# The Threat of Boko Haram

This essay discusses the evolving nature of the threat posed by Boko Haram between 2011 and 2018. It first introduces the group's origins and ideologies. Then, the analysis is divided into three sections, each representing a different phase of the insurgency—overt front, covert front, and recruitment. Although this essay sections these threats, they do not happen in isolation; Boko Haram employs them simultaneously. The essay uses a realist framework to examine the threat to state security by examining the effect of the insurgency on Nigeria and surrounding states. It examines the threat to human security by addressing the effects on individuals and women, using scholarship from security studies and feminist theories.

This essay uses two seemingly opposing theoretical frameworks—feminism and realism—to show that Boko Haram poses a hybrid threat. Hybrid threats employ a "full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder" (Hoffman 2007, 8). This essay will demonstrate Boko Haram's hybridity, flexibility, and antifragility, or the 'positive sensitivity' to environmental pressure (Omeni 2021). The actor does not capitulate under pressure, nor is it merely resilient against external stressors, but it thrives under pressure and even requires it to expand (Omeni 2021, 143). This essay would argue that Boko Haram poses a strong and enduring threat because it is a hybrid and antifragile actor with a willingness and ability to adapt tactically and strategically.

## Boko Haram

Boko Haram, originally known as Jama'a Ahl as-Sunna Lida'wa wa-al-Jihad—People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad—was founded in 2002 by

Mohammed Yusuf as a religious complex and prayer assembly in Maiduguri (Forest 2012, 62; Kulungu 2019). As an offshoot of the Salafi movement, it sought stricter adherence to Sharia law in Nigeria (Felter 2018; Forest 2012, 62). Its three core objectives are the opposition to Western education and influence, the rejection of the Nigerian political system, and the creation of an Islamic State (Azumah 2014). Initially, the group was peaceful, but on June 11, 2009, members clashed with the police for disobeying motorcycle helmet laws, leading to its first violent encounter where 17 of its members were shot (Forest 2012, 63; Kulungu 2019). In retaliation, Boko Haram attacked police headquarters, primary schools, prisons, and churches, leading to 800 deaths, including Yusuf's assassination (Forest 2012, 64). Yusuf's deputy, Abubakar Shekau succeeded him as the group's leader (Regens 2016, 45). Under Shekau, the group has become more violent and radical since 2011, posing a more serious threat to Nigeria, the region, and its people (Glazzard et al 2018, 49; Regens 2016, 45). Shekau is less willing to negotiate with the Nigerian government and is more ruthless against innocent civilians (Kulungu 2019).

**The Overt Front**

Within realism, the state is the primary actor and level of analysis in need of security (Mearsheimer 2013, 51; Waltz 1979). Max Weber argues that states maintain "the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory" (Weber 1978, 54). A state's security rests on its ability to control its territory, population, government, and legitimacy (Weber 1978). Although realism concentrates on wars between states, not non-state actors, Mary Kaldor presented the concept of 'new wars' in contrast to this traditional conception of war (1999, 1). Clausewitz conceived of war as "an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will" (Clausewitz 1976). Kaldor points out that this statement assumes 'we' as states in the

European model (1999, 17). She argues that 'new wars', unlike 'old wars', involve a network of state and non-state actors (Kaldor 1999). An insurgency, or an "armed uprising or rebellion against a government", challenges and threatens state security (Brown et al 2018).

In realist terms, Boko Haram posed a threat to Nigeria through military confrontation and territorial aspirations. Between 2013 and 2015, Boko Haram's military capabilities supplanted guerrilla operations as the main security threat (Omeni 2018b, 886). Its standing army is comprised of primarily able-bodied military-aged males with rudimentary training in soldering and infantry tactics (Omeni 2018b, 888). In February of 2015, U.S. intelligence officials estimated that Boko Haram had 4,000-6,000 'hardcore' fighters, but other analysts have cited three times that estimate (Felter 2018; Hosenball 2015). In July 2014, Boko Haram seized territory and established a caliphate in Gwoza (Aghedo 2015, 515). Boko Haram engaged in a direct and sustained confrontation with the state, capturing several towns and villages across northeast Nigeria (Aghedo 2015, 516). By early January 2015, they had captured around 20,000 square miles of land with a population of 1.7 million people and controlled at least 15 local government areas in Nigeria (Aghedo 2015, 516; Blair 2015, Kulungu 2019). Boko Haram posed a security threat to the Nigerian government who no longer held the monopoly of force of that territory, its government, and its population. By making the Nigerian government and Army appear ineffective and easily conquered, Boko Haram undermined the state's authority and ability to maintain control.

