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# **INSURGENCY IN NIGERIA**

**The History and Impact of Boko Haram in  
Nigeria and the Sahel**

**Tanish Srivastava**

**Edited By: Divyashree Jha**

## About the author

**Tanish Srivastava** is an undergraduate student at the Jindal School of International Affairs and is a Research Intern at the Centre for Security Studies, JSIA.

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# Introduction

In a report on global terrorism in 2016, Nigeria was labelled the country with the second highest impact of terrorism worldwide, only behind Iraq and Afghanistan, and ahead of countries such as Syria, Yemen, and Pakistan (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2016). The Boko Haram, a terrorist organisation based in northern parts of Nigeria, and its various split factions have been a source of terror for the Nigerian public for two decades now, and the Nigerian military and state have not neutralized the threat, at least not completely, as of now. The Boko Haram, literally meaning “western education is forbidden” (the term Boko was used to describe books with western knowledge in colonial times) is an Islamic terrorist organization in Nigeria, which believes that western influence in Nigeria has led the country to fail. It is actively attempting to refute the ills of “western” education and is trying to make Nigeria return to “true” Islam. It frequently carries out attacks on both government, and civilian targets, in Nigeria and neighbouring states such as Chad and Mali.

Boko Haram has been responsible for many deadly attacks in the western African, or the Sahel region. For example, it was responsible for the attack in the village of Kukuwa-Gari in Nigeria which left a 174 dead. In other neighbouring states it was responsible for attacks such as the one in a military base and residential areas in Karamga, Niger with 230 deaths. In 2015, the Boko Haram was reported to be the second most deadly terrorist organisation in the world, being responsible for around 5700 deaths, three quarters of which were in Nigeria (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2016). The issue of the insurgency in Nigeria, however, does not get the proportionate media coverage that it should get. It is important to understand the way The Boko Haram functions, and the history and background, for which the context of what the socio-political status of Nigeria was in the early 2000s, at the time of the group’s inception, is vital.

## Background

The issue of insurgency from the Boko Haram is not simply a communal rift between the Muslim and Christian communities in Nigeria, however it is important to understand the demographics of the Nigerian population to trace the influence and attacking methods of the Boko Haram. Roughly half the country’s population is Muslim, mostly concentrated in the northern part of Nigeria, 48.1%

of the country is Christian, concentrated in the south, and the rest of population follows various indigenous religions (Diamant, 2019). There have been significant tensions between the two major segments of Nigeria, and a civil war involving the separatist province of Biafra in the south. Ever since it's independence from colonial rule under Britain, Nigeria has been a very diverse state, with various ethnic tensions leading to riots and violent clashes between the ethnicities. In fact, before the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1914, northern and southern Nigeria were separate protectorates before Frederick Lugard signed a document which made them the colony and protectorate of Nigeria (McCaslin, 2018). It was the colonial rule that combined different ethnicities to try and bring them together into one state in 1960, during Nigeria's independence, without really understanding the history of the cultures in Nigeria. The Nigerian civil war, lasting from 1967 to 1970, was perhaps the biggest example of the ethnic tensions in the state. It had the second highest death toll of all African conflicts, with estimates stating that it is more than a million (Nwaubani, 2020). At the end of the civil war though, the separatist movement was crushed, and the United Nigerian state prevailed, granted that not all of their ethnic issues had been solved.

While Nigeria continues to remain an ethnically diverse state with many points of contention between the different ethnicities and religions, the Nigerian armed forces have worked, and been fairly successful at, attempting to defeat the Boko Haram. The general Nigerian population has also been a victim to the terrorist organization, regardless of ethnic and linguistic divide, and the Nigerian military still is a diverse force in itself, with both Muslim and Christian personnel working to fight the Boko Haram.

## **Timeline of the Insurgency**

### **2002-2009**

In 2002, a young man named Mohommed Ali and an offshoot of a group of radical Islamist youth that used to worship in the Alhaji Mauhmmadu Ndimi mosque declared the City of Maiduguri and the establishment to be corrupt. They declared a separatist community run on hard Islamic principles in a village named Kanama in the State of Yobe in Nigeria. The leader pressed on all Muslims to join the community and follow Islamic principles.

In the December of 2003, the group got into a conflict regarding fishing rights in a local pond, which involved the police. The group overpowered the police, and took their weapons, leading to a confrontation that lasted through the new year, and ended with most of the members, including their leader Mohammed Ali, being killed by the army after they stormed in their mosque. An assessment by the United States embassy in Abuja in 2004 stated that the group did not pose a major international threat at that point (this assessment of the United States Department Cable was leaked by WikiLeaks that year) and that it most likely had no connections to bigger terrorist organisations in the region (Walker, 2012). The group gained some traction in the media after the locals dubbed them the “Nigerian Taliban”.

