



## Comparing the Niger Delta and Boko Haram Insurgencies

Since the latest iteration of the Boko Haram violence started in 2010, scholars have attempted to compare the group to other groups in Nigeria that have used violence to express their grievances including the Maitatsine and Niger Delta militias. Yet, in real terms, the Boko Haram insurgency is different from other insurgencies or organized armed violence in Nigeria. For instance, the frequent comparison of the Maitatsine uprising to the Boko Haram insurgency is theoretically weak. This is because parallels may only be drawn demographically in terms of the populations attracted to both movements: down and out young men in cities, graduates of Koranic schools, and the less fortunate including the almajirai. Theologically (and ideologically), however, both are polar opposites. For example, Maitatsine was a Koran only movement that rejected the corpus of the hadith, which is the essence of Salafism. Salafists including Boko Haram would find the theological (and ideological) position of Maitatsine highly untenable and anathema. Similarly, the Maitatsine took a hardline against technology, even rejecting the bicycle, which often is the only means of transportation for rural populations. Boko Haram is not similarly disposed as its members (even in the days of its founder, Mohammed Yusuf) cruised around town in luxury cars and its attacks bear the hallmarks of a group that is technology savvy.

The comparison to Niger Delta insurgents, on the other hand, merits more elucidation. In 2010 when it launched its first IED attacks, its *modus operandi* was remarkably similar to the tactics adopted by Niger Delta insurgents, especially the Independence Day bombing at the Eagle Square, Abuja, by MEND. Apart from this, both movements may be compared in many respects, including their formation, recruitment, funding, support structure, and target.

### *Formation of the Conflicts*

Boko Haram and Niger Delta insurgents are similarly inspired by the lack of accountability among officials of government, which is part of the governance deficit in Nigeria. The lack of accountability is blamed, in the case of Boko Haram, for the lack of economic access for majority northern populations, their perceived increasing political alienation (at least at the federal level), the ecological devastation produced by the unremitting desertification in many parts of northern Nigeria, and moral turpitude caused by the increasing alienation of northern Islam-based culture and its supplanting by Western cultural forms. In the case of Niger Delta insurgents, lack of accountability has led to the unremitting social and economic marginalization of the people; encouraged irresponsible oil production techniques and strategies that pollute the environment killing animal life, destroying farmlands, and corrupting water sources. More importantly, the lack of accountability enables corrupt politicians to create and equip warlords and to use the destructive power that these warlords and thugs possess to steal political power. Stolen political power is frequently the basis for looting the treasury and for benefitting clandestinely from illegitimate economic opportunities that open principally from oil extraction. Even in this sense, the Niger Delta insurgency closely resembles the Boko Haram insurgency for the fact that powerful politicians or individuals proximate to the political state actively sponsored both, giving immense legitimacy to the theory that there are distinct rules, which are learned in

the course of an insurgency, for the conduct of insurgencies. Although the specifics of each insurgency may be different, the core elements are transferable from one insurgency to the other.

For instance, in late August 2014, Reverend (Dr.) Stephen Davies, an Australian contracted by the Nigerian government to negotiate the release of over two hundred schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram, accused some Nigerian politicians including Alhaji Modu Ali Sheriff, a former governor of Borno State, of sponsoring Boko Haram. Indeed, before this expose, a panel – the Ambassador Usman Galtimari Panel – established by the President Goodluck Jonathan administration to investigate the formation of the insurgency, appeared to indict Alhaji Sheriff. The Panel blamed the formation of the insurgency on certain influential politicians in Borno who created several militias including ECOMOG (established and funded by Governor Sheriff), Yan Kalare, and Sara Suka, during preparations for the 2003 general elections. The politicians armed the militias and used them as political thugs to intimidate rivals and to forcefully secure victories. Just as it happened in the Niger Delta, the militias were abandoned after the elections but allowed to keep their sophisticated weapons, which enabled them to gravitate towards religious extremism and other vices. These militias, like the Niger Delta militias, eventually began to roam free of the restraints placed on them by their sponsors to the extent that they became a menace not only to society but even their sponsors that they began to oppose or challenge.

