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# Centenary of Failure? Boko Haram, Jihad and the Nigerian Reality

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the two contrasting narratives of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria; namely, the global jihadi rhetoric and the domestic factors argument. A review of the numerous commentaries from academics, policy makers and security practitioners, reveals a heavy dose of the jihadi narrative as the dominant theme in the counterinsurgency discourse of Boko Haram. This contrasts however with mounting evidence and strong indications that the insurgency is grievance-driven and largely a creation of conditions within the Nigerian state. Against this background, the fact that the insurgents are persistent in their lethal campaign for a caliphate means that Boko Haram has defied the military might of Africa's most populous, and perhaps strongest, state. I argue that the renewed momentum and increasing sophistication of Boko Haram are a forceful reminder that Nigeria, and West Africa, cannot afford the obscurity that afflicts the causative discourse on this security threat. Furthermore, I restate the primacy of domestic factors, as opposed to the global, in combating political violence in Nigeria.

## **Introduction**

Scott Straus writes that the character of warfare in sub-Saharan Africa has changed (Straus, 2012). Modern warfare on the continent, he argues, has generally been small-scale, peripheral and fundamentally factionalised. Whether this observation is meant to be good or bad news for the countries of Africa, it is clear that Straus is referring to traditional African civil wars, those known to have plagued the continent in the last four decades or so. There is a new warfare—

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unconventional to the African geopolitical terrain—emerging with the proliferation of transnational terrorism in a post-9/11 world. Indeed, in West Africa recently, the emergence of terror cells and safe havens has almost created a new ‘axis of evil’ in the region around and south of the Sahara. In Nigeria—Africa’s most populous and, perhaps, most dysfunctional state—the militant group ‘Boko Haram’ (the official name of the group is *Jamā'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lādda'awatih wal-Jihad*, which translates as ‘the group committed to teaching the ways of the Prophet religious warfare’) - has since 2009 challenged the state for the creation of an Islamic caliphate, with devastating human and material costs. Nigeria, and the entire West African sub-region, now features on the terrorism map of the United States of America (Meehan & Speier, 2011). Although veteran US journalist and author Robert Kaplan warned of the dangers that could arise from the socio-political vacuums and ethno-religious sensitivities in some West African states (Kaplan, 1994), the Boko Haram scourge seems not to have been anticipated. This surprise element in the rise of the insurgency may have resulted in the vagueness that afflicts debate on its exact causes.

Whilst there are strong indications that Boko Haram is largely a creation of conditions within the Nigerian state, the response of the Jonathan-led government has tended to, in both rhetoric and action, focus instead on the broad concept of global jihad. While this lack of clarity makes a compelling case for a thorough examination of the relative significance of these causative discourses, some analyses on Boko Haram are beset with limitations: they are either mostly obsessed with the religious factors ignoring the political (Karmon, 2014; Fiore, 2014; Eveslage, 2013; Agbiboa, 2013), or sometimes the political ignoring the economic. Thus, a useful appraisal of the insurgency’s socio-political reality has mostly been missed. The result is that much obfuscation still exists on whether the undercurrents of Boko Haram are primarily domestic or fundamentally global. It is instructive, consequently, to revisit the causal ‘tug of war’ between domestic state level factors and global jihadi dynamics. Specifically, this obscurity invites a further conceptualisation and analytical exploration of the Boko Haram insurgency and Nigeria’s response to it.

