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## Revisiting *Boko Haram*: Changing the rules of engagement

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### Introduction

*Boko Haram* has grown to become the biggest challenge facing internal security in Nigeria and a threat to international peace and security. It has become clear that the operations of the sect have confounded state security forces and the government is at a loss as to how to engage the extremist sect.

### The changing faces of *Boko Haram*

“The battle has changed”. That much is certain. *Boko Haram* (“Western education is forbidden”) has clearly mutated from an extremist Islamic sect agitating against Western education to a group with an agenda to breed insecurity and political instability, and presently a growing terrorist group with suicide-ready recruits and possible links to international terrorist groups. Since the sect was founded in 2002, it has undergone the following significant transformations.

#### 2002-July 2009: Pious beginnings

*Boko Haram* was founded by Ustaz Mohammed Yunus in Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria. A small group with focused leadership driven by a purely religious agenda to introduce strict *Sharia* law throughout Nigeria, and whose existence and activities were geographically con-

tained in parts of northern Nigeria. The group established an Islamic school, which also served as a recruiting center for jihadists. Within this period, any political agenda the group may have nursed was masked behind the facade of its publicly expressed religious motive.

#### July 2009-April 2011: Politicisation

The political leaning of the sect has become more apparent. The battleground shifted towards the centre of government, Abuja, in the build-up to the April 2011 general elections. Anti-state violence increased with targeted bomb explosions at two military barracks, attacks on police stations and prison breaks. The frequency of attacks increased significantly when it became clear that the presidential candidate favoured by the ruling political party was not a Muslim of northern Nigerian origin, prompting the presumption that those attacks were targeted at causing instability and derailing the democratic transition. A bold terrorist-political statement was made on 1 October 2010 with two synchronised bomb blasts close to the grounds of the Independence Day celebrations in Abuja. The National Assembly hurriedly passed an anti-terrorism law after the incident. In north-eastern Nigeria, political involvement in Borno state, violent attacks on offices of the Independent National Electoral Commission and at polling stations, and assassinations have also tainted the sect.

#### Beyond April 2011: Internationalisation

The first suicide bombing in Nigeria’s history was recorded on 16 June 2011. The attack was carried out at the police force headquarters and was specifically targeted at the Inspector General. Curiously, other equally fatal attacks on beer gardens, school pupils and churches which have been attributed to *Boko Haram* have left security experts

and state security agents guessing. In the latest and most disturbing re-enactment of attacks claimed by the sect, the bombing of United Nations (UN) House in Abuja on 26 August 2011, 23 persons including 12 UN staff were officially confirmed dead and over 80 persons wounded. Unofficial reports quote much higher casualty figures, and allege an attempt by the government to downplay the incident in a bid to avoid the labelling of Nigeria as a terrorist state. Again, the attack was carried out using a tested and yet unchecked bombing method—implanting explosives into cars.

## Demystifying *Boko Haram*

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### *Preferred strategy: Asymmetrical warfare*

*Boko Haram's* survival seems to be hinged on the irregularity in its structure, motive, targets, timing, and an almost fail-safe mode of operation. Probably by design and to keep it less predictable, indications of splintering within the sect have emerged – same vision, different missions. Splintering has made negotiating with any one identified faction ineffective and any potential agreements non-obligatory on the others. The greater concern however is the increased risk of factions of the sect being hijacked—either from within or outside Nigeria—or the sect itself being used as a composite group of mercenaries for carrying out different attacks with different sponsors and different motivations.

### *Tactical advantage: Three steps ahead*

Figuratively speaking, *Boko Haram* is now three steps ahead of Nigeria's security and intelligence agencies. The government is fighting a war blindfolded against a sect that has strategically made itself less identifiable and therefore more difficult to deal with. So long as the sect remains unseen and unpredictable, it will remain unstoppable. A key to winning the war lies in unlocking the real motive(s) driving the sect. Only then could it be possible to pre-empt and overtake it. Otherwise any individual successes would be based largely on increased vigilance or on intelligence agencies penetrating few recruits with time. Sadly, the more time passes, the more compounded its motives would get, and the more difficult it would become to fix the jigsaw.

### *Growing networks: Links with AQMI?*

It is no longer mere speculation that *Boko Haram* has gone international. The sect is believed to have recruited

foot soldiers from neighbouring Niger Republic, Sudan and faraway Somalia. Its training grounds outside Nigeria remain unverified but fingers have pointed to Algeria. On 17 August 2011, the commander of US Africa Command, General Carter Ham, stated that multiple sources indicated that *Boko Haram* had made contacts with al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and with another group, al-Shabab in Somalia. The contacts are not thought to be particularly strong ones, but the attack on UN building is an indication of possible influence in terms of targeting coming from al Qaeda.

## Deconstructing *Boko Haram's* environment

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The political, social and cultural environment in which the sect operates also bears conditions that predispose to insecurity and instability. At both national and local levels, such environment provides fertile ground for the cultivation of forms of extremism.

### *A recalcitrant strain: Senseless or sensible?*

Since independence in 1960, civilian and military heads of state of northern-Muslim extraction have ruled the country for about 37 out of 51 years. Political differences have often been drawn along ethnic and religious lines, just as ethnic and religious sentiments have been used to stoke the flames of political crises. However, *Boko Haram* appears to be a recalcitrant strain. The acts of the sect have been described as “senseless” and “barbaric”. Yet, viewed from the reverse angle, the sect has well-defined objectives albeit unpalatable, is focused on achieving its mission, plans intelligently and often patiently, and carries out well-timed, well-coordinated and so far very successful attacks. If the sect was a service-delivery company, it would rate high on client satisfaction.

### *Anti-state violence: Political and social origins*

Despite its unrivalled footprint on the national political landscape, northern Nigeria continues to be beleaguered by underdevelopment. A failure of governance is manifest in the decaying education system, intractable youth unemployment, widespread poverty, infrastructural collapse, and abuse of human rights by state security agencies. The targets of attacks suggest that there is more to *Boko Haram* than just religion. The clamour for strict implementation of *Sharia* law was premised on an alternate vision for a failing state ripped asunder by social injustice, endemic corruption, oppression, electoral

malpractice and moral decadence. Quite logically, the combined effect of these ills has been disaffection against the state. Where legitimate avenues for voicing disaffection against state policies and bad governance are plugged, then illegitimate exit strategies and violent expressions of discontent become an attractive option.

## *Boko Haram* consciousness in northern Nigeria

In its early gestation days, the sect's xenophobic tendency led it to distance itself from its immediate community purportedly to avoid the "contamination" of Western education and to concentrate on its creed. Today the story is different. Elements of *Boko Haram* have diffused into the society in its strongholds in north-eastern Nigeria. At some level, members of the sect are perceived as martyrs and its cause has been so humanised and bought into such that a fight against the sect could be construed as a fight against society itself. Leaders of the Muslim community in Nigeria are against *Boko Haram's* stated mission and actions, but in the view of *Boko Haram* spokesman Abul Qaqa, the Nigerian state is run by non-believers and only a Muslim leader can transform it into a *Sharia* state.

## Conclusions: Engaging *Boko Haram*

How does the state and stakeholders in the peace and security of Nigeria engage an extremist group that has so far shied away from engagement? Regardless of what strategies are employed in the engagement of *Boko Haram*, success will be dependent on the extent to which three crucial issues are addressed: the underlying causes and motivations for *Boko Haram*; the socio-economic and political base that sustains the activities of the sect; and its leadership profile and organising ability. ■

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