BOKO HARAM, TERRORISM, AND THE CHURCH IN NORTHERN NIGERIA (1999–2015)

Professor Ifeyinwa Henrietta EMEJULU
Dept. of History & International Studies,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.
Phone number: +234 803 342 0322
Email: drifyemejulu@yahoo.com
&
Uchenna Kelechi IWUOZO
Doctoral Student
Dept. of History & International Studies,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.
Phone number: +234 805 212 4383, +234 806 294 6012
Email: iwuchekel@gmail.com, revucheiwuozo@gmail.com

Abstract
This study examines the emergence of Boko Haram as a terrorist movement and its impact on the Christian Church and broader Nigerian society between 1999 and 2015. It argues that Boko Haram's evolution from a local religious sect into a full-scale insurgency was facilitated by structural weaknesses such as poverty, corruption, political exclusion, and the instrumentalization of religion. Drawing on documentary sources and existing scholarly literature, the paper analyses the social, economic, political, and religious consequences of terrorism on Christian communities in northern Nigeria. The study concludes that although Boko Haram has inflicted significant damage on religious institutions and national cohesion, the crisis is not insurmountable if addressed through coordinated security reforms, effective governance, and sustained interreligious engagement.
Keywords: Terrorism, The Church, Boko Haram

INTRODUCTION
The reintroduction of democratic governance in Nigeria in May 1999 raised widespread expectations of political stability, social development, and national cohesion. Instead, the period that followed witnessed the escalation of violent conflict, criminality, and religious extremism, culminating in the emergence of terrorism as a dominant security challenge. Since the early 2000s, Nigeria has experienced persistent waves of ethno-religious violence, particularly in its northern regions, resulting in mass casualties, displacement, and the destruction of social institutions.

Prior to the al-Qaeda terrorist September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, terrorism attracted limited scholarly and policy attention within Nigeria.[1] Onuoha notes that prior to 9/11, terrorism was not a major focus of Nigerian security policy or academic discourse, gaining prominence only after the global redefinition of terrorism following the September 11 attacks.[2] However, subsequent global developments and the intensification of domestic violence repositioned terrorism as a central concern in Nigeria's national security discourse. The implementation of Islamic law (Sharia) in twelve northern states between 1999 and 2000[3], the recurrent clashes between Christians and Muslims,[4] and politically charged religious controversies created fertile ground for extremist mobilization.[5]
Within this volatile environment, the Boko Haram movement emerged and gradually transformed from a local religious sect into one of Africa's most lethal terrorist organizations. Its campaign of violence—marked by suicide bombings, mass abductions, and systematic attacks on churches—has profoundly reshaped Nigeria's security landscape. This study examines the evolution of Boko Haram and analyzes the impact of its activities on the Christian church and Nigerian society between 1999 and 2015.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: TERRORISM AND THE CHURCH
Terrorism
The concept of terrorism resists a single universally accepted definition, largely because of its political and ideological implications. The term derives from the French *terrorisme*, originating during the French Revolution's Reign of Terror (1793–1794), and from the Latin *terreo*, meaning "to frighten."[6] Modern terrorism, however, extends beyond state violence to encompass non-state actors who employ systematic violence to coerce populations and governments.

The United States Department of Defense defines terrorism as "the calculated use of unlawful violence to inculcate fear, intended to coerce or intimidate governments or societies in pursuit of political, religious, or ideological

objectives."[7] Similarly, the Federal Bureau of Investigation describes terrorism as the unlawful use of force against persons or property to influence political or social outcomes.[8]

For the purpose of this study, terrorism is understood as the deliberate deployment of violence by individuals or groups—within or outside state authority—against civilians and institutions to advance perceived ideological, political, or religious goals. This definition closely reflects the operational patterns of Boko Haram.

The Church

In this study, "the church" refers not to a physical structure but to the collective community of Christian believers. The term derives from the Greek *ekklesia*, meaning "assembly" or "called-out people."[9] The church functions as both a spiritual institution and a socio-cultural actor, shaping moral values, social relations, and community resilience. Consequently, attacks on churches represent not merely physical destruction but assaults on social cohesion, identity, and collective stability.

