

DISTILLING MYTH FROM REALITY: RECONSTRUCTING THE EMERGENT TRENDS OF BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria has attracted considerable scholarly attention. The literature is replete with studies on its origins and socio-economic impact in Nigeria. Similarly, scholars have examined the implications of Boko Haram for Nigeria's internal security and nation-building efforts. Relatedly, there is an extensive body of literature on the precipitating factors behind the insurgency, one of which is the argument that the group's objective was to destabilize the presidency of Goodluck Jonathan. Despite these contributions, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding emerging trends in the Boko Haram insurgency, which suggests that the group's primary objective extends beyond undermining and subverting Jonathan's presidency. This paper seeks to fill this gap in knowledge. Drawing on both primary and secondary sources of data, the paper argues that, beyond the rhetoric that Boko Haram was primarily conceived to disrupt governance between 2010 to 2015, the group is an Islamic sect whose ultimate objective is the establishment of an Islamic state in Northern Nigeria. The paper further contends that this objective is evident in the nature and pattern of the group's attacks on Muslims, Christians, security personnel, and government facilities both during and after Jonathan's presidency. It concludes that Boko Haram seeks to establish an Islamic state and impose its interpretation of Islamic teachings in Northern Nigeria based on its understanding of the Holy Qur'an. This objective is reflected in the group's capture and declaration of certain towns as part of an Islamic caliphate in Northeast Nigeria.

Keywords: Boko Haram; Conflict; Islam; Myth, Reconstruction; Security;

Introduction

As a major security threat in Nigeria's post-colonial history, the Boko Haram scourge has attracted scholarly attention (Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2013; Adele, 2013; Afzal, 2020; Marc-Antoine, 2021). Thus, following the rise of its heinous activities in Nigeria during Goodluck Jonathan's Presidency, most scholars and elder statesmen like Edwin Clark argued that the sudden increase in the killings of Boko Haram in Nigeria was to subvert and disrupt governance under a Christian presidency (Anyadike, 2013; Olaniyan & Asuelime, 2014; Adibe, 2014). The reasons for such emboldened assertions were not far-fetched. First, there is a scholarly consensus that Boko Haram was formed in 2002 by Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf as its leader; their activities, however, became pronounced during the emergence of Goodluck Jonathan as Nigeria's president (Ajayi, 2012; Adibe, 2014). Second, the various speeches of the acclaimed leader of the sect, Abubakar Shekau, that the group cannot afford to see the affairs of the state being presided over by an "infidel," further fueled such assertions from some scholars (Barkindo, 2018). However, the activities of the sect together with the dimension they have assumed during and after Jonathan's presidency are thought-provoking. For example, during Jonathan's presidency, the group captured five towns and subsequently declared these towns as part of the Islamic caliphate (Afzal, 2020). Similarly, the bombing of the United Nations House in Abuja in 2012 that led to the declaration of Nigeria as a terrorist state by UN, kidnapping of foreigners, kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls in April 2014, the attempted bomb attack on General Mohammed Buhari and Sheik Dahiru Bauchi in 2014, bombing of schools in Borno, Adamawa, Kano, Kaduna, Yobe and the November 28, 2014 Kano Central Mosque triple bomb that killed 120 people were acts that showed the dynamism in the group's attacks and activities during Jonathan's presidency (Kertyo, 2015).

Since Jonathan exited office in 2015, the sect is notoriously known for the bombing of Internally Displaced Persons' (IDP's) camp in Northern Nigeria. Perplexing to note is how Boko Haram and the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP) have continued to kill top military personnel, as evidenced by the killing of Brigadier General Musa Uba in 2025. The numerous bombings that have characterized Nigeria during the last ten (10) years have questioned scholarly debates that Boko Haram's sole objective was the disruption of governance from 2010-2015 that Goodluck Jonathan held sway. This paper is therefore aimed at an examination of the activities of the sect to deconstruct the scholarly views that Boko Haram was not favourably disposed to

Jonathan's presidency. To carry out this objective, the paper is structurally divided into five sections: an ongoing introduction, a conceptual framework, the rise of Boko Haram, emergent trends of Boko Haram activities, and, of course, a conclusion.

