

Boko Haram and the Politics of Terror in Nigeria

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The heinous abduction of 276 girls from a boarding school in the village of Chibok in the north eastern part of Nigeria on the 14th of April 2014 falls into a pattern of hideous terror unleashed by the Boko Haram in Nigeria, north Cameroon and Niger for a few years now.

Boko Haram's terror, it is estimated, has resulted in about 10,000 deaths. Both Muslims and Christians, clerics and non-clerics, Nigerians and non-Nigerians, have been the victims. Police stations, government offices, schools, mosques, churches, and tourist sites frequented by Westerners have been attacked at various times.

Through acts of violence, Boko Haram, founded in 2002, seeks to oust the Nigerian government and replace it with an "Islamic State" based upon the sharia. Eliminating Western education in particular and a secular way of life in general is central to its notion of an Islamic state. It subscribes to a myopic interpretation of sharia with the emphasis upon harsh, punitive laws. Many of its rules keep women subservient to male power. Those who do not adhere to its notion of the sharia are categorised as "apostates" who deserve to be put to death. In that sense, Boko Haram is very much a Takfiri movement — a movement which easily condemns fellow Muslims as apostates.

A number of leading ulama (Islamic religious scholars) in Nigeria and West Africa have criticised Boko Haram for not only resorting to violence but also for its bigotry and dogmatism. Its attempts to coerce Christians to embrace Islam and to force what are perceived as secular schools to close down have earned the ire of a lot of the ulama and Muslims who constitute half of Nigeria's total population.

They rightly regard Boko Haram as a movement that has shamelessly betrayed Islamic teachings. Indeed, some Muslims inside and outside Nigeria have even begun to wonder if Boko Haram isn't the creation of forces that are determined to tarnish the image of the religion! It is alleged that it is funded by foreign elements though Boko Haram is also known to have staged bank robberies and the like to finance its operations.

From its criminal activities it is obvious that the movement is not just about a distorted, perverted interpretation of religion. Boko Haram is essentially about the pursuit for power. Like many other groups, both Muslim and non-Muslim in various parts of the world, it has consciously chosen to manipulate religious emotions as it lusts for power and the glory that accompanies it.

However, if Boko Haram continues to command a constituency, it is partly because of the larger situation prevailing in the country. Nigeria is one of the most unequal societies in the world with an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor. There is also massive corruption at all levels of society. A weak delivery system has increased the burden of the people. All this has fuelled anger and disillusionment with the State. As a movement fighting

the State, Boko Haram has been able to tap into some of that frustration.

The global environment has also abetted Boko Haram. The unending suffering of the Palestinian people at the hands of Israel, an intimate ally of the United States; the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and the massacre and torture of innocent civilians; and the alienation and humiliation of Muslims in many Western countries post 9-11, have helped to reinforce the anti-Western sentiments of groups like Boko Haram. These episodes and trends provide justification for militants who try to avenge injustices and indignities perpetrated against Muslims through their own acts of terror. In recent months, the presence of French soldiers in Mali and the Central African Republic has given Boko Haram yet another reason to ventilate its hostility towards the West.

In this regard, there are Muslims who ask why Western elites are so concerned about the kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls now when just two decades ago, Washington had imposed sanctions upon Iraq that killed some 650,000 children and when hundreds of deformed babies — the tragic victims of depleted uranium from US military operations — continue to be born in that blighted land to this today? What this shows is that a selective approach to issues of justice in the global arena and the stark double standards of the powerful undermine the battle against violence and terrorism.

It is further undermined by the material and political support that the centres of power in the West and in other parts of the world sometimes offer to certain terrorist outfits — in spite of their rhetoric against terrorism. This had happened in Libya in 2011 and is happening now in Syria on a much more extensive and systematic scale. It is this hypocrisy that has compelled analysts to conclude that there are good terrorists and bad terrorists, the former being those who are useful tools in the perpetuation of Western hegemony while the latter are those who oppose that hegemony!

Given this scenario, how does one address the terrorism of Boko Haram and other such groups?

One, it is the responsibility of everyone — governments, businesses, unions, civil society organisations, media, professionals, academics — to work towards a just and equitable international order where no nation or cluster of nations exercises global hegemonic power that can only be sustained through violence which in turn begets violence from terrorist outfits.

Two, elites in power and with influence at the state level everywhere should ensure that there is good, honest governance. For elite corruption as we have seen in so many countries, is grist to the mill for groups that seek to remedy the situation through violence.

Three, hidden hands that manipulate terrorist groups for their own nefarious agenda at national, regional and international levels should be exposed without fear or favour. This is where the media has a critical role to play.

Four, the sources of funding of terrorist groups at different levels should be laid bare through more effective intelligence gathering and exchange. There should be no tolerance for attempts to conceal or camouflage terrorist funding, even if it involves the powerful.

Five, Muslim intellectuals committed to the universal, inclusive message of Islam should join hands across continents to counter the narrow, bigoted, dogmatic distortions of the

purveyors of violence and terror within the ummah. In fact, there should be similar movements within all the other religious communities too, since bigotry and dogmatism often spawning violence is a challenge that has emerged in all religious communities in the 21st century.

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