BOKO HARAM: ORIGINS, IDEOLOGY, AND EVOLUTION

The group popularly known as *Boko Haram* formally identifies as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* ("People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad"). It emerged in 2002 in Maiduguri, Borno State, under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf.[10] While public perceptions of the movement vary— ranging from religious revivalism to political insurgency—there is broad scholarly consensus that Boko Haram represents a hybrid movement whose ideology fuses religious extremism, political grievance, and social frustration.[11]

Origins

Boko Haram arose within the context of widespread poverty, weak governance, youth unemployment, and the declining legitimacy of political institutions in northeastern Nigeria. Yusuf initially promoted a puritanical Salafist theology that rejected Western education, democratic governance, and Nigeria's secular constitutional framework, which the movement considered corrupt and un-Islamic.[12] The group's early strategy involved religious preaching, social welfare provision, and community mobilization, attracting large numbers of unemployed and marginalized youths.[13]

Although initially non-violent, tensions between the sect and state authorities intensified, culminating in the July 2009 uprising and the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf while in police custody.[14] This event marked a decisive turning point: the movement abandoned localized activism and reorganized under Abubakar Shekau into a clandestine insurgent organization committed to armed struggle.

Ideology and Doctrine

Boko Haram's ideological foundation is rooted in Salafi-Jihadism, emphasizing rigid scriptural literalism, rejection of Western modernity, and the necessity of violent jihad to establish an Islamic state.[15] The group employs the doctrine of *takfir*, permitting the excommunication and killing of Muslims who fail to conform to its interpretation of Islam.[16]

The movement views Nigeria's democratic system as incompatible with divine law and advocates the imposition of full Sharia governance. In interviews, Yusuf openly rejected democracy, Western science, and secular education, declaring them corrupting influences.[17] After Yusuf's death, Shekau radicalized the movement further, expanding targets to include Christians, moderate Muslims, traditional rulers, journalists, humanitarian workers, and state institutions.[18]

Evolution into a Transnational Insurgency

From 2010 onward, Boko Haram transitioned from sporadic violence to systematic terrorism. Major attacks that included the 2011 bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Abuja placed the group firmly on the global terrorism map.[19] By 2013–2014, Boko Haram had become the world's deadliest terrorist organization by casualty count, surpassing ISIS and Al-Qaeda.[20]

In 2015, the group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and rebranded as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), reflecting growing transnational ambitions.[21]

IMPACT OF TERRORISM ON THE NIGERIAN CHURCHES AND SOCIETY

The phenomenon of terrorism in Nigeria has grown in scale, sophistication, and audacity, assuming the character of a full-blown insurgency.[22] Boko Haram's operational pattern has shifted over time from spectacular, high-profile attacks with international implications—such as the suicide bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Abuja on 26 August 2011—to a sustained campaign of violence against Christian communities and renewed assaults on security agencies, particularly the police and army.[23]

A notable development has been the movement from largely indiscriminate or symbolic attacks to more intentional targeting of Christians. In 2012, Boko Haram's leader, Abubakar Shekau, declared to Christians that, "The religion of Christianity you are practicing is not a religion of God – it is paganism … We are trying to coerce you to embrace Islam, because that is what God instructed us to do."[24] In the wake of such rhetoric, the sect has repeatedly left behind trails of destruction, death, and kidnapping affecting Christians, but also Muslims, politicians, and traditional rulers. Since 2012, Boko Haram has orchestrated widespread violence against churches and Christian institutions, including the kidnapping of missionaries and cross-border attacks on Christian communities in Cameroon. In 2014, Catholic and Protestant congregations in northern Nigeria and border areas were forced to cancel Sunday services and major liturgical celebrations such as Christmas Eve and New Year vigils owing to surprise assaults and persistent threats. In some northern towns, churches were effectively closed when asymmetric violence peaked, while in Cameroon, Baptist churches near the Nigerian border were attacked and destroyed.[25] Many Christian families were stripped of property and displaced, as documented by reports such as those of World Watch Monitor.[26]

Boko Haram's extremism represents a grave violation of religious freedom as guaranteed by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. In parts of the North, especially the North-East, Christians have been effectively denied the core right to worship freely. Analysts generally distinguish three broad categories of attacks against Christians:

(i)   assaults on local Christian communities within Boko Haram's core operating areas and adjacent states (Borno, Yobe, Bauchi);
(ii)   major bombings and shootings targeting churches in Jos and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja; and
(iii)   operations directed against church and para-church personnel across the northern and Middle Belt regions.

Christians in the North have consequently experienced sustained violence against their lives, churches, and institutions.[27] While Boko Haram's targets are not exclusively Christian, the cumulative effect on Christian life and witness has been profound. Freedom to worship, evangelize, and engage in public Christian witness has been severely constrained, with negative implications for social cohesion and national development. Between 2013 and 2014, Boko Haram was reported to have caused approximately 8,239 deaths,[28] while a United Nations report estimates that some 1.4 million children have been displaced by the group's activities in Nigeria.[29] In some cases, abducted children have been used as instruments in suicide attacks. Such disregard for children's rights has contributed to Boko Haram's global notoriety.