### **The Nigerian response to terror**

Since 2009, the Nigerian government has been seen, quite erratically, to be reinventing itself to face this new security challenge. Part of the government’s response has been the declaration of a state of emergency in some northern states where the insurgency is thought to be most

active, and the setting up of a Joint Task Force to end the impunity of insurgents and terrorists (Sahara Reporters, 2013). The motivation behind these measures is clear. Indeed, Boko Haram, apart from the human and material costs, has threatened Nigeria's sovereign integrity, dented her international image, and made a deeply polarised country practically ungovernable. Within five years, Boko Haram has metamorphosed from a mainly violence-free movement into an al-Qaeda-like terror cell. Despite Nigeria's reputation as a military superpower and a champion of security operations in the West African sub-region, the insurgency has however continued to defy the Nigerian state. The group added to its notoriety in April 2014, by kidnapping over two hundred schoolgirls from the northeastern town of Chibok. This development, in as much as it has given the insurgency international relevance, has particularly reinvigorated western governments' resolve to come to Nigeria's aid. However, it is the country's domestic conditions that reveal the true environment within which the insurgency operates. And as Nigeria marks the centenary of its creation, perhaps Boko Haram represents the sum of all the sociopolitical disasters of the country's turbulent pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history. It also raises the question of whether Nigeria should celebrate (or mourn) a centenary of failure.

For the present, it seems the failure to defeat the insurgency may have been due to a lack of political will by the Nigerian government to confront the insurgency in an all-encompassing manner, taking into account the historical antecedents of the contemporary Nigerian state. Some security practitioners and authors have drawn attention to Nigeria's domestic challenges by advancing the relative deprivation argument to explain the insurgency (Ogunrotifa, 2013; Adesoji, 2011; Onapajo & Uzodike, 2012; Onuoha, 2012, 2010; Piazza, 2006). However, President Goodluck Jonathan has vehemently denied any link between Boko Haram and the failures of the Nigerian state (CNN, 2013), preferring to highlight the 'religious terrorists' dimension of the group instead. President Jonathan's position may have motivated individuals such as Colonel Hasan Stan-Labo to encourage the government to take a heavy-handed military approach against the group, stressing that the group will not be defeated without some civilian casualties (Vanguard, 2013). Arguably, post-9/11 'war on terror' rhetoric has found favour with Nigerian security and policy chiefs. In line with such rhetoric, a Muslim insurgency, it seems to the Nigerian state, is solely religion-driven and must be stopped by the state through a physical show of force. It is conceivable however that while it may be

straightforward for institutions and other countries to criminalise Boko Haram it may not be entirely productive for Nigeria to tread that same path. Moreover any attempt at making terrorism the dominant theme in the discourse on Boko Haram may lead to a bleak future for counterinsurgency in Nigeria; a country that remains susceptible to divisive forces. It is conceivable yet again that looking solely to global jihad or accepting it as the overarching narrative of the insurgency may suggest terror-related insurgencies like Boko Haram shall continue to hijack Nigeria's development and indeed test the country's statecraft.

It must be stated, however, that the position of the Nigerian government is not entirely misplaced. There is a notable trend in the scholarship on Boko Haram that underlines the government's approach. A significant number of academic enquiries into the problem have largely dwelt on the global scope of Muslim insurgents (Eveslage, 2013; Fiore, 2014; Hill, 2013; Karmon, 2014; Oh, 2011; Onuoha, 2012; Vlahos, 2002, p. 10). Such literature seems to have motivated the perspective that presents Muslim insurgents as groups whose unprovoked ultimate desire is to have an Islamic state by violent means. To examine this 'terrorist' narrative, it is necessary to engage relevant theories of counterterrorism.

### **Terrorism and Counterinsurgency: Some Key Thinkers**

Terrorism straddles the boundaries of international law, global security, international relations and politics. This however is not the reason why defining the term is characteristically problematic. The apparent subjectivity of the term has propelled most researchers to settle on the view that an unbiased and universally accepted definition remains elusive at best (Acharya, 2008; Crenshaw, 2011; Ganor, 2002; Garrison, 2004; Meisels, 2009; Schmid, 2004; Symeonidou-Kastanidou, 2004; Young, 2006). It has been advanced for example that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" (Ganor, 2002, p. 292). This notwithstanding, Ganor (2002, p.287) goes on to maintain that "an objective definition of terrorism is not only possible; it is also indispensable to any serious attempt to combat terrorism". Some definitions have therefore employed the concept of war crimes in international law in the service of defining terrorism (Schmid, 1992). The point is that "if the core of war crimes—deliberate attacks on civilians, hostage-taking and the killing of prisoners—is extended to peacetime, we could simply define acts of terrorism veritably as

‘peacetime equivalents of war crimes’<sup>2</sup>. This definition, despite some limitations, explains what terrorism means in the context of this article. Irrespective of whether or not Boko Haram has a legitimate goal, it is still a terrorist organisation, and its activities are acts of terror as it deliberately targets and attacks civilians.

