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## Nigeria's plight: The causes, crimes, and casualties of Boko Haram

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## NIGERIA'S PLIGHT

### **Nigeria's Plight: The Causes, Crimes, and Casualties of Boko Haram**

#### **History of Boko Haram**

Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (meaning "people committed to the propagation of the prophet's teachings and jihad") is the proper name for the Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram, which is based in Nigeria (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2014). Boko Haram is the most common name for the group, and loosely translates to "Western education is sacrilegious." Targets of the groups are mostly local (within Nigeria), not international. Still, the group has been described as audacious, sophisticated, and increasingly coordinated over time (Maiangwa et al. 2012). There is some speculation regarding when this terrorist organization came to be, but it is still active today. The group most likely began when its first leader and founder, Mohammed Yusuf, returned to his home state of Nigeria after studying the Quran in the Niger Republic (Adegbulu, 2013).

Yusuf believed that Western education, dress, and politics were harming the Islamic faith in Nigeria (Maiangwa et al., 2012). This is the message Yusuf conveyed to his students and followers. Thus, the group appears to have three core objectives: opposing Western education, rejecting the current political system in Nigeria, and creating an Islamic state (Regens et al., 2016). Boko Haram claims to defend the Islamic law provided in the Sharia. The Sharia is part of the Quran and represents the infallible law of God coupled with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2014). The Sharia is meant to govern the lives of all Muslims, and Boko Haram applies a very strict interpretation. Boko Haram is dedicated to ridding Nigeria of political corruption and moral deprivation through creating an Islamic state, and they have proven that they will bring this about by any means necessary, including violence.

However, Boko Haram insists that their vendetta is not against the general public, but against the state authorities that promote anything that falls into the category of Western culture,

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as well as anyone who sides with the authorities (Maiangwa et al., 2012). Boko Haram considers themselves to be freedom fighters for the people of Nigeria. The group claims they are simply reacting to the country's abundance of issues including corrupt government, suffering, and economic inequality (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2014).

Boko Haram originated as an Islamic school and mosque in Maiduguri in the state of Borno. The group was considered relatively small in number (around 60 members) and remained peaceful for many of its early years (Maiangwa et al., 2012; Regens et al., 2016). In 2009, the group began to expand its growth and power through increasing acts of terrorism. This increase in terrorism began as a result of a member being killed during a traffic stop for a mild traffic violation (Regens et al., 2016). Days later, the destruction of many buildings (churches, prisons, schools, etc.) and over 700 deaths occurred, including that of the leader Yusuf as a result of a struggle between Boko Haram and the Nigerian military (Adesoji, 2010). Yusuf actually died in police custody, which raised questions of corruption. Nigerian police reported that Yusuf had died in the shoot-out, but his body was found in handcuffs, causing speculation that he was handcuffed at the time of his death (Maiangwa et al., 2012).

It was after Yusuf's death specifically that the group began to exhibit more violent tendencies. Directly after their leader's death, members of Boko Haram scattered to neighboring countries in an attempt to hide. However, by 2010 Boko Haram had resurfaced under a new leader: Abubakar Shekau (Regens et al., 2016). With this resurgence of the group, Boko Haram desired justice for the members who had been killed unjustly (including Yusuf), release of the members in captivity, and nationwide imposed Sharia law (Maiangwa et al., 2012). When these wishes were not granted in 2010, a prison in Bauchi was stormed and the group succeeded in releasing over 700 prisoners, including group members. Later in 2011 Boko Haram performed

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the group's first suicide attack, the bombing of a police headquarters in Abuja with vehicles loaded down with explosives (Maiangwa et al., 2012). It was a failed attempt to assassinate the Inspector General of Police, but it still sent the message that the group was willing go to any means necessary (even suicide) to make their demands and grievances heard. Their more current demands have expanded to the expulsion of Christians from Northern Nigeria and even commanding President Goodluck Jonathon to convert to Islam (his presidency was from 2010-2015), and their demands continue to expand (Maiangwa et al., 2012).