For many Nigerian Christians, Boko Haram's violence is interpreted as a form of religious persecution. Historically, persecution has been a significant factor in both the spread and suppression of Christianity. In a context where religious identity is highly sensitive, contemporary developments evoke memories of earlier conflicts, such as the nineteenth-century jihad led by Uthman dan Fodio, after which Christians in the region have periodically faced marginalization and victimization. Against this backdrop, the impact of Boko Haram on Christians in northern Nigeria can be analyzed under social, economic, political, and religious dimensions.

Social Impacts
Terrorist violence has disrupted social life across large swathes of Nigeria's North.[30] Public gatherings, cultural events, and community activities have frequently been cancelled due to fear of attacks involving firearms, machetes, or explosives. In Boko Haram-affected areas, people move with constant apprehension. For example, the durbar festival in Kano was cancelled in 2012 because of heightened security concerns linked to Boko Haram. The insurgency has also had a direct impact on education. In the North-East, school attendance has plummeted as children and parents fear abduction, rape, or killing, contributing to some of the highest school dropout rates in the country in recent years. In terms of Christian communities specifically, the level of violence has been extreme, with hundreds of recorded cases of physical aggression, the destruction of nearly 300 churches, and the deaths of at least 612 Christians.[31]

Key social consequences for Christians include:
Deepened mutual distrust and suspicion between Christians and Muslims.
Disruption of public social and religious activities such as weddings, open-air crusades, and youth programmes.
Large-scale migration of Christians from northern to southern states in search of safety.
Heightened fear and anxiety, as churches and Christian gatherings are perceived as prime targets.
Widespread destruction of churches, homes, schools, and business premises, leaving many homeless and internally displaced.

Christians frequently identify the overcoming of mutual fear, hatred, and suspicion as one of their greatest social challenges in the aftermath of Boko Haram's attacks.

Economic Impacts

Churches in North-Eastern Nigeria have arguably suffered some of the most severe terrorist-related damage to Christian communities in contemporary African history.[32] Economic life in the region has been equally affected. Persistent violence deters investors, disrupts markets, and undermines livelihoods.[33] When human, material, and financial resources are diverted into sectarian violence or counter-insurgency, economic development is inevitably retarded.[34]

In practical terms, Boko Haram's activities have led to:

Significant decline in economic activities in the North-East.

Decreases in private investment and the flight of businesses from conflict-stricken areas.

Looting, destruction of commercial property, and disruption of trade routes.

Increased poverty, food insecurity, disease, and malnutrition, as farmers flee and agricultural production declines.

The cumulative economic impact has been to deepen existing regional disparities and to compound the structural conditions that often-feed further instability.

Political Impacts

Politically, the insurgency has exposed the fragility of law and order, particularly in northern Nigeria. The civil rights and basic liberties of citizens, as enshrined in the constitution, have been severely jeopardized.[35] Terrorist activities threaten the corporate existence, national unity, and integration of the Nigerian state.

Security agencies, in response, have frequently resorted to emergency measures—curfews, roadblocks, and aggressive policing—that, while intended to restore order, can also result in abuses. "The security agents stop people at will, restrict people's movement by the day and especially at night and kill anyone at the least suspicion."[36] In an ethnically and religiously sensitive polity, such dynamics can exacerbate political polarization and intensify mistrust between North and South, as well as between different communities within the North.[37]

Thus, Boko Haram's violence has produced a complex political fallout: undermining citizens' confidence in state institutions, straining civil–military relations, and complicating efforts at nation-building.

Religious Impacts

Religiously, Boko Haram's campaign has posed a direct challenge to Christian worship and practice, especially in northern Nigeria. Christians have been killed, abducted, and in some cases forcibly converted. Churches have been bombed or burned, and regular worship services have been disrupted. In addition, security facilities and church-related infrastructure have also been targeted.[38]

For several years, central Christian solemnities and public ceremonies—such as Christ the King processions, Corpus Christi processions, and aspects of the Christmas and Easter Triduum—have been sparsely or cautiously celebrated in many parts of the North owing to security threats.[39] Many Christians have been compelled to abandon jobs and businesses and relocate to safer regions, often beginning life afresh under difficult conditions.

A joint report, Crushed but Not Defeated, by Open Doors and the Christian Association of Nigeria summarizes the situation as follows:

Christians in northern Nigeria face violence from multiple sources.

A minimum of 9,000–11,500 Christians have been killed.

Approximately 1.3 million Christians have become internally displaced or forced to relocate elsewhere since 2000. Many churches have experienced steep declines in membership; about 13,000 churches have been closed or destroyed.

Thousands of Christian businesses, homes, and properties have been destroyed.

Distrust and fear of Muslims among Christians have greatly increased, leading to further segregation.