The point though is that not all terror activities warrant a terror response. In *Terrorist Myths: Illusion, Rhetoric and Reality*, Peter Sederberg (1989) explores three models of understanding terrorism: the war model, the crime model and the disease model. The application of each of these models depends on the dominant perception of terrorism:

The view that terrorism is war leads its proponents to favor repressive responses; the view that terrorism is crime leads its proponents to favor legal solutions; and the view that terrorism is a desperate cry for help leads its proponents to favor therapeutic remedies (Sederberg, 1995, p. 300).

David Kilcullen is among the most authoritative of contemporary counterinsurgency theorists, and he adopts and builds upon Sederberg’s concept by differentiating ‘counter-insurgency *redux*’ from ‘classical counter-insurgency’ (Kilcullen, 2005, 2006). The latter is a counter-revolutionary warfare that emerged in response to the ‘wars of national liberation’, which, according to him, is somewhat ill-suited for contemporary insurgencies. Counterinsurgency *redux*, as a more suitable response, requires a critical reappraisal of the conventional wisdom that underpins classical models of counterinsurgency. Mapping the positions of key theorists such as David Galula (2006) Robert Thompson (1966, 1970), Frank Kitson (1960, 1971, 1987) and Bernard Fall (1998), Kilcullen argues that to understand insurgency we must first understand the state system insurgents are attacking. These two contemporary security theorists point to a fundamental truism: successful counterinsurgency operations must take into account the factors that drive insurgent movements.

Following from these positions, it seems convincing that the lack of clarity around the primary cause of Boko Haram constitutes a monumental disservice to sustainable and effective counterinsurgency in

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<sup>2</sup> See *Singh v. Bihar*, 2004 SOL Case No. 264, April 2, 2004, para. 16, available at <http://supremecourtsonline.com>. This case advanced Schmid’s (1992) arguments, making this definition recognised by the international community.

Nigeria. Media reportage on the insurgency, as an accurate representation of the views of Nigeria's political community, has carried the 'terrorist' and Islamic fundamentalist hysteria. Accordingly, the Nigerian government's approach has heavily pursued the 'war' and 'crime' models through the sanctioning of violent responses in the form of an all-out war and criminal pursuit. This approach is not entirely unjustifiable: governments do not negotiate with terrorists. Counterinsurgency *redux* however rebuts this customary dictum. This conventional wisdom is reminiscent of the classical strand of counterinsurgency and as such is unsuitable to this era of globalised and transnational insurgencies. Additionally, whereas the war and crime models dwell largely on overblown rhetoric, the 'disease' model allows for *some* repressive actions but also necessitates a focus on underlying causes and, consequently, a prescription of therapeutic remedies. The starting point of such therapeutic prescriptions is usually the sociopolitical, economic and historical environment that gives birth to insurgencies.