Conceptual Framework

In the Hausa language, *Boko* means book (especially Western or foreign), while *Haram* is an Arabic word meaning 'forbidden', 'ungodly', or 'sinful'. If the words are put together, *Boko Haram* literally means 'book is sinful'. The import implies that Western education/civilization is sinful, sacrilegious, or ungodly and should be forbidden (Anyadike, 2013). Thus, *Boko Haram* stands for outright rejection of Western education, Western culture, and modern science. Rather, it advocates the propagation of strict adherence to Islam in its purest form. *Boko Haram* represents the vision and mission of a fundamentalist Islamic movement in Nigeria. The sect known as Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (people committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and Jihad) seeks to Islamize Northern Nigeria by whatever means at its disposal and at whatever human cost.

The term *Boko Haram* also means "Animist", western or non-Islamic, and the Arabic word *Haram* literally means forbidden. When pieced together, this connotes the refutation of Western or non-Islamic culture or tradition. The term is often translated to mean that Western education is a sin (Ajayi, 2012). According to Adibe (2014), *Boko Haram* is a controversial Nigerian terrorist Islamic group that seeks the imposition of *Sharia* (Islamic Law) in the northern states. Corroborating this view, Kertyo (2015) refers to *Boko Haram* as an Islamic fundamentalist group that propagates religious ideologies that are seen in advocating a return to its understanding of the fundamentals of Islam; the Quran and the Sunnah. Since the group is based on its understanding of the teachings of Islam, many of the group's attacks are targeted at places of worship, often churches, mosques, and by extension government institutions and properties, and Islamic clerics who are anti-*Boko Haram*.

The Rise and Resurgence of Boko Haram

Although Boko Haram was formed in 2002 as a militant group in Yobe State, its rise has been associated with many factors. One of such factors, as advanced by scholars, is the nearly absence of ethnic tolerance in Nigeria (Nnoli, 1980). Ethnic differences have, over time, given birth to a lot of crises in post-colonial Nigeria. The inability of Nigeria to manage its ethnic diversity was responsible for the reason that ultimately resulted in the collapse of the First Republic in 1966. Similarly, the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970 erupted because of the irreconcilable differences that were fashioned along socio-ethnic and religious lines (Egbefo, 2009). Since ethnicity is one of the major issues threatening the unity of the Nigerian state, some scholars have argued that Boko Haram was formed to agitate the creation of an Islamic state that will have Arabic as the language and official culture.

Another factor for the rise of Boko Haram is poverty and unemployment. This factor is championed by Williams and Guttschuss (2012), who argue that the root causes of the *Boko Haram* insurgency in Nigeria's resurgence are poverty and unemployment driven by poor governance and corruption. Corroborating, Abdulkarim Muhammed, as quoted by Alimba and Salihu (2020), argues:

Boko Haram is essentially the fallout of frustration with corruption and the attendant social malaise of poverty and unemployment. The young generation sees how the nation's resources are squandered by a small bunch of self-serving elites, which breeds animosity and frustration, and such anger is ultimately translated into violent outbursts.

Similarly, Johnnie Carson, the former United States Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, and John Kerry, the former United States Secretary of State, have noted that poverty and unemployment are responsible for Boko Haram in Nigeria (Alimba & Salihu, 2020). John Kerry, for instance, notes that the current level of poverty in Nigeria, especially in the north, has been the cause of insecurity in Nigeria, including Boko Haram.

Beyond poverty, the quest by some northern politicians to ensure power was returned to the north during the 2011 general election was also a precipitating factor for the rise of Boko Haram. To subscribers of this view, some politicians from northern Nigeria were surreptitiously funding and supporting *Boko Haram* to force Goodluck Jonathan to relinquish power (Adibe, 2014). Politicians like Mallah Adamu Ciroma believed power was supposed to be shifted to the north in 2011 (Agwadu, 2023). Strengthening this argument, Aye (2011) notes that:

The 2011 elections have been a major factor that led to the sudden rise of Boko Haram resurgence in the northern part of Nigeria. The rising wave in activities by the religious fundamentalists has been the cause of anger in some northern leaders, caused by the failure of the north to grab the presidential power through the 2011 elections, which most northern leaders alleged were rigged in favour of Goodluck Jonathan.

