a natural predisposition of accepting Islam, but parents can socialize their infants to accept other religions'. The deliberate impregnation of women then serves to increase the ranks of the faithful and would also increase the ranks of Boko Haram. Boko Haram's misogyny first came to the international attention in 2014 when they captured 276 girls from a rural high school in Chibok.[71] In truth, and in keeping with their name, whilst attempting to keep all children away from Western (secular) schooling, Boko Haram specifically targeted girls from attending school for the reason outlined above.[72]

The capture of the Chibok girls as well as the capture of 101 young girls from a school in Dapchi, in Yobe State, also served another strategic purpose. In the former case, they used the Chibok girls and the publicity surrounding their capture as hostages with the Nigerian government demanding the release of senior Boko Haram commanders in custody. In the latter case, they used the girls to secure a handsome ransom for their release thereby augmenting their war chests.[73] Beyond the pain, suffering and trauma with which these girls were confronted, this violence was strategic in nature. Mia Bloom and Hilary Matfess

eloquently argue, 'Violence against women and girls is often intended to humiliate their families and communities, wherein women and girls are "bearers of honour" and men are shamed for failing to protect "their" women.'[74] The same logic is at play in the Middle East.

Despite Boko Haram's inclination to have women confined to the domestic realm, this has not prevented them from using females as suicide bombers. Al Chukwuma Okoli argues that the use of female suicide bombers is useful for two interrelated reasons.[75] First, state security surveillance is generally less suspicious of women than of men. Female suicide bombers can therefore easily evade surveillance and detonate their deadly cargo. Second, the utilisation of women as suicide bombers means that the militants can conserve their male recruits for combat on other fronts. Girls as young as 7 years of age have been used by Boko Haram as suicide bombers.[76] They had no idea that they had explosives, designed to kill them and those in their immediate vicinity, being strapped to them.

The misogyny displayed by Boko Haram is no different from that displayed by other Islamists in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Somalia or Syria.[77] In Afghanistan, the return of the Taliban has seen girls being prevented from receiving an education. This is very much in keeping with Boko Haram's own actions in Nigeria. Islamic State, meanwhile, has earned global notoriety for their forced conversion and sexual enslavement of Yazidi women.[78] Perhaps the most egregious and recent example of this type of Islamist misogyny occurred during the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023.

On 7 October 2023, Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israel in which 1 200 people were killed and 3 300 wounded. In addition, hundreds of hostages were taken. What has not been discussed about this attack is the systemic and deliberate sexual violence Hamas unleashed. Sheryl Sandberg's recent documentary, *Screams Before Silence*, finally highlighted this matter with eyewitness and first responder accounts, telling how 364 people were brutally killed at the Nova rave party on 7 October. Repeated rapes took place as well as the genital mutilations and disfigurement of women's bodies.[79] Unlike Chibok survivors, most of these rape victims were killed, and will never be able to testify what they had experienced. Others, because of the shame associated, may not come forward. One witness provided a chilling account of how four Hamas men surrounded a woman at the Nova event.[80] They stripped her and proceeded to take turns raping her. After this, they stabbed her and raped her again. Once again, this brings home the importance of understanding Boko Haram within the wider context of other extremist Islamist movements and to view them first and foremost through the prism of their own radical fundamentalism ideology.

Policy Implications

Despite the fact that misogyny has been weaponised into the arsenal of Islamist terrorist groups everywhere, the reality is that scholars researching terrorism have left it to those in gender studies to focus on these aspects – largely from the perspective of trauma. Meanwhile, policymakers have not incorporated the issue of gender into their broader counter-terrorism policy.[81] This is unforgivable. As Rosemary DiCarlo, UN Under-

Secretary General stated, "Just as misogyny is at the heart of so many terrorist groups' strategies, so must women be at the centre of our responses."[82]