### **The Historical Nigeria: Clarifying the confusion**

It is not only useful to interpret Boko Haram with an historical eye; it is fundamental to do so. A number of notable events have occasioned Nigeria's stormy political and economic position. This notwithstanding, the role of history in the country's present is not generally recognised, perhaps in perpetuation of corrupt state practices by the country's political elite. Historically, the background of most Nigerian conflicts dates back to 1914 when Britain oversaw the creation of a disjointed polity which is today Nigeria. Inspired mainly by economic interest, the Crown amalgamated a number of empires into one nation through the Lugardian policy of *indirect rule* (Afigbo, 1972; Mamdani, 1996). Before amalgamation, three dissimilar tribes—the Hausa-Fulanis, the Yorubas and Igbos—dominated modern day Nigeria (Falola & Heaton, 2008). In contemporary parlance, the creation of Nigeria has been referred to, metaphorically, as a 'forced and unhappy marriage' between the predominantly Muslim north and primarily Christian south. This reconfiguration of indigenous structures, the imposition of artificial colonial borders and a farcically constructed national identity led to forms of marginalisation that gave birth to pessimists of Nigerian unity. For example, Obafemi Awolowo, the Yoruba icon and one of Nigeria's pre-independent nationalist heroes, observed, quite prophetically, that Nigeria is a mere geographical expression, not a nation (Adejuyigbe, 1983; Anugwom, 2000).

A report written by Osaghae and Suberu for the Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity has concluded: “by cobbling the different Nigerian groups into a culturally artificial political entity for instance, the British stimulated inter-group competition and mobilization for power and resources in the new state, thereby fostering ethnic conflicts” (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005, p. 16). Further reinforcing these ethnic fault lines, Britain federated the country into three regions in 1954—Northern, Western and Eastern regions—to reflect the three dominant ethnic groups (Afigbo, 1991; Campbell, 2013). As a result, minority tribes, feeling neglected by this tripartite arrangement, became a new source of national discord that compounded the divisions in Nigeria. Desperate, perhaps, to contain this legacy of disunity, the newly independent Nigeria created more states and local government units (Elaigwu, 2002). Currently thirty-six states make up the Nigerian federation, yet national unity and cohesion remain elusive. Tribal altercations have grown even bolder in recent years (Umaroho, 2006). This is arguably further evidence to suggest that Nigerian ethnic groups have at no point in history shared, and still do not share, a desire to identify with a common nationality.

The artificiality of the Nigerian state and the ensuing disunity also facilitated the emergence, on the political front, of three political parties in the immediate postcolonial era, in accordance with the tripartite tradition explained above. In Western Nigeria, the Action Group Political Party (AGPP) became the dominant political party whilst the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) and the Northern People’s Party (NPP) represented Eastern and Northern Nigeria respectively. This three-region political arrangement would become the foundation of ethnic chauvinism, which would shape the later stages of Nigerian politics. Whilst ethnic and sub-ethnic loyalties threatened the survival of both the East and West regions, the North was divided religiously between Christianity and Islam (Okpaga, Chijioke & Eme, 2012). Religious bipolarity has been particularly crucial. The creation of Nigeria, as explained elsewhere, was a “forced marriage” between the predominantly Christian-core South and the Muslim Hausa-Fulani Sokoto Sultanate (1809-1903) in the North. Religion was not a divisive tool, perhaps, until post-1966 after the first military coup which, staged by all Igbo (Christian) soldiers, ousted and assassinated Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and Sir Ahmadu Bello, the first Prime Minister of Nigeria and the first Premier of Northern Nigeria respectively (Ayoade, 1973; Mustapha, 1986). The 15 January 1966 coup d’état marked a watershed moment in Nigeria’s political history

(Diamond, 1984, 1988; Jenkins & Kposowa, 1992).

However, it was the discovery of oil that dealt—or at least initiated—a decisive blow to Nigeria’s new and fragile state. By the late 1960s the discovery had presented ethnic and religious affiliations with deadly political currency, ushering in a new era of political confrontations in Southeastern Nigeria, of which the Biafra civil war of secession (1967-70) is historical evidence (Obi, 2008). Whilst discovery of oil may have motivated ‘Biafrans’ to seek an independent state out of Nigeria, oil became an economic curse as the vast wealth, instead of transforming lives, created a legacy of corruption, poor and failing national infrastructure, endemic diseases and environmental crisis (Sala-i-Martin & Subramanian, 2003). The resultant inequality between the rich few—who benefited from the oil wealth—and the poor masses provided religion and ethnicity with the impetus for an aggressive, violent and grievance-driven political engagement (Kinnan, Gordon, DeLong, Jaquish & McAllum, 2011). On political leadership, military governments remained arbitrary and self-serving whilst their civilian counterparts survive on sectional and ethnic sentiments. In both cases, political decisions have mostly been inspired by the oil economy (Diamond, 1988).