Examples of such personalities that it was alleged were fueling the activities of Boko Haram were Senator Ndume Ali, late Senator Ahmed Zanna, and Alhaji Amodu Shrif (Newsadmin, 2012). Again, the controversial circumstances in which the alleged master minder of the St. Theresa's Catholic Church, Madalla bomb blast,

Kabiru Sokoto, escaped in the very hands of the Nigerian police and the attacks on Jonathan's presidential campaign during the 2015 general elections further illustrated the desire of northern politicians to have power returned to the region.

Distilling Myths from Reality

Since its formation in 2002, Boko Haram, according to Human Rights Watch, is responsible for tens of thousands of deaths in Nigeria. In 2014, Boko Haram killed 2053 people in six months (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Similarly, in 2015, more than 1000 people were killed by Boko Haram (Human Rights Watch, 2015). According to the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, Boko Haram, since its inception, has killed more than 150,000 people and displaced over 3 million people in Nigeria and Chad (Infographics, 2025). Besides killings, the sect has kidnapped and abducted some children in Nigeria. According to UNICEF, more than 1000 children are abducted by Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria (UNICEF, 2018). Despite the killings and abductions, the year 2014 witnessed a drastic change and a new dimension in the activities of the *Boko Haram* sect. The sect embarked on territorial control and hoisted its flag in towns such as Baga, Gwazo, Bama, Mubi, and Damboa (Kertyo, 2015). The attack and capture of Gwazo, for example, led to the killing of the Emir of Gwazo, Alhaji Muhammed Timta. The seizure of the town signified the sect's desire for territorial gains to establish an Islamic caliphate that would be administered according to the sect's version of Islam. Mubi, the second largest town in Adamawa state, was captured. The capture and renaming of the town as "Madinatul", meaning City of Islam, and the hoisting of the sect's black flag with Arabic inscription consolidated the sect's desire to have territorial control of northeast Nigeria (BBC, 2014).

Apart from the quest for territorial control, since Jonathan exited the corridors of power in Nigeria, the country, under the leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari, witnessed the killings of innocent Nigerians by Boko Haram. The number of killings during Buhari's presidency had outnumbered that of President Jonathan. For instance, during President Buhari's first term (2015-2019), the sect killed 25,794 people in Nigeria (Kabir, 2019). By the time he exited office in 2023, Boko Haram was responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of Nigerians. Some of the killings during his eight-year rule are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Selected Number of Attacks and people killed by Boko Haram from May 2015 to May 2023.

S/N	DATE OF ATTACK	STATE	LOCATION OF ATTACKS AND NUMBER OF DEATHS
1	31 st May, 2015	Borno	Boko Haram attacked Maiduguri. 30 people killed.
2	2 nd June, 2015	Borno	Bomb attacked in Maiduguri. 20 people were killed, and several others were injured.
3	12 th June, 2015	Borno	Bomb explosion in Damboa. 37 people killed.
4	22 nd June, 2015	Borno	Two female suicide bombers bombed a Mosque in Maiduguri. 30 people killed
5	24 th June, 2015	Borno	Boko Haram slaughtered 40 people in Gujba near Maiduguri.
6	24 th June, 2015	Borno	Explosion in Debiro Hawul and Debiro Bi Villages. 40 people were killed.
7	1 st July, 2015	Borno	Kukawa Mosque attack. 48 people killed and 17 wounded.
8	2 nd July, 2015	Borno	Several Mosque bombings around Maiduguri. 97 killed.
9	5 th July, 2015	Yobe	A female suicide bomber attacked a church in Potiskum. 5 people were killed.
10	6 th July, 2015	Plateau	Two bomb blasts in Jos killed at least 44 people.
11	21 st July, 2015	Yobe	Boko Haram attacked the hometown of Buratai, the Chief of Army Staff. 2 people were killed.
12	11 th August, 2015	Borno	Attack on Sabon Gari in Maiduguri. 50 people were killed, and 52 people were injured.
13	31 st August, 2015	Borno	Explosion in Baanu. 79 people killed.
14	20 th September, 2015	Borno	Attacks in Monguno village. 145 people were killed and 97 people were injured.
15	20 th September, 2015	Borno	Ajilari Mosque was attacked. 43 people killed.
16	21 st September, 2015	Borno	Four explosions detonated in Gommari in Maiduguri, killing more than 100 people.
17	3 rd October, 2015	Abuja	Attack near Kuje. 15 people killed
18	23 rd October, 2015	Adamawa	A bomb blast near a Mosque in Yola. 27 people killed.