In addition to state security, Boko Haram also posed a tangible and symbolic threat to civilians. Scholars in the early 1990s developed the concept of human security, shifting the focus away from national security (Nnam et al 2020, 1260). Whereas national security protects states from external and internal threats to sovereignty, human security protects individuals from

military and nontraditional threats, including food scarcity, poverty, and lack of education (Nnam et al 2020, 1260; Sempijia and Mongale 2020, 427). This phase of military confrontation threatened human security by accentuating the existent refugee crises. As an example, Boko Haram seized Mubi, the second-largest city in the Adamawa State in October 2014 (Aghedo 2015, 516). Although they promised the safety of its inhabitants, the seizure internally displaced 13,000 people (Aghedo 2015, 516). This displaced population creates a refugee problem both for Nigeria and the surrounding states where they seek asylum (Nnam et al 2020, 1258). This expulsion further undermines the state's authority and ability to protect its citizens, while also leaving thousands of people without homes and necessary resources.

In response to this overt front, the Nigerian Army launched campaigns to regain the territory, and Boko Haram's military threat was short-lived. By April 2015, Boko Haram lost 90% of the territory and large numbers of fighters, platforms, and equipment (Omeni 2018a). At the heart of its threat was the ability to operate on two fronts (Omeni 2019, 130). As an antifragile group, when Boko Haram could no longer sustain its threat to state security through military confrontation and territory gains, it adjusted. Although Boko Haram had never stopped its covert front, it returned to guerrilla warfare as its primary front, so it could employ its tactical advantage.

**The Covert Front**

Although the overt front was segregated to a finite period, Boko Haram has continually employed its covert front. This guerrilla warfare consists of bombings, kidnappings, prison breaks, market raids, and terrorism (Omeni 2018b, 887). Terrorism has several definitions, but it can be understood as "the use of violence or the threat of violence against civilians to achieve a

political purpose and have psychological effect" (English 2009, 9). Non-state actors employ violence against civilians to undermine governments and make political statements; they also use terrorism as a tactic to gain legitimacy and provoke over-reactive responses from the state (Kaldor 1999; Neumann and Smith 2005). This new logic of violence redresses the asymmetry of war between states and non-state actors, allowing insurgencies to pose a threat despite inferior military capabilities (Omeni 2018a, 11; Sempija and Mongale 2020, 424). Suicide bombing is commonly used because it is low cost, low risk, and requires little technology; bombers are readily available and require little training (Okoli and Azom 2019, 1216; Omeni 2018a, 11). Suicide bombing sends symbolic messages to diverse audiences, kills civilians, and asserts power over governments and communities (Okoli and Azom 2019, 1216). It allows insurgents to "circumvent an asymmetrical weakness by using members of the group themselves as part of the delivery mechanism" (Horowitz 2010, 33). This threat is more dangerous and difficult to counter because regular armies cannot and do not employ suicide bombings (Omeni 2018b, 907).

As guerilla fighters, Boko Haram can penetrate Nigerian Army, security, and government locations (Omeni 2018a, 4). As an example, in 2011, Boko Haram bombed the Nigerian Police Force headquarters and the United Nations building in Abuja (Omeni 2018a, 4). Not only were these buildings far from Boko Haram's comfort area, but they are symbols of the Nigerian government and international institutions (Omeni 2018a, 4). These attacks not only damaged physical buildings and bodies but also the institutions they represent. This attack undermined the Nigerian government, which could not defend itself or prevent the attack. This guerrilla warfare removed the asymmetry between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government and enabled Boko Haram to attack and undermine the political entity it seeks to remove. Guerilla

warfare and terrorism exploit human security to undermine state authority, by showing the state's inability to protect its civilians.

In the face of external pressures, Boko Haram shows not only resistance but antifragility. At the beginning of its violent guerrilla campaigns in 2011, the attacks were virtually always successful because the Nigerian government had no established resilience against this threat (Omeni 2018a, 12). Since 2011, the Nigerian government has established two new Army divisions specifically to combat Boko Haram (Blair 2015; Ogbogu 2015, 18; Omeni 2019). There have been increased instances of failed attempts although reporting on failed attempts is limited (Adeoye 2012; Regens et al 2016, 45). Boko Haram, however, not only continued to exist but thrived from this resistance. Regens et al analyzed 1,086 successful attacks between July 2009 and December 2014 to track their pace and frequency (Regens et al 2016). Although not linear, the number of attacks each month increased over time, showing Boko Haram's increasing operational tempo and ability to sustain its guerrilla campaign (Regens et al 2016, 46). This increase suggests that Boko Haram is not only resistant to the Nigerian counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations, but it is antifragile.