These examples make it quite clear that the group will make their wishes and demands a reality through any means necessary. Since 2009, Boko Haram has been able to successfully carry out hundreds of attacks per year. In 2014 alone, the group successfully carried out 436 attacks (Regens et al., 2016). Additionally, from July 2009 to December of 2014, Boko Haram attacks caused over 10,000 deaths (Regens et al., 2016). Moreover, the Nigerian government estimated in 2015 that around 980,000 Nigerians have been displaced by this insurgency (Omele et al., 2015). Refugees have been known to flee to neighboring countries such as Niger, Cameroon, and Chad. By 2015, Boko Haram had grown to control an area across three states in Nigeria (which combined would be roughly the size of Belgium). These states were Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa (Omele et al., 2015). The states are located in the Northeast region of Nigeria and health issues seem to be an increasing problem in the area. Some health concerns include maternal and child mortality, polio, measles, minimal access to food and water, and more. Consequently, Omele et al. (2015) estimates that about 1 in 5 of the people in these refugee camps are malnourished.

With so much collateral damage and turmoil due to the actions of Boko Haram, it may be hard to believe that they are able to gain any support or funding for their cause. It was speculated

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that late leader Yusuf received financial support from a former commissioner in Borno State (Maiangwa et al., 2012). Therefore, Maiangwa et al. (2012) still speculate that current sponsors include prominent northern politicians and/or religious leaders. The group also manages to fund themselves through drug-trafficking, kidnapping, and bank robberies (Regens et al., 2016), but it is important to note that authority figures in Nigeria may actually be supporting Boko Haram behind the scenes (Martin, 2019).

Interestingly, Boko Haram even uses the popular social media platform Twitter to convey their messages and ideals to younger audiences in the hopes of expanding their following and support (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2014). In fact, Nigeria ranks first in internet usage in Africa, so for Boko Haram to use the platform to convey their message and recruit members is a smart and logical tactic. However, the group makes sure to keep their ideologies clear. On Boko Haram's twitter profile, a brief slogan can be read at the top of the group's page: "To hate is human; to bomb is divine. We hate Western inventions including Twitter: however, we feel the necessity to use it to reach out to our fans" (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2014, p. 328). Additionally on their profile, a rhetoric of "we" versus "they" is inherently present. Boko Haram paints themselves as a Messiah figure, while government organizations and Western culture are repeatedly described as "others," "fools," and "mad dogs" (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2014). They appear to be selling their ideologies to this younger audience present on social media through the guise of sharing popular feelings and sentiments about the current state of Nigeria (i.e., corrupt government, economic inequality, etc.).

By 2013, the U.S. Department of State designated Boko Haram as a foreign terrorist group and announced a reward of \$7 million for any information that would lead to the group's leader at the time, Abubakar Shekau (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2014). U.S. interest may have been

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prompted by Boko Haram previously claiming allegiance to Al-Qaeda, the terrorist group responsible for the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York. In 2016, Boko Haram also announced an affiliation with the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (Regens et al., 2016). Both groups that Boko Haram have now claimed allegiance to are notorious around the world for being some of the most powerful and horrific terrorist groups of the century. This only increases Boko Haram's credibility in spreading terror and violence by any means necessary in the name of their cause.

### **An Event of Recognition**

One of Boko Haram's most notorious terrorist incidents occurred in April of 2014 when 276 girls were kidnapped from a government school in Chibok (Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2014; Omele et al., 2015; Regens et al., 2016). Prior to these kidnappings, many of the schools in the area had been shut down due to other attacks by Boko Haram. It was decided that this school would stay open for final year students who needed to take their examinations (Smith, 2015). Increased security was promised by police in the area, but only a few officers guarded the school during daylight hours. Moreover, it was reported that only one watchman was at the school at the time of the attack (Smith, 2015). Obviously, this was no match for Boko Haram and became a topic of much tension and debate in the months following the attack. The school was burned down, and the captive girls were forced into trucks, which were driven deep into the forest for seclusion (Bauer, Spyra, & Trump, 2017; Chiluwa & Ajiboye, 2014).

It was not until a month later that Nigeria knew Boko Haram had performed this terrorist attack. In May of 2014, leader Abubakar Shekau claimed credit for the kidnappings in a video posted by Boko Haram (AllAfrica.com, 2014). These kidnappings at the school were surmised to be carried out as an act of their hatred for Western culture and education (Chiluwa & Ajuboye,

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2014). Because the education of women was forbidden by Sharia law, leader Shekau threatened to sell the girls as slaves or marry them off to Boko Haram men; in the eyes of Shekau and Boko Haram, these girls were directly opposing Islamic law (Regens et al., 2016).