19	17 th November, 2015	Adamawa	Explosions in Yola. 32 killed, with several others injured.
20	27 th November, 2015	Kano	Attacks in Kano. 22 people were reported dead.
21	30 th November, 2015	Borno	Attack on the 157 Battalion Military base. 107 soldiers were believed to be missing in action.
22	5 th December, 2015	Borno	A triple suicide bombing at a market on an Island in Lake Chad. 15 people were killed, and 130 were injured.
23	10 th December, 2015	Borno	Bomb explosions killed 7 civilians in Kamuya village, located along the border between Borno and Yobe state.
24	27 th January, 2016	Borno	Attack in Dalori. 65 people killed.
25	2 nd February, 2016	Borno	Two female suicide bombers bombed Dikwa IDP camp. 58 people were killed.
26	13 th March, 2016	Borno	Two female suicide bombers bomb Umarari village in Maiduguri. Killed 22 and injured 18.
27	13 th July, 2016	Borno	One soldier killed in Kangarwa
28	30 th July, 2016	Borno	One female suicide bomber killed 8 people in an IDP camp close to Maiduguri.
29	8 th September, 2016	Borno	Diffa, a border town between Nigeria and Niger, was attacked by Boko Haram. 7 Niger soldiers were killed, and 8 others were wounded.
30	24 th September, 2016	Borno	Clash between Boko Haram and men of the Nigerian Army at Dikwa. 22 Boko Haram members were killed, and 4 soldiers.
31	17 th October, 2016	Borno	Attack on a military base in Gashigar village, a border town with Niger. 83 soldiers were missing, and 13 were wounded.
33	4 th November, 2016	Borno	Boko Haram ambushed and attacked Malam-Fatori. Killed Lt. Col. Abu-Ali and 4 others.
34	5 th January, 2017	Borno	Boko Haram attacked Baga and killed 20 people.
35	21 st November, 2017	Adamawa	A Mosque in Mubi was attacked, and 29 people were killed.
36	1 st November 2018	Borno	An attack on Kofa, Maiduguri, that killed 20 people.
37	14 th January 2019	Borno	Boko Haram attacked Rann and killed 14 people.
38	6 th January 2020	Borno	Gamboru was attacked, and 32 people were killed.
39	9 th February 2020	Borno	A bomb blast in Auno village killed 30 people.
40	30 th September 2020	Borno	Boko Haram attacked Marte and killed 10 Nigerian soldiers.
41	28 th November 2020	Borno	110 farmers were killed by Boko Haram in Koshebe village.
42	6 th March 2021	Borno	An attack on Rumirgo village resulted in the death of 10 people.
43	10 th August 2021	Borno	10 people killed in Bama by Boko Haram
44	20 th January 2022	Yobe	15 killed in Geidam village.
45	24 th February 2023	Borno	13 rice farmers killed in Baga

Source: Compiled by the Authors from Newspapers like *The Nation*, *Vanguard* and *The Punch*.

From the above table, Boko Haram killed innocent Nigerians during the Presidency of Muhammadu Buhari. In 2016, there was an increase in the number of attacks by Boko Haram. In 2017, Boko Haram killed 42 students and carried out mass shootings in a Mosque in Konduga, Yobe state, that resulted in the deaths of 44 people.