Like the sponsors of the Niger Delta insurgency, the politicians that created and funded Boko Haram also tried to rein in the militias using the coercive instruments of the state, but failed woefully. For instance, in response to Rev. Davies' allegation, Alhaji Sheriff claimed that he only met Mohammed Yusuf, the extra-judicially murdered founder of Boko Haram, after the army had arrested him in 2009. This is the first time that this type of information has been shared with the public considering the secrecy that surrounded Yusuf's arrest by the army, his handover to police authorities, and his summary execution by the police only hours after he was arrested. There had been speculation at the time that the execution of Yusuf and his close associates, including Alhaji Boji Foi, a Boko Haram member who Sheriff had made commissioner for religious affairs as compensation for the sect's active involvement in Sheriff's re-election in 2003, and Baba Fugu Mohammed, Yusuf's father-in-law, were ordered from "above," meaning powerful government officials ordered the killings. By admitting to meeting Yusuf shortly before his execution, Sheriff has given credibility to the theory that Yusuf was hastily executed both to hide the identity of the real founders and sponsors of the sect and in a crude attempt to whittle the group. But Sheriff and other suspected sponsors of Boko Haram, because of their proximity to the political state, particularly the presidency, have managed to evade prosecution and are waxing stronger in business and politics.

In addition, both insurgencies are based in ideology. In the case of Boko Haram, neo-Salafist ideology originating from the teachings of the medieval Islamist, Ibn Taiminya, as well as the contemporary jihadism of Al-Qaeda and other Salafist groups, are the ideological bases of the insurgency. Boko Haram has innovatively applied these principles in Nigeria in a way that highlights what they see as Western cultural hegemony, which they link to the unfolding political

system where national political power has shifted from the north to the south, suggesting the cooptation of southern Christian leaders into the broader anti-Muslim agenda of the West. It is for this reason that applying smart sanctions including DDR may be ineffectual in neutralizing the threats posed by this group or in persuading the group to embrace peace. In the case of Niger Delta insurgents, radical ideology that lumps the state and oil companies together as oppressors, inspires resistance by means other than dialogue and negotiation. The oil-state alliance has produced the unremitting environmental condition of the delta and the economic and social marginality of the delta people. To address this condition, new social movements that prioritize armed rebellion over dialogue are needed. But because their ideology is tied to specific material conditions, and not just some mental and spiritual spaces, the application of smart sanctions, including DDR may be applied with relative success, especially if these interventions address the material conditions at the heart of the problem.

### *Recruitment*

There are clear differences in the recruitment orientation and strategy of Boko Haram and the Niger Delta militias. These differences reflect not only the ideological bent of the militias but also geographic and demographic differences. For instance, in its early days, Boko Haram attracted large numbers of poor, illiterate, and largely disenfranchised and disenchanting northern Nigeria youths, who saw Boko Haram as a way out of the prevailing stultifying poverty in northern Nigeria. Also, its messages, which were largely based on the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the Koran, provided ideological and emotional gratification for youths who were largely adrift, socially and spiritually. Many questions that could not be answered within the narrow confines of the state or its institutions, were answered (even if incorrectly) by the sect. In some instances, the sect provided much more than spiritual or ideological signification, extending to the provision of welfare services including food and medical care and some form of economic sustenance that ingratiated the youths to the sect.

Apart from the down-and-outers that needed the sect for physical and ideological fulfillment, Boko Haram also recruited from the available pool of touts who saw the movement as the expansion of political opportunities to influence electoral outcomes. Socially marginalized and economically vulnerable youths who were exploited by politicians for political gain, continued to provide primary catchment for the Boko Haram. In addition, the group focused attention on non-Hausa-Fulani Muslim youths because non-Hausa-Fulani ethnicities were the more likely to rue the north's loss of national political power culminating in the significant diminishing of the previously enormous political influence of Hausa-Fulani political elites. The loss of national political power unmasked the vicious face of poverty in the north, reflecting decades of abysmal leadership by Hausa-Fulani political elites. Boko Haram's messianic messages gained resonance with these youths and their insertion into the political disputes of northeast politicians gave immense visibility, credibility, and legitimacy to the sect, at least initially. The linking of the dismal political legacy of Hausa-Fulani political elite with the shifting of national political power

to the south continues to help Boko Haram's recruiting, especially when a connection is made between the shifting of power and the presumed renewed cultural hegemony of the West.