These guerrilla tactics, also threaten human security. Boko Haram's casualties-per-attack ratio far exceeds other terrorist groups, including Daesh (Omeni 2018a, 4). Although Daesh has 2.5 times the number of attacks as Boko Haram, it was responsible for considerably fewer casualties (Omeni 2018a, 4). Boko Haram's terrorist campaigns also threaten human security by creating a refugee crisis. As of 2015, more than 1 million people were displaced within Nigeria, and at least 168,000 people had fled to neighboring countries; as of 2016, 7 million needed immediate humanitarian assistance (Buratai 2016; UNHCR). Boko Haram has also attacked farmers and used farmlands as hideouts, straining agricultural production and transportation

(Nnam et al 2020, 1270). In 2016, an estimated 5 million people faced food insecurity (Buratai 2016). Guerrilla warfare is not only a threat to state security, but it is also a hybrid threat that attacks multiple facets of society.

Another framework for understanding the nature of Boko Haram's threat is gender. Traditional assumptions of 'national security' favor the protection of the state over its citizens (Marhia 2013, 19). War is gendered, and women disproportionately experience gender-based violence (Brisolara 2003, 27; Puechguirbal 2012, 4). Historically, sexual violence was seen as a 'spoil' of war, but recently feminist scholars have unpacked its strategic and symbolic power (Seifert 1996, 35).

Boko Haram exploits gender for tactical advantages. On June 8, 2014, Boko Haram committed its first recorded female suicide bombing, and since then, they have disproportionately relied on female suicide bombers (Okali and Azom 2019, 1222-1223). Whereas the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka used 46 women over 10 years, between 2014 and 2017 alone, Boko Haram used 244 women as suicide bombers (Bloom and Matfess 2016, 105; Warner and Matfess 2017, 31). Boko Haram straps IEDs onto females and conceals them with veil coverings (Omeni 2018a, 16). Male guards are prohibited from interacting inappropriately with females, and women are considered less suspicious perpetrators because they are perceived as pacifists (Okali and Azom 2019, 1220; Omeni 2018a, 14). Using women enhances the 'shock value', maximizes publicity and propaganda, and evokes emotional responses vital to campaigns of fear (Okoli and Azom 2019, 1219).

In addition to tactical advantages, Boko Haram also uses female bodies to convey symbolic threats. Violence against women is intended to humiliate and degrade (Seifert 1992; Seifert, 1996). Abducting girls and using or selling them as slaves projects Boko Haram's power

and demonstrates its capacity to intimidate and degrade the civilian population (Bloom and Matfess 2016, 114). Claiming female bodies through suicide bombings, sexual violence, and abductions also parallels territorial ambition. Shelby Ward examined sexual violence in the Sri Lankan Civil War as a form of nation-building (Ward, 2019). She claimed that the Sir Lankan government raped Tamils as a form of staking territory and building a nation on the claimed areas (Ward 2019, 171). As an insurgent group, Boko Haram seeks control of the Nigerian state and its population. The first female suicide bomber in June 2014 aligned with its phase of military confrontation to claim territory and establish a caliphate. Using female bodies for guerrilla warfare enhances the tactical advantages of guerilla warfare and the strategic objective of creating fear and instability. It also symbolically carves out territory to establish its caliphate. When Boko Haram experienced military defeats in its ambitions for territory, it used the external pressure to adapt and enhance its physical and symbolic threat. Boko Haram did not just resort to guerrilla warfare, but it strengthened its effectiveness by employing female suicide bombers.