After the confrontation the surviving members of the Group returned to the city of Maiduguri to establish another mosque for the group and its new radicalized members under the leadership of a local Imam named Mohammed Yusuf. This was the starting of the establishment of the Boko Haram. The group now operated at a bigger scale than the previous “Nigerian Taliban” under Mohammed Ali, but it still did not pose a significant international threat. It was responsible for low level attacks. One of the significant turning points in the history of the Boko Haram at this stage was the assassination of a local Imam at the Ndimi mosque, who criticised the Boko Haram for their strict and stringent Islamic policies. It was suspected that this assassination was carried out under the orders of Mohammed Yusuf. The reason this event was known to be significant was that now the followers of Boko Haram had no possibility of returning to the norm of the northern Islamic establishment of the state of Nigeria.

The Boko Haram at this stage was still relatively (relative to their activity post 2009) a low-profile organisation, which would come to change by the time of the confrontation in 2009 between the authorities and the Boko Haram. While travelling for the funeral of fellow member, there was a conflict between the Boko Haram and the police over a law for wearing helmets while riding motorcycles. A group member of the Boko Haram fired on and injured a police officer. This led to various other attacks on police stations throughout the stage, and a DVD being spread of Mohammed Yusuf openly giving threats to the police and the state.

This event led to a military crackdown on the Boko Haram. The Nigerian Army entered Maiduguri and attacked the members of the Boko Haram, executed anyone who was suspected of being sympathetic to the Boko Haram, and these people were killed with no trial. Boko Haram members

fled from the city and fought the military independently, but the military eventually regained control of the city, and their leader Mohammed Yusuf was taken into military custody where he was killed hours later by the military. This military crackdown on the Boko Haram brought it into global news and gave it popularity. A lot of the members of the Boko Haram had fled the country into neighbouring states. The military in collaboration with local leaders of Maiduguri identified potential members of the Boko Haram who had fled, and their property and wealth were transferred to local Imams and supporters. This confrontation between the military and the Boko Haram marked the end for Mohammed Yusuf's leadership of the group, but it spiralled the group into a much bigger scale later, as the group became bigger in size under new leadership.

## Post-2009

The Boko Haram was in need of new leadership. There was fighting among Mohammed Yusuf's most important right-hand lieutenants. The competition for the leader came down to the two most important men in the Boko Haram, Mamman Nur and Abubakar Shekau, both of whom held significant positions under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf. Eventually, it was Abubakar Shekau who took control of the Boko Haram as its new leader. He was a young ambitious leader who increased the scale of the terrorist activities of the Boko Haram, and it is this leadership that would really bring Boko Haram to the level of an international threat, and to the spot of the second deadliest terrorist organization in the world.

Shortly after becoming a leader, Shekau turned the Boko Haram into his own faction, called the Jamatu Ahlu Al-Sunna Lil Da'wa Wal Jihad (referred to as JAS). The group declared its affiliation to the Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) which was Al Qaeda's outfit in Northern and Western Africa. The JAS was responsible for militant attacks on secular schools, institutions, and civilians on a weekly basis from this point on. Since 2009, the Boko Haram, in all its forms and factions has been responsible for around 20000-30000 deaths and has displaced around 2 million people. According to a report, the Boko Haram one of the most dangerous organisations, killing on an average around 11 people per attack (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2016). This is because the JAS was known to have extremely brutal methods of terrorism. One of the major ways the organization gained attention was through the mass kidnappings of schoolgirls in Nigeria, which resulted in an entire movement in the Nigerian population demanding for the return of

abducted and kidnapped girls called the “bring back out girls” campaign. The JAS used these kidnapped girls for attacks such as suicide bombings. 20% of suicide bombings done by the JAS were done by children, a majority of which were girls (Around three fourths). In April 2014, 276 seniors of the Chibok Government Secondary School were kidnapped by the JAS. The Bring Back Our Girls movement became a global phenomenon. The United States and several European countries mobilized forces and used military equipment such as drones to help rescue the kidnapped girls. 9 years later, 112 girls are still missing and have not been rescued. There are accounts of rescued girls, including the one of Naomi Adamu, a 24-year-old senior who spent around 1000 days in captivity. She was labelled a “troublesome captive”, alongside another captive named Lydia John, who refused to convert to Islam or marry the JAS fighters (Seay, 2021). In a meeting with the group leader Abubakar Shekau, they were threatened with beheading, and were forced to learn Islamic text. Near the end of Naomi’s captivity, Lydia agreed to the forced marriage, and is still missing.

## **The Split Inside the Boko Haram**

The kidnapping of these schoolgirls is one of the many examples of the sheer brutality that the JAS fought with. This brutality is the reason of there being a separation of the Boko Haram between the JAS, and another group called the Jama ‘at Ansari Al-Muslimin fi Bilad Al-Sudan (also referred to as Ansaru). Ansaru was a group formed by two members of the consultative council of the JAS, namely Khalid Al-Barnawi and Mamman Nur. They were dissatisfied and were against Abubakar Shekau’s leadership of the JAS. Their complaints and issues were sent to the Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), who acted somewhat like an important bigger benefactor to the JAS in helping it in its regional goals.