Finally, Boko Haram's recruiting has been helped significantly by the linear (of brutal Boko Haram action followed by equally or brutal state response) reaction of Nigeria's military. Beginning with the extra-Judicial murder of Mohammed Yusuf by the police, Nigeria's security forces have attempted to use characteristic force and brutality to suppress the insurgency, resulting in the arrest and execution of thousands of possibly innocent Muslims in northern Nigeria. The use of force has historically been the state's response to all political challenges, which has often inspired greater resistance by the targets of the state's violence. In this instance, the aggressive reaction of the state has reinforced Boko Haram's messaging that it is fighting against governmental impunity, including the vicious impunity of security forces that act on the orders of the Christian-led state in alliance with the West to commit genocide against genuine northern Muslims. The government's use of force coupled with robust Boko Haram messaging helps the group recruit new fighters, including foreigners incentivized by ideological connections and the opportunity to gain materially and spiritually (i.e. 72 virgins in aljanna) from the conflict. Boko Haram has also used young boys and girls kidnapped and brainwashed by the group to carry out operations across the north east and north west.

Unlike Boko Haram that had to recruit from a mass of unsophisticated, illiterate, and disenfranchised publics, which it subsequently trains to do damage, Niger Delta militias recruit from a steady pool of pseudo-fighters that are members of cult-gangs in their regions. These cult-gangs performed the initial training functions, including training in the psychology of warfare, covert operations, weapons training, and the logics of engagements as well as techniques to neutralize resistance by local communities (including family and friends) and the state. This means that Niger Delta militias have a more structured, discriminatory recruitment strategy and process than Boko Haram based on the prioritization of relations with existing cult-gangs. The cult-gangs give spiritual and ideological signification to the militias and also provide other functions for the militias including recruiting, training, and meaning construction. Rather than recruiting from the general public, Niger Delta militias recruited solely from cult-gangs. This situation may be likened to a revolving door, which opens from cult-gangs to militias and back to cult-gangs. Thus, a primary criterion for joining a Niger Delta militia is membership of a secret cult or cult-gang in the region.