**Recruitment**

Boko Haram's recruitment also threatens state and human security. Boko Haram's ideology has resonated with an increasing group of young men in northeast Nigeria (Forest 2012, 72). Religious conflicts need not be about religion (Seul 1999, 553). Boko Haram exploits existing socioeconomic and political grievances (Agbiboa 2013, 147; Forest 2012, 72; Nnam et al 2020, 1262). In Northern Nigeria, poverty, unemployment, and lack of education are higher than in the rest of the state, and in the Borno State, 72% of children aged 1-16 have never attended school (Forest 2012, 73). There is corruption of the political and wealthy elite with a history of dictatorships and political oppression (Forest 2012, 73). This poverty and inequality

disproportionately affect Muslims and the Kanui population, the predominant ethnic group in

Borno (Felter 2018). Boko Haram exploits these conditions by constructing and reproducing a

victim narrative of the Kanuri and Muslim community's marginalization (Kulungu 2019). This

victimhood assumes the state as the main perpetrator of 'true' Muslims and the major obstacle to

'true' Islamic reform (Thurston 2011, 1). This narrative not only increases Boko Haram's

numbers and public support but also undermines the state and its legitimacy. Boko Haram's

flexibility of ideology widens the potential for support and positions itself as an alternative to the

'oppressive' Nigerian government. The use of terrorism, however, has lost a lot of local support

because of the displacement, deaths, and destruction of lives (Omeni 2018a, 9). Boko Haram,

however, is not the only side of the insurgency to abuse women and civilians. Some

counterinsurgency and military forces also commit human rights abuses in the name of

preserving law and order (Idris and Tutumlu 2021, 10; Nnam et al 1272). This violence

undermines the legitimacy of the security forces as they create the same insecurity as the

insurgent group.

   As its popularity declined, Boko Haram did not capitulate; it adapted and strengthened

itself. Boko Haram commonly conducts prison breaks to free men who become fighters

(Kulungu 2019). For example, on May 7, 2013, they attacked a police station in Bama, freeing

105 prisoners (Pereira 2018, 253). Women are more likely to be forced into conscription because

of gendered power dynamics (Sempijja and Mongale 2020, 427). Their participation is

conditioned by the roles played by males in their lives (Pereira 2018, 259). They serve non-

operational purposes such as cooking and raising children born to male fighters (Sempijja and

Mongael 2020, 427). Also, they are more effective and novel suicide bombers and fighters,

adding to the necessary fear and shock factor of terrorism. In April 2014, Boko Haram abducted

276 schoolgirls from the Federal Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok (Pereira 2018, 253; Sempijja and Mongale 2020, 425). Shekau claimed he would sell the girls as slaves (Smith 2015). This incident received significant international attention, elevating the status of Boko Haram's threat (Regens et al 2016, 51). Boko Haram recognized and exploited the tactical and strategic implications of female fighters and members. Many women abducted by Boko Haram are 'married' to fighters or sold as sex slaves (Bloom and Matfess 2016, 108). The subjection of sexual violence builds group cohesion and fosters comradery, necessary components when relying on forced conscription (Bloom and Matfess 2016, 108). Women are desirable because of their tactical advantage in guerrilla warfare and their value to incentivize recruitment.

Considering all women as forced recruits, however, strips the agency of those who willingly join. Not all women are powerless; some women persuaded their husbands and others to join Boko Haram (Pererira 2018, 259). When given the choice to leave, some women decide to stay with the insurgency (Omeni 2019, 125). Many women do not see an alternative; they suffer from Stockholm syndrome—an emotional dependence on captors (Omeni 2019, 125). Many women are impregnated by Boko Haram fighters and viewed with suspicion if they try to reintegrate into the community (Pereira 2018, 260). Regardless of willingness, Boko Haram exploits female bodies for tactical and strategic advantages in its search to find new and more potent threats against the state and civilians. Boko Haram shows its ability to adapt ideology and tactics when faced with external pressures. When it received international backlash for adducting girls and abusing women, it recognized the shock and outrage it created and exploited it by using female suicide bombers and fighters to enhance its threat.

**Conclusions**

From 2011 to 2018, Boko Haram has shown its ability and willingness to adapt and thrive when pressured by the Nigerian government and declining local support. Initially, Boko Haram exploited religious, ethnic, and socio-economic grievances to undermine the government, gain support, and propose itself as an alternative to the current government. When it started losing local support, it shifted toward forced recruitment and adjusted its tactics to support this change. After years of creating instability, Boko Haram threatened the Nigerian state through military confrontation and territorial seizures. Although this threat was short-lived, Boko Haram was not deterred or defeated. Boko Haram innovated and strengthened its guerrilla warfare and terrorist tactics by exploiting individuals, especially women. Despite increases in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations, the Nigerian Army has not eliminated Boko Haram's threat because of its hybridity and antifragility. In turn, the Nigerian Army must also become more flexible and antifragile against Boko Haram to undermine its legitimacy and dismantle it.

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