Contemporary Nigeria is therefore a ‘palimpsest’ (Berman, 2004) of history; it is a superimposition, over time, of one factor on another, of the ethnic, the religious, the political and the economic. Nigeria has carried this ethno-religious/socio-politico-economic complex throughout its turbulent hundred-year-old history (Okpaga et al., 2012; Umaroho, 2006). Anthony Kirk-Greene (1980) rightly referred to this as “*damnosa hereditas*”; a burdensome inheritance that has set the country against its own development and unity. The challenge for the onlooker is how to muster the relationships within these different but mutually reinforcing factors and, more crucially, how they explain the contemporary challenges of the Nigerian state. This is no less a difficult task for the writer on Nigerian society. Yet, an interesting parallel can be observed in how these determinants explain Nigerian conflicts over time.

It is possible to categorise the above factors into those that trigger or generate conflicts and those that invigorate them or serve as points of mobilisation. It is important to restate, to further this point, that the literature on ethno-religious conflicts has provided sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the mere existence of ethnic and/or religious identities—the points of mobilisation—does not necessarily equate to the occurrence of conflicts. In most cases, it is the economic and political factors (the triggers) that recruit such identities towards fatal

ends (Elbadawi & Sambanis, 2000; Horowitz, 1985; Lake & Rothchild, 1996; Posen, 1993; Reynal-Querol, 2002; Sambanis, 2001). That is, whilst ethnic and religious identities may serve as points of mobilisation, it is the political and economic factors that trigger conflicts. This categorisation is applicable to almost all conflicts and insurgencies in Nigeria. Generally, conflicts mobilised around religious identity have largely been a northern affair, for example in Kano in 1980; Maiduguri and Kaduna in 1982; Jimeta in 1984; the 1985 *maitatsine* riots in Bauchi; the Kafanchan, Kaduna and Zaria crises in 1987; and Jos in 2001, 2002, and 2004 (Yusuf, 2007). In the middle belt, conflicts have tended to be mostly stimulated by mutually reinforcing factors of religion, ethnicity and settlement (Kastfelt, 1994), while in the southwest and southeast, conflicts have almost always been described as ethnic (Best & Von Kemedi, 2005; Mudoola, 1968; Obi, 2008). As expected, a number of conflicts in the North and South are either retaliatory, defensive or both. Ukiwo (2003) rightly observes that almost all major conflicts in Nigeria have been fought along religious and ethnic lines despite their politico-economic origins and historical roots.

The instrumentalist role of ethnicity and religion in Nigerian conflicts manifests in two dimensions. First, conflicts originate out of different interest groups using the acute inequality in wealth, pervasiveness of poverty and the resultant general dissatisfaction to their advantage by exploiting the ethnic and religious identity of the people (Ukiwo, 2003). Second, conflicts have arisen out of political elites utilising religious and ethnic rhetoric to advance their political ends, or out of instances where there exists real or imagined political marginalisation and/or injustice (Mustapha, 1986; Ukiwo, 2003, 2005). Consequently, all the different manifestations of conflicts—the religious, the ethnic, the retaliatory and the defensive—are similar in their poignant political and socioeconomic roots (Adesoji, 2010b; Akaeze, 2009; Danjibo, 2009; Leith & Solomon, 2001; Omipidan, 2009; Ukiwo, 2003). Further, the pervasiveness of ethno-religious differences means that at every level of Nigerian society there are bound to be cleavages, which could be fatal if inflamed. This has the potential to present ethnicity and religion as sources of conflicts. However, it is apparent that no conflict determinant exists in a vacuum (Osaghae, 1998). The use of ethno-religious identities to create conflict ecology to air grievances that are primarily economic and/or political should not obscure the real causes of such conflicts. Neither should it blur the conceivably thin line between conflict triggers and conflict mobilisers (see Akinwumi, 2004 for a list of Nigerian conflicts and insurgencies