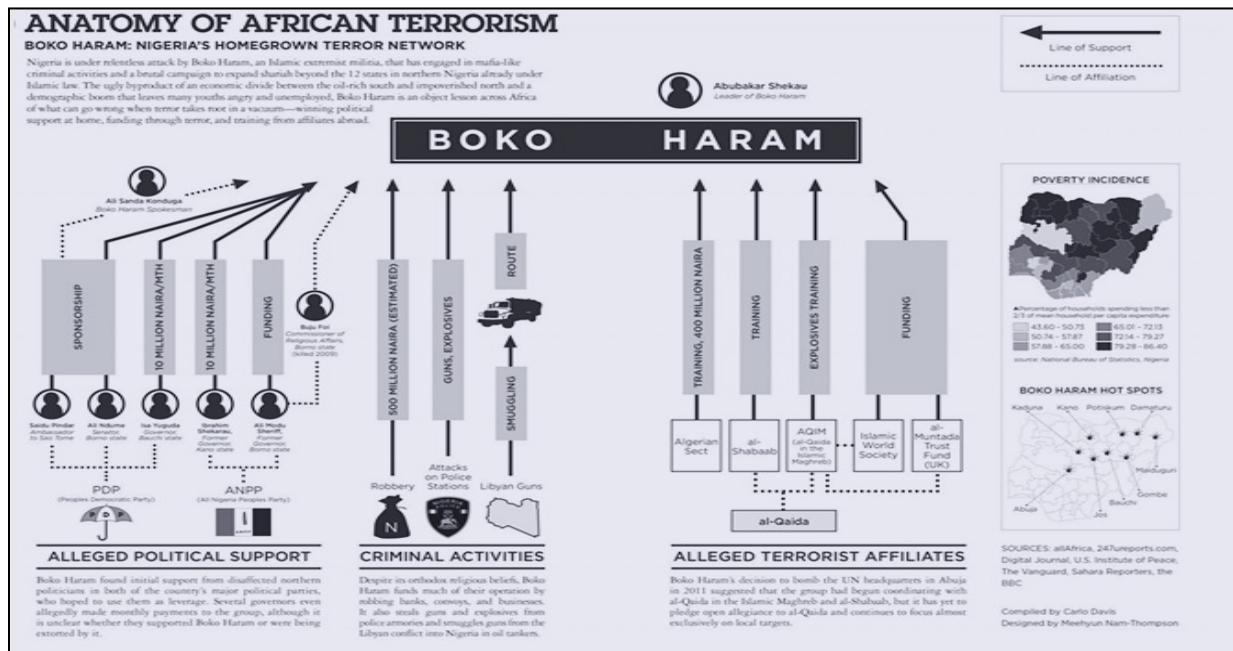
This difference in recruiting strategies, processes, and logics of Boko Haram and Niger Delta militias is significant, especially because it is informed by and determines how their campaigns are waged, the nature of the insurgencies, the targets, and how the groups are funded. The approach to recruitment also affects how government reacts to the insurgencies and the response of the groups to the government's counter-insurgency operations. For instance, the government was able to implement its Amnesty Program in the Niger Delta because of the relatively homogenous structures of the militias, which generally follows patterns established by their supporting cult-gangs. This fairly hierarchical system enabled the state to open negotiations with

leaders of the cult-gangs some of whom had close relations with the political state. This strategy cannot work with Boko Haram, which has a more unstructured recruitment approach where any member of the public including Christian converts may be recruited as fighters.

### Funding

Boko Haram’s funding continues to be the subject of great debate in Nigeria and in the West. Experts believe that one way to defeat the group is by identifying and cutting off their funding sources. Unfortunately, there is too little information about these sources to warrant the type of concerted global effort that can be effective in blocking or cutting off funding to the group. Apart from this, Boko Haram appears to have perfected the informal movement of large amounts of money, which makes detection doubly difficult. In line with its rejection of formal Western education, it appears to also reject formal banking channels and procedures, preferring informal mechanisms for receiving, transporting, and storing funds used to finance its operations.

Figure 1: Boko Haram’s Funding Network. Source: Davis, C. 2012. “Boko Haram: Africa’s Homegrown Terror Network.” *World Policy Journal Blog* [last accessed on 15 April, 2014]. Available from: <http://www.worldpolicy.org/journal/winter2012/anatomy>.



Despite this, experts believe that Boko Haram gets its funds from diverse sources such as influential politicians (including state governments who are forced to make periodic payments to the group from security votes that are typically not accounted for), clandestine criminal activities (including kidnapping for ransom, intimidation of influential people in northern Nigeria, armed robbery, and drug and human trafficking), and from international jihadist/Islamist organizations including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (see figure 1). Since 2012, several influential politicians in northern Nigeria have been fingered for their roles in providing financial support for the group. For instance, Senator Ali Ndume was arrested for his links to the group and former

governor Ali Modu Sheriff has been consistently mentioned as a founder and benefactor of the group. In 2012, it emerged that several northern state governments, including the government of Kano State had been making monthly payments in millions of Naira to the group in order to forestall attacks on their states.