In response to this, the Al Qaeda (AQIM) had limited their support for movements in Nigeria to Ansaru and stopped all support for the JAS and distanced themselves from Abubakar Shekau and his organisation. Due to the lack of support from their primary backing organisation in the Islamic Maghreb, the JAS endured massive losses of territory and had to declare allegiance to the Caliph of the Islamic State named Abubakr Al-Baghdadi, an offshoot of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Northern and Western Africa. They were an organisation rivalling the AQIM. The JAS had now reunited with the Ansaru leaders and were now collectively, the ISWAP (Islamic

State West Africa Province) and Al-Baghdadi named Shekau as the leader of the ISWAP by early 2015 (SOFREP, 2022). However, there were still many issues that the group faced. The two members of the old consultative council (called the “Shura council”) who were the leaders of the separate Ansaru organisation still had issues with the leadership of Abubakar Shekau and had sent letters of complaint to the IS caliph. The complaints were sent on three grounds, which are the following:

- 1) Abubakar Shekau’s dictatorial leadership. He was allegedly not consulting the consultative council (Shura Council) that Al-Barnawi and Mamman Nur were a part of, and he took major decisions on his own. Moreover, anyone who disagreed with Shekau was dealt with violently, and group members were killed for making trivial mistakes. Shekau was also accused of hoarding group resources, and not distributing the take properly, resulting in poor living conditions for the other group members.
- 2) Abubakar Shekau was known to have extreme opinions on key issues. For example, he believed that any Muslim citizens who refused to join his movement were “Kafirs”. He attacked Muslim communities where people were living under the government, had official identification and taught their children in secular institutions. Attacking Muslim civilians was originally prohibited under the AQIM doctrine, which the group originally following.
- 3) The logistical issues under Abubakar Shekau were massive. As stated before, decisions were made by Abubakar Shekau without consulting others, and bad decisions had led to the loss of all the land they had captured by the end of 2015. The methods used by them were becoming increasingly more volatile and small-scale attacks that were unplanned such as suicide bombings using children. In comparison to this, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) would carry out sophisticated planned attacks that were larger in scale (Ahmed, 2019).

Due to these complaints, In August 2016, Al Baghdadi declared Al-Barnawi to be the new leaders of the ISWAP. This led to a partition of the two groups, namely into the ISWAP led by Al-Barnawi and Abubakar Shekau’s faction which went back to its old name, the JAS. The difference between the operation method of the two organisations was very evident. For example, the 110 girls that were captured by the ISWAP were well treated and well fed and returned (except for one who



refused to accept Islamic principles), compared to the previously stated example of the schoolgirls captured by the JAS and what the consequences of that were.

## **The ISWAP Versus the JAS**

The local perceptions of civilians about ISWAP and the JAS are reflective of the way they operate. While the JAS is seen a more brutal organisation which is less rational, ISWAP is seen a relatively less radical organisation. Due to the persisting sentiment of extremism in a lot of the youth in Nigeria, there is a view of ISWAP as an organisation fighting state corruption and offers financial incentives, which helps give ISWAP an edge over the JAS in terms of recruitment.

Another loss for the JAS is the loss of leadership. On May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021, in a confrontation between the ISWAP and the JAS, Abubakar Shekau was claimed to have died by the detonation of a suicide vest as he was determined to not surrender to the ISWAP. In an audio recording, ISWAP leader Al-Barnawi can be heard, claiming the death of Abubakar Shekau. The Nigerian government was hesitant to confirm the death and claimed to still be investigating the event. However, an intelligence report shared by a government official and researchers on the Boko Haram have also claimed Shekau's death (Reuters, 2021).

## **Insurgency in the Recent Times**

As the Nigerians prepare for the 2023 general elections, the Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgency is one of the main items on the agenda. The ISWAP, among other Islamist organisations, is still active and is carrying out high profile attacks in Nigeria. For instance, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2022, gunmen from the ISWAP had entered the St Francis Catholic Church in Owe, in the state of Ondo. Over 40 worshippers had been killed, and many other injured (Igwe, 2022). There was also an attack on train from Abuja to Kaduna, in which 8 people were killed and 72 people were kidnapped. All of the kidnapped individuals did gain their independence in different circumstances. At the same time, both ISWAP and the JAS continued fighting in 2022. The ISWAP also claimed responsibility for an attack on the Kuje prison, which is about 40 KM from the national capital city of Abuja and freed about 900 inmates (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Clearly, the insurgency has not died. There are still major attacks taking place in Nigeria.

## Conclusion

While there are still attacks on the civilian population in Nigeria, the threat of insurgency in Nigeria and neighbouring states has relatively decreased, especially so with the death of Abubakar Shekau. While the ISWAP is still a bigger threat to Nigeria and the Western African region, the fight against the insurgency seems to be heading in a positive direction. It is important to note however, that the threat has not reduced solely because of Shekau's death. If anything, a large point of resistance inside the JAS against the ISWAP is now absent. There is also a chance of reunification of the two for a greater Boko Haram resurgence in the future. Ultimately there needs to be less corruption in the Nigerian state, more economic development, and the changing of mindset of the youth to completely neutralise the issue of insurgency in Nigeria. The Nigerian state and its actions regarding these factors are important to the future of insurgency in the Sahel, whether the state will be competent enough to bring these changes, however, is still unclear.

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