Apart from killings, the abduction of school children that started with the Chibok girls during Jonathan's presidency became a frequent activity after President Jonathan left office in 2015, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Some children abducted by Boko Haram and other terrorist groups since 2018

S/N	DATE OF ABDUCTION	NAME OF SCHOOL	REMARKS
1	9 th March 2018	Government Girls Technical College, Dapchi, Yobe State.	110 girls abducted by Boko Haram.
2	24 th August 2020	Prince Academy, Damba-Kasaya, Kaduna State.	7 children abducted by gunmen.
3	11 December 2020	All Boys Science Secondary School, Kankara, Katsina State.	300 school children were abducted.
4	17 th February 2021	Government Science College, Kagara, Niger State.	Gunmen abducted 27 school children and killed one school pupil.
5	26 th February 2021	Government Girls Secondary School, Jangebe, Zamfara State.	317 school girls were abducted.
6	7 th March 2024	LGEA Primary and Secondary School, Kuriga, Kaduna State.	300 students abducted.
7	17 th November 2025	Government Girls Comprehensive Secondary School, Maga, Kebbi State.	25 school girls were abducted.
8	21 st November 2025	St. Mary's Primary and Secondary School, Papiri, Niger State.	303 school children and 12 teachers were abducted.

Source: Compiled by the authors using various National dailies in Nigeria.

From the table above, eight cases of abduction have been recorded since 2018. A total of 1,389 school children has been abducted in Nigeria since Jonathan exited office in 2015. The demography of such abduction has moved from northeast to northwest Nigeria. In northwest Nigeria, Zamfara and Niger states are the epicentre of school children abduction by militant groups.

Apart from the above, the sect is now known for the killings of top military personnel since 2016, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Names of top Military Personnel killed by Boko Haram since 2016

S/N	NAMES OF OFFICERS KILLED	REMARKS
1	Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Abu	Ambushed and killed in Malam Fatori by Boko Haram in November 2016.
2	Lieutenant Colonel Ibrahim Sakaba	Killed along with 117 soldiers by Boko Haram in November 2018.
3	Colonel Dahiru Chiroma Bako	Killed by Boko Haram in Wajiroko village in September 2020.
4	Brigadier General Dzarma Zirkusu	Ambushed and killed with other soldiers in Askira Uba village in November 2021.
5	Brigadier General Muhammad Uba	Killed in November 2025.

Source: BBC News (2025). Top Military Officers wey Boko Haram, ISWAP don kill for Terror war. <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/articles/cn0909z1gd7o>

The above officers killed by members of the sect signal the desire of the group to eliminate leaders of Battalions that were against their desire for territorial gains in Nigeria. Lt. Col. Muhammad Abu, for example, was the officer commanding Nigeria's Army 272 Tank Battalion. Lt. Col. Ibrahim Sakaba was the leader of the Nigerian Army 157 Task Force Battalion in Metele, Borno State. Colonel Dahiru Bako was in charge of the 25 Task Force Brigade, Operation Lafia Dole.

In 2015, the group pledged its allegiance to members of the Islamic State (ISIS). Thus, the commendation of the activities of Boko Haram by ISIS and its link to other terrorist formations such as *Al-Qaeda* also portrays the sect's desire for autonomous existence of northern Nigeria under its control. This fact is particularly true following the Islamic State announcement of its goal to build a Caliphate and the expression of Shekau, the purported leader of *Boko Haram*, in support of Islamic State leadership (Bukarti, 2022). As a syndicate, following the adoption of the Yazidi girls by ISIS in August 2014, ISIS acknowledged ideological alignment with the sect and cited the kidnapping of over 247 Chibok schoolgirls by *Boko Haram* as a precedent for its own enslavement of Yazidi girls (Otten, 2017). The philosophical underpinnings of *Boko Haram* and ISIS are the same since both of these terrorist groups are out for territorial gains and, as such, have continued to threaten global peace.

Conclusion

The activities of Boko Haram since the exit of Goodluck Jonathan from office have raised questions about the prevailing literature on the precipitating factors behind the insurgency. Beyond the rhetoric that the group was formed to undermine governance during Jonathan's presidency, Boko Haram's quest for territorial expansion became evident through its capture of Gwazo, Mubi, and Bama Local Governments in Borno and Adamawa States, as well as its declaration of these territories as part of the Islamic Caliphate. These actions, coupled with attacks on and killings of senior military personnel in Nigeria, suggest that Boko Haram's objective extends beyond political destabilization to the establishment of an Islamic state in Northeast Nigeria and parts of neighbouring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. Although the group has fragmented into different factions over time, its ambition to control and govern territories has remained a central objective of the insurgency.

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