since the pre- and post-independence era). In light of this, it becomes a matter of consequence that for sustainable counterinsurgency and a containment of social cleavages in Nigeria, the focus should be on the socioeconomic imbalance that paves the way for the religious and ethnic factors to take shape, gain momentum and cause havoc. Boko Haram may represent not jihad or the desirability for the Sharia *per se*, but rather the sum of all economic and political marginalisation or injustices that litter Nigeria's centenary of inherent national crises.

### **Jihad: Reality or Rhetoric?**

Like terrorism, the terms *jihadism* and jihad, have also suffered significant transmogrification post-9/11. Delving into the many commentaries on them will not only be irrelevant to the core of the arguments here, it will also be unhelpful to the judicious utilisation of space. To start a discussion, a definition will suffice. Jarret Brachman defines jihadism as “the peripheral current of extremist Islamic thought whose adherents demand the use of violence in order to oust non-Islamic influence from traditionally Muslim lands en route to establishing true Islamic governance in accordance with Sharia” (Brachman, 2008, pp. 4-5). Like this description, many if not all of the definitions of jihad or jihadism seem insufficient due to their inherent ideological suasions. The problem with such definitions presents itself from two angles. First, jihad as an over-traversed topic in security discourse still remains a deeply-held religious concept, and second, definitions of the term usually ignore the interlocking demarcation between what Islam as a religious system considers to constitute jihad in contemporary practice of the religion and what those who preach its militant strand conceive of it (Stern, 2000). Jihad is therefore ubiquitous (Jackson, 2007), “clumsy and controversial” (Brachman, 2008, p. 13). And when insurgents adopt the jihadi narrative, they more often fail to understand its intricacies (Holtmann, 2013), with the tendency thereby of dwelling on a one-dimensional interpretation of specific religious texts.

Considering the potential for opportunism, the outright acceptance of professed ambitions of jihadi insurgents becomes unforgiving without an examination of the fundamental motives behind the sometimes criminal, and usually grievance-driven, ‘jihadi’ movements (Baehr, 2009; Husain, 2007). This point however faces significant setbacks. A study supported by the US Department of Homeland Security on global insurgencies found that of the four narratives used by global insurgents, the religious narrative which “legitimises violent struggle to defend

Islam against the crusader West” is what sets Muslim insurgencies apart from others (Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskalenko & McCauley, 2010, p. 43). The others are the political narrative, the moral narrative and the social-psychological narrative. In the specific case of the Boko Haram insurgency, copious references to Islamist propaganda by the insurgents themselves means that a complete dismissal of global jihad may appear almost impossible. Additionally, the August 2011 attack on the United Nations headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria not only “launched Boko Haram onto world news and established it as a militant group with the technical and doctrinal capacity to produce suicide bombs” (Walker, 2012, pp. 5-6); it also made the group’s politico-military intentions clear. It is certainly feasible that Boko Haram or elements thereof have links with al-Shabab or al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (Byman et al., 2003).

This notwithstanding, it remains questionable for politicians and policy makers, and even worse still scholars, to accept, without scrutiny, the religious war-mongering narrative of jihadi insurgents. Commentaries on religious populism by such scholars as Joshua Yates have also reiterated this point. They indicate the possibility of using jihadi narratives for rhetorical convenience and for global attention (Baehr, 2009; Brachman, 2008; Holtmann, 2013; Yates, 2007). Consequently, despite the similarity of the overarching narrative of jihadi movements, the purpose of using global jihad as a rallying cause is highly variable and at times extremely unclear, disjointed and misplaced. The conclusion from the foregoing, seemingly, is that global jihad can neither be a safe focus for solving the scourge of sub-national political groups such as Boko Haram, nor preventing other insurgencies like it. Indeed, looking at the wider context from which Boko Haram sprang, and within which it operates, and challenging its political, sociocultural and economic dynamics, reveals an assessment that is sharply incongruent with both the jihadi narrative and the notion of the insurgency as an al-Qaeda inspired terrorist group.