In contrast, Niger Delta militias appear to get most of their funds from crude oil theft. Since 2003, Niger Delta militias have stepped up the theft of crude, which typically results in pollution of the environment. Stolen crude are either refined locally (and sold in local markets such as the “Asari fuel” as the refined stolen crude of the militia leader Asari Dokubo was called in Port Harcourt), or they are sold to markets in Europe and Asia through unscrupulous foreign businessmen. Also, politicians in the region who want to preserve their political position and influence as well as those who want to unseat them have paid Niger Delta militias to support them. For instance, political patronage from Governor Peter Odili of River State helped to create the first sets of militants and militias in the Niger Delta. Since 2003, election cycles have proven to be lucrative periods for militias as they typically morph into the election infrastructure of political parties and their leaders. With the help of militias, politicians obtain fraudulent victories with which they exploit legitimate and illegitimate opportunities that open from oil extraction. This means that crude oil theft is central both to the operations of militias and the political aspirations of politicians and their political parties in the Niger Delta. Finally, Niger Delta militias continue to receive money from clandestine operations including kidnapping for ransom and armed robbery. In fact, many of the smaller militias initially finance their operations through criminal activities before they gain sufficient legitimacy to be imbedded into political infrastructures or gain territories for crude oil bunkering.

### *Target*

Boko Haram has always been antagonistic to the state and officials of government. In fact, this was the basis of its initial organizing, to rail against the government, especially the pervasive corruption in government, which had led to capital flight and the concomitant decay of social infrastructure. Because of official corruption, public services were unavailable and millions of northern Muslims were unemployed and poor and lack access to social, economic, and political resources. The corruption in government had also corrupted social manners, producing dramatic rise in social decadence, including prostitution, alcoholism, drug addiction, and criminality. Its masterful linking of social-economic conditions to the Christian-led state, which it believes is aligned with the West to undermine the interest of northern Muslims, Boko Haram was able to win the support of a large mass of unemployed, poor, frustrated, and angry people. This means that its early targets were politicians opposed to the re-election of Governor Modu Sheriff (during the 2003 elections, it considered all who oppose Sheriff as apostate). When Sheriff won re-election, he rewarded Boko Haram’s support during the elections by appointing a senior member of the group, Alhaji Boji Foi as commissioner for religious affairs.

After the skirmish with law enforcement that resulted in the killing of Mohammed Yusuf and about 800 of his supporters, Boko Haram's target became law enforcement and non-Muslim populations. During the first 10 months of the reincarnation of the group, it attacked churches and police stations, killing hundreds of people in the process. However, due mainly to the reaction of law enforcement and the military, Boko Haram has been unable to recruit major support from non-Kanuri populations in the north, especially the Hausa-Fulani. In reprisal, it has labeled Muslims who do not support its cause as apostate and infidel and consequently has adopted the strategy of indiscriminate attack, which has resulted in the death of more northern Muslims than Christians. The group justifies its broadening of potential targets through indiscriminate targeting by claiming that genuine Muslims who die from its attacks will go to heaven and be rewarded with 72 virgins while apostate Muslims will go to hell.

Niger Delta militias, in contrast, focus their attacks on specific targets, which may vary according to the specific circumstance. When it has focused on disrupting oil production, it has targeted oil workers, especially expatriates, as well as oil assets including oil pipelines and other oil storage facilities. During elections, their targets are the opponents of their principals, which often has pitted one militia against another. For instance, the majority of casualties during the 2003 and 2007 election violence in the Niger Delta were members of militias. When militias have been threatened by law enforcement, it has responded with targeted attacks against law enforcement. In some instances, police and army officers responding to violence in the region have been ambushed and killed. Also, when militias have attempted to steal crude oil or money from banks, workers and security personnel who provide protection for these workers have been targeted. In essence, unlike Boko Haram that targets a much larger population, the targets of Niger Delta militias are smaller and more specific. However, Niger Delta militias, especially MEND have been known to at times indiscriminately target civilian populations. For instance, on 1 October 2010, MEND detonated two large vehicle borne explosive devices at Eagle Square Abuja, venue of the yearly federal government's independence day celebration. Scores of people were killed in that attack, which appeared to have been designed to shock and awe the government. Similarly, MEND detonated two bombs that killed several people during a retreat organized by the Delta State government to discuss solutions for the Niger Delta insurgency.