More of the group's motives became clear in August 2016 with the emergence of a new video. Twenty girls had escaped their kidnappers shortly after abduction, but that left over 250 girls still in captivity. The video in August 2016 showed 50 of their captives in front of a black backdrop, one of them including Maida Yakubu, who had been missing since the Chibok kidnappings (Blair, 2016). After Yakubu made her case and begged for rescue in the video, a masked member of Boko Haram proclaimed that the girls would never be released if the Nigerian government did not also release their fighters in government custody. The video not only posed as a negotiant to the Nigerian government, but an attempt to renew their profile and remind Nigeria that they remained a threat .

This abduction allowed Boko Haram to cross international headlines, and this recognition was likely another one of the motives for the attack. There was such an outcry around the world that the social media hashtag #BringBackOurGirls began trending (Bauer et al., 2017). Even prominent figures and celebrities were involved in the outcry, including former first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama. Unfortunately, these outcries seemed to do little good for the rescue of the Chibok girls for quite some time.

Haunting retellings and accounts of Boko Haram survivors provided by Bauer et al. (2017) provide a glimpse into what the Chibok girls endured. Captives told stories of the Chibok girls living much deeper in the forest than the other captives. Two were specifically assigned to leader Shekau's wife for cooking and cleaning. The others would come in alternating groups of two each day, escorted by guards to teach the new captives lessons in Islam. They were

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described as being very strict, beating and whipping the captives with plastic cables if they were unable to read the Koran in Arabic. In other accounts, more evidence was presented that the Chibok girls (through means unknown) were converted to Islam and strict Boko Haram and Sharia law ideology. One survivor told of Chibok girls telling them shortly after their capture: "don't worry, you are here to carry out the work of God" (Bauer et al., 2017, p. 66). More disturbing still, captives were told by Boko Haram leaders that the Chibok girls learned to understand the religion of Boko Haram, and boasted that the girls would even cut the throats of their own parents.

A year after the kidnappings, a resident of Chibok told of the aftermath. This Chibok resident told Hoije (2015) that education was important, but that she had already forgotten much of what was learned due to schools still being closed a year after the kidnappings. While some parents sent their children away from Chibok to further their education, most families in the area could not afford to do the same. The resident also stated that even if schools were to reopen, families would be remiss to send their daughters back, out of fear of more kidnappings by Boko Haram (Hoije, 2015). While schools did eventually reopen, even five years later in 2019 it was reported that residents and teachers refused to return (Kindzeka, 2019). Thankfully, by May of 2017 over 100 of the Chibok girls were released in exchange for five of Boko Haram's high-ranking members in detention (Awford & Rogers, 2018). In 2020, 112 of the Chibok girls remained missing (Onley, 2020). Fortunately, there have been some recent news reports that most of the remaining girls have been rescued by the Nigerian government as of January 2021 (Busari, 2021; Hughes, 2021).

### **Government Response to Boko Haram**



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As was mentioned previously, the kidnappings in Chibok created an international outcry. Once this occurred, multitudes of people around the world recognized the name Boko Haram and knew what the group was capable of. However, it was not until about a month later that anyone knew where the girls had gone (AllAfrica.com, 2014). Leader Shekau claimed in May 2014 that Boko Haram was responsible for the kidnappings. It was around the same time that then-president of Nigeria Goodluck Jonathon made a statement. A nationally broadcasted speech was given by the president that claimed he would rescue the girls no matter where they were (Stout, 2014). The problem with this statement is that no one knew where the girls were being held or where Boko Haram was hiding themselves and the Chibok girls at the time. More problematic still, President Goodluck Jonathon even accused some of the victims' parents of withholding information about the kidnappings (Stout, 2014). While this may have been true, attacking the apparent victims after weeks of silence did not help to calm the nerves of the public.

The social media campaign #BringBackOurGirls brought together thousands of people around the world who demanded action from the Nigerian government to rescue the Chibok girls (Bauer et al., 2017). The president of Nigeria then called for the formation of a "fact-finding committee" that would be dedicated to investigating the kidnappings (Stout, 2014). Even the United States pledged to help Nigeria in returning the girls to safety. Then Secretary of State John Kerry made a statement that the U.S. would do everything possible to help the Nigerian government and bring Boko Haram to justice (Stout, 2014).