Christians in northern Nigeria frequently face marginalization and discrimination, especially in Sharia-implementing states in the far North, but also in parts of the Middle Belt.

Participation in church activities and in the private devotional life of Christians has been severely affected; while numbers have declined due to insecurity and migration, commitment has deepened among many who remain.

The impact of persistent violence on Christian communities across the North is enormous—declining numbers, widespread trauma, overwhelmed congregations hosting displaced persons, and loss of resources.

Christians affected by targeted violence have been left severely traumatized.[40]

Places of worship—churches, mosques, and other religious sites—have been systematically targeted by Boko Haram since its emergence in 2002. In June 2014, for example, Boko Haram destroyed five churches and killed over forty-eight people near Chibok in Borno State.[41] Persistent attacks have reinforced spatial and social segregation between Christian and Muslim communities and constitute a substantial threat to security, peace, and development in Nigeria.

PATTERNS OF VIOLENCE AND STATISTICAL TRENDS

Between 2009 and 2015, Boko Haram carried out over 100 major attacks, with 2011 and 2014 recording peak levels of violence.[42] The group's tactics evolved from small-scale assaults to coordinated mass killings, suicide bombings, and mass abductions—most notably the 2014 kidnapping of 276 Chibok schoolgirls.[43]
Casualty figures suggest over 9,000 Christians killed and more than 1.3 million persons displaced during the period under review.[44] Thousands of churches, schools, and homes were destroyed.[45]

DISCUSSION

Boko Haram's success is inseparable from Nigeria's structural weaknesses: corruption, poverty, youth unemployment, fragile institutions, and politicized religion.[46] The movement exploits grievances rooted in social inequality and state failure while cloaking violence in religious legitimacy. The church, though severely affected, remains a critical agent of resilience, humanitarian response, and peacebuilding.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION
Recommendations

From the foregoing discussion, it has been established that militants of Boko Haram are largely concentrated in the northern states of Nigeria, particularly Borno, Yobe, Bauchi, and Kaduna. Having examined the issues, it is pertinent to propose recommendations that could contribute to curbing terrorism and insurgency.
In view of the above, the following recommendations are advanced:
a. The Nigerian government and the international community should cut off communication and support channels available to Boko Haram. Tightening border security is essential to ensure effective monitoring of the inflow and outflow of persons, thereby reducing the possibility of infiltration by individuals with harmful intent.
b. There must be strict enforcement of laws against acts of terrorism and insurgency.
c. Governments at all levels should exercise prudence and responsibility in managing information concerning terrorist groups and security matters.
d. The government must address the root causes of disaffection that drive unemployed youths toward radicalization.
e. There is need for sustained interreligious dialogue. The two major religions in Nigeria—Christianity and Islam—must cultivate peaceful coexistence and resolve differences without violence.
f. The use of inflammatory statements against other religions should be prohibited.
g. Corruption must be eschewed at all levels. The benefits of abundant natural resources cannot be realized in a corrupt society; inequality often generates conflict and revolt.
h. Political will and strong determination are required of leaders to confront security challenges decisively. The government must rise above inertia and address issues as they arise.
i. Cases of human rights abuses perpetrated by criminals as well as security agencies assigned to maintain law and order must be urgently addressed.
j. National security agencies should be repositioned and refocused for improved service delivery, and defaulters must be prosecuted.
k. Government should engage Islamic clerics more actively in educating the Muslim community on authentic teachings of Islam regarding violence, and in re-orienting deradicalized members of the sect.
l. The media should provide adequate and unbiased coverage of Boko Haram's activities and the plight of victims in order to attract international support in combating the insurgency.

Conclusion

The insurgency of Boko Haram has undoubtedly become an albatross for Nigeria, posing a significant threat to national unity and democratic stability. The group seeks to impose its interpretation of religious governance and undermine secular state authority.[47] It is evident that factors such as corruption, unemployment, poverty, weak institutional structures, ethnic tensions, social frustration, and infrastructural decay contribute to the persistence of terrorism and religious extremism. These conditions generate resentment that may be expressed violently against the state and against citizens outside constitutional processes.[48]
This study therefore concludes that the current high level of insecurity in Nigeria is not insurmountable. Addressing these multidimensional challenges requires the adoption of comprehensive and appropriate strategies. The government must move beyond weak defensive postures and confront the insurgency decisively. Ultimately, the defeat of Boko Haram depends on coordinated security, socio-economic, and ideological strategies.
Finally, this paper has demonstrated that Christianity is fundamentally a religion of peace, even though this conviction is often tested in moments of crisis. The evidence presented indicates that Christians have suffered severe devastation as a result of the activities of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria.

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