There is, however, an urgent need to go beyond seeing women as merely victims of terrorism, and to look to them as a fundamental bulwark to Islamist militancy. This emerged from interviews conducted by the Institute for Inclusive Security in 30 countries – from the MENA countries to South Asia. They found that women were the first to become aware of the rise in violent extremism in their communities and the first to resist its spread. Explaining the reason for this, Sia Jyoti opines that these women were well aware that they were often the first victims of fundamentalism and knew it entailed the curtailment of their rights as well as the increase of domestic violence at home. Women could also make the connection between gender-based violence (GBV) and armed conflict.[83]

Other research reinforces this connection between GBV and Islamist extremism. In 2012, whilst studying at Manchester College, unassuming Salman Abedi punched a female student on the head. His reason: her skirt was too short. Five years later, Abedi detonated a bomb in a crowded Manchester Arena killing 22 concertgoers and injuring a thousand others. At this stage, Abedi was an Islamic State member. Then there was the case of Omar Mateen. In 2016, he killed 49 people and wounded 53 others at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Before he became an Islamic State terrorist, Mateen constantly abused his own wife. These cases are not an aberration. A 2022 study from the Combatting Terrorism Centre at West Point Military Academy demonstrated that 36 per cent of all Islamic State members with a criminal history had previously been arrested for GBV.[84]

It is precisely for this reason that policymakers need to go beyond viewing gender narrowly from a counter-terrorism lens and to have a whole-of-society approach. Aneela Salman powerfully writes, 'females' actual advancement and equality in education, employment and political representation are more effective in reducing terrorism'[85]

Conclusion

Boko Haram and its offshoots demonstrate all the characteristics of a religious cult – a manipulative and authoritarian leadership, a communal and totalitarian organisation coupled with aggressive proselytising and systemic programmes of indoctrination reinforce a belief system that ostensibly has the answers to all life questions. Religious texts are perverted to support the aims and objectives of the organisation and/or its leader. Moreover, the Boko Haram and Islamists ideologies are misogynistic and violent.

Nigerians and the Sahel region have suffered under their orgy of violence for 22 years. The Nigerian state has proved itself to be unable to ameliorate, if not eliminate, the threat posed by the militants. Whilst the threat is regional in scope and needs to be confronted both within the borders of Nigeria as well as in neighbouring states, the region itself is unstable as witnessed in the number of coups in West Africa. In addition, the desperate needed support from the international community is simply not forthcoming. The Ukraine–Russian War, the ongoing crisis in the Middle East, as well as a potential conflict between

the United States and China is distracting attention away from the Sahel despite it being the epicentre of global terrorism. Moreover, the region is currently witnessing waning Western influence as Western forces depart, and others, notably Russia, gain strategic footholds in this area.

All however is not lost if the United States working with strategic partners in the region and European allies remain engaged. This engagement however needs to move beyond arming of militaries and supporting governments, which violate good governance. Doing so will merely reinforce the Islamist narrative of a corrupt and evil government being supported by the Great Satan. Here is what can be done:

- The counter-insurgency campaign can be undertaken more effectively, specifically in areas such as the Sambisa Forest and the Mandera Mountains where forces need to be concentrated. Importantly, civilian casualties need to be kept to a minimum and government services need to move rapidly into an area to take over the social welfare element, which Islamists provide to communities.
- We have witnessed how Boko Haram used Islamic texts to justify their actions. More moderate Islam needs to be promoted but it is important to ensure that this moderate Islam should not be co-opted by the authorities, or it will lose all legitimacy.
- The intelligence community needs to focus on breaking the umbilical cord binding local terror franchises with international Islamists, such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. This umbilical cord entails financial flows, arms trafficking, and military training.
- The growing collaboration between Islamist insurgents and criminal networks also needs to be disrupted by the intelligence community.
- Issues of gender need to be taken into account as part of a broader counter-terrorism approach – not only viewing women as victims but also recognising their agency in combatting extremism.

This war against Boko Haram and its offshoots and affiliates can still be won.

Endnotes

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