Doubtlessly, Boko Haram insurgents claim to be waging war on corrupt Muslims and the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Adesoji, 2010a). They espouse a return to life under ‘true’ Islamic law, with the aim of creating a more perfect society away from the corrupt establishment. Without doubt, this motive points to the jihadi dimension. Yet, this is only superficially so. The credibility of this motive is questionable on many grounds. Former colleagues of the group’s erstwhile leader Mohammed Yusuf, as well as a majority of Muslim scholars in northern Nigeria, have denied the message of Boko Haram, arguing that they are heretical, reactionary and represent the product of a novice’s

interpretation of religious texts and verdicts. Bruce Hoffman (1995) and Gurr *et al* (1993) also opine that many conflicts classified as religious represent a misnomer. In many cases, according to them, the primary sources of conflicts are either political or economic, with religion as just a way of mobilising participation. Stewart (2009, p.5) agrees that:

While all conflicts have several motives with political and or economic ones generally central, mobilisation frequently occurs on the basis of particular identities, and conflicts can then be classified as ‘ethnic’ or ‘religious’, or class or ideological, on the basis of *how people are mobilised* rather than with respect to the political or economic motives for such mobilisation.

## **Conclusion**

The above discussion has highlighted the wider, and primarily domestic, factors underpinning the Boko Haram insurgency. This article has argued that Nigerian insurgencies represent the natural progression of the historical and contemporary challenges of the state: colonialism’s artificially constructed national identity from empires around the Niger and Benue rivers; the ensuing disunity thereof; the misappropriation of state resources especially oil wealth; the militarisation of leadership and security; official corruption; and the hopelessness that these events have created for the youth in particular. Put together, these factors fundamentally extol Robert Kaplan’s exposition that “where there is mass poverty, people find liberation in violence” (Kaplan, 1994, p. 66), and establishes Boko Haram as a ‘desperate cry for help’. As such, the taking of the ‘crime’ and ‘terrorist’ path by the Nigerian state only serves to deepen the sociopolitical realities that gave birth to the insurgency in the first place. This background significantly weakens the case for the group’s jihadi motives and underscores the primacy of socioeconomic factors. This argument does not entirely dismiss global jihad from the analysis of Boko Haram. It rather contends that “any crackdown of terrorist activity [...] has to be carried out with great sensitivity to the historic grievances of marginalized groups, the incipient struggle for human rights, and the relatively weak civilian oversight of the military and security institutions” (Harbeson & Rothchild, 2009, pp. 278-302).

Put differently, a look beyond ethno-religious fundamentalism as a primary point of departure in mounting a successful response appears to be a favourable strategy. This position makes a compelling case for

Nigeria to redefine its 'criminal' and 'war' diagnoses of the Boko Haram insurgency, and consequently the overreliance on force and criminal pursuit. Boko Haram looks more certain to be the direct outgrowth of the historical and contemporary burden of the Nigerian state, rather than the result, necessarily, of religious fanaticism. The domestic factors and relative deprivation explanations of the insurgency are authoritative. This means that the search for long-term solutions to recurring conflicts must repudiate and avoid inflammatory positions and unfettered religious assumptions. This position may be seen to be the most practical policy direction to prevent Nigeria from going down the path of self-destruction. Otherwise the history of Nigeria, after the failures of its centenary, may indeed continue toward a fate that risks an ominous leap from 'burdensome' into the darkness of a great nation that could have been.

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