Many raids by the Nigerian military brought back small numbers of Chibok girls in the coming months, but it was clear that Boko Haram would not willingly release the girls without proper negotiations, as seen in the videos released by the group (Blair, 2016; Regens et al., 2016). In September of 2016 Nigeria requested assistance from the United Nations for their

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continued negotiations with Boko Haram (Williams, 2016). Boko Haram had expressed a willingness to release some of the girls if some of their captured fighters would also be released, a common negotiation strategy of many terrorist groups (Martin, 2019). With the help of the International Red Cross and the Swiss government, Nigeria was able to negotiate the release of 21 Chibok girls in October 2016 (Williams, 2016). By 2017, over 100 of the girls had been released through further negotiations with Boko Haram (Awford & Rogers, 2018).

Unfortunately, while these responses by the Nigerian government and their allies may have appeared hopeful in the public eye, six years have gone by and still over 100 of the girls are missing. While it is a great success that at least some have been rescued, more measures still need to be taken to bring Boko Haram to justice. Maiangwa et al. (2012) describes the military response to Boko Haram as "brutal suppression" tactics. While this may seem like the best way to combat further terrorist acts, sometimes the authorities' response only escalates the issue. An example already given can be taken into account here: the killing of a member during a simple traffic stop that also led to the killing of leader Yusuf in police custody. The corruption seen in this example unfortunately only aids in conveying Boko Haram's message that the government needs a drastic change.

Furthermore, over the years of Boko Haram's insurgency the Nigerian military and government have claimed to kill the leader, Abubakar Shekau, only to have him reappear in future propaganda videos (Regens et al., 2016; Williams, 2016). This type of deception calls into question the credibility of the Nigerian government to not only successfully do what needs to be done to stop Boko Haram but to also truthfully report the ongoing issue to the public (Maiangwa et al., 2012). Without first gaining the trust of the people, Nigeria may have no hope in stopping

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Boko Haram or other future insurgencies that may be inevitable due to a plethora of issues facing the country.

A range of issues have been suggested that must be dealt with first before any insurgencies such as Boko Haram can truly be controlled and stopped indefinitely. In fact, Maiangwa et al. (2012) suggests that good government is the best form of counterinsurgency. This means that Nigerian government must work proactively to repair issues of education, poverty, public health, security deficiency, military brutality, government corruption, and underdevelopment, just to name a few (Adegbulu, 2013; Maiangwa et al., 2012; Omele et al., 2015). Omele et al. (2015) even goes on to suggest that the Nigerian government should develop better preparedness strategies through emergency planning for the future and also formulate plans for the reintegration of returning refugees displaced by the Boko Haram insurgency. These steps could all aid in decreasing civil unrest.

### **Boko Haram's Success**

In its years of existence, Boko Haram has carried out hundreds of terrorist attacks. On top of kidnappings, the group has fought their "holy war" using an array of tactics, including vehicle bombs, heavy gun usage, suicide bombings, and the like (Maiangwa, 2012; Martin, 2019). However, the kidnapping of the Chibok girls can be considered their most "successful" attack. Before these kidnappings, most of the Western world ignored the plight of Nigeria in dealing with Boko Haram (Williams, 2016). This attack was covered through media platforms internationally, and as previously mentioned even brought about the social media campaign #BringBackOurGirls. Boko Haram finally received international coverage as a serious threat to the safety of not only Nigeria, but to humanity.

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It became quite clear after this attack that Nigeria and the rest of the world should take the group seriously in its ideology and wishes. Not only did Boko Haram receive international coverage for this event, but they also received numerous negotiation opportunities with the Nigerian government in the following years. Keeping the Chibok girls hostage for over six years has allowed the group to not only continue their recognition as a serious threat, but also led to the release of many of their members in custody. Each time Boko Haram has released some of the Chibok girls willingly, their imprisoned group members have been freed. By all accounts, this would be seen as a successful operation by Boko Haram and outside observers. Though Boko Haram has not been successful in the core objective of Islamizing Nigeria, with this operation the group managed to free many of their members from custody. The group also continues to be discussed on an international scale, specifically in regards to the lasting and tragic impact of the kidnappings of the schoolgirls in Chibok.

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