### *Operations*

Until it developed into a franchise system in 2012, Boko Haram was a monolith with a central command system revolving around a 30-member shura council. This council headed by an Imam, Abubakar Shekau, took all of the meaningful decisions regarding the operations of the group. However, that structure changed dramatically with the unleashing of targeted counter-insurgency operations against the group by the Nigerian government with active support from Western allies including the United States. To counter the massive coalition against it, Boko Haram connected with terror groups operating in the Sahel-Savannah region including AQIM, resulting in a dramatic change in its strategy. One of the direct fallouts is the franchization of the group with new franchises such as ANSARU emerging and claiming legitimacy outside of Boko



Haram. The change in operations, which has been misconstrued as evidence of internal turmoil within Boko Haram, means that Boko Haram may have adapted a cell structure that allows groups with similar ideological leanings to operate relatively independently of the group, although they still maintain sufficient ideological and tactical linkages to allow for routine joint operations when the need arises.

One advantage of this structure for Boko Haram is that it has confused efforts by Nigeria's security forces to thwart their operations. Since it adopted this strategy, the government's response has been largely inchoate with numerous blunders being recorded almost daily. One area in which this structure has had maximum effect is in its messaging. Boko Haram has been able to frame its movement as messianic, effectively linking existential and spiritual or ideological conditions in ways that buys it crucial support from a small but important segment of northern society at the same time that it tries to expose the hypocrisy of the Nigerian government and its band of thieving leaders. To the extent that most of the existential conditions that Boko Haram rail against including corruption in government, apparent southern political, social, and economic domination, and the parlous condition of northern communities exists, Boko Haram continues to gain an edge over the Nigerian government despite citizen revulsion at the extreme brutality of the group. In fact, the group's brutality is evenly matched by brutal state response that has Nigerians and Nigeria's Western allies confused and upset. For instance, recent Amnesty International reports suggest that Nigeria's security forces are using some of Boko Haram's strategy including the slitting of throats of suspected Boko Haram members and the use of torture on an unprecedented scale.

Most importantly however, Boko Haram has an underlying interest in claiming and maintaining territory and sacking the political and traditional/religious authority in northern Nigeria. In one of his videos, Abubakar Shekau announced the creation of an Islamic Caliphate with headquarters in Gworza, Borno State, that is part of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. In many of its recent operations, Boko Haram has captured Nigerian towns and installed its black flags in those towns signaling that they have become autonomous Boko Haram territories. In some instances, it has either killed or removed local emirs and replaced them with new ones appointed by the group.

The above is in stark contrast to the operational bent of Niger Delta militias. Due principally to the operational structure of the cult-gangs from which they emerged and continue to receive spiritual, ideological, and operational support from, which typically is based in secrecy (hence they are also referred to as secret societies), Niger Delta militias have no intention of claiming territories but to make the governance of those territories impossible unless its demands are met. Thus, unlike Boko Haram that has no real demand except the complete sacking of the government and their replacement with an Islamic regime governed strictly in accordance with the Koran, Niger Delta militias routinely make demands on the state that requires resolution within the established framework of the state. For instance, when it has called attention to pollutions caused by daily spills, it has requested the state to act responsibly to bring oil companies to account and to take steps to ameliorate the conditions. This means that Niger Delta

militias have been restricted to clandestine, guerilla-like operations against the state-oil company alliance, which are often commingled with high-level propaganda against the alliance. This has won Niger Delta militias critical support from Western countries who continue to act not only to bring oil companies to account but also to help ameliorate conditions in the delta.

In terms of the actual operations, Niger Delta militias, especially since the emergence of MEND, have operated based on a cell structure. Each militant group maintains a certain level of independence although each is subject to the rules established by the larger MEND, which exist as the umbrella association of over 100 militias in the delta area. While each group may claim particular territory, they must respect the territorial integrity of other militias and may not operate within those territories. In fact, MEND emerged partly to end the frequent acrimonious squabbles for territory between rival militias in the region.