

Inter-Religious Dialogue Strategy and Containment of Boko Haram Terror in Nigeria: Any Lessons for Fight against International Islamic Terrorism?

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Abstract: *From the bombing of the World Trade Center in the United States of America, the Al shabab insurgency in Somalia, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Talibans in Pakistan, Hamas in the Gaza strip, Boko Haram in Nigeria and very recently, the ISIS in Iraq and Syria, terrorism has continued to leave on its trail, tales of woes, horror, and devastation. In Nigeria, Boko Haram has killed several thousands of people and properties worth billions of dollars are wasted almost on daily basis. The bombing of the United Nations house in Abuja in 2011 and the abduction of over 200 Chibok secondary school girls in 2014 have been some of the high points of the activities of this group. The federal government in a bid to halt this trend has deployed very huge financial, human and material resources into fighting this war on terror. Hundreds of members of the Nigerian troops have also paid the supreme price in their quest for a lasting peace. However, the more resources deployed the more daring and emboldened they seem to become. Analysts have attributed this trend to the religious dimension that the war has assumed amongst the adherents of Christianity and Islam (the two dominant religions). The paper sets out to study how dialogue among people of diverse religions as in Nigeria, can be deployed to contain the menace of terrorism and also engender peace among multi-ethnic/religious/cultural groups. It is the position of this paper that religious-induced terrorism can be contained if not permanently eliminated through dialogue.*

I. Introduction

Background to the Study

The Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lida Awati Wal-Jihad, popularly referred to as Boko Haram (Meaning western education is forbidden), a faceless Islamic jihadist sect, has been perpetrating deadly attacks against civilians since 2009. They are committed to the violent overthrow of Nigeria's democratic state and its replacement with Islamic state based on radical Islamic teachings and tenets of faith.

Boko Haram has gradually but steadily degenerated into a full blown monster over time. Sources have it that what constitutes, perhaps, one of the deadliest terror group today, started as a group of renegades (thugs) that were assembled by desperate local politicians to settle political scores and use them as instruments for ascension to power. This should not come as a surprise as politics in Nigeria over the years is not ideologically-based, but driven by raw violence if one must win in elections. It is in this sense that Anaele (2014) described "Nigerian politics in particular and Africa in general as a contest of war and not that of idea for positive change". He concludes that that what obtains is power of bullet and not ballot.

This political culture of militarization of elections, one can argue is the genesis of Boko Haram benign in religious expression. Correspondingly therefore, Boko Haram members as military wing of politicians were armed to the teeth with very dangerous weapons which they unleash on political opponents and unwary hapless electorate. After the elections, their paymasters failed to mop them up, but instead reserve them for private violence and foot-soldiers for use against political opponents real or imaginary. The rest as they say is now history. The chicken has finally come home to roost.

Nigeria has in the last few years been lying on its belly, severely challenged by violent religious extremism. In the last couple of months, Boko Haram has taken a step further from being a blood-thirsty killing machine, kidnapper of hundreds of women and bombers of places of worship, markets and taxi/bus stations, to a clear and dangerous threat to the territorial integrity of Nigeria.

The federal government in a bid to halt this trend has deployed huge human, financial and material resources into fighting this war on terror. A number of members of the Nigerian troops have had to pay the supreme price in their bid for its defeat and restoration of peace. Nevertheless, it appears the more resources the government deploys into the war, the more daring and emboldened the terrorists become.

After six years of relentless military campaign, Nigeria cannot really claim to be winning the war on terror. Embarrassing also is the outright annexation of some Nigerian territories by the terrorists and the hoisting

of their flags in the north-east axis of the country bordered by Niger, Cameroun and Chad Republic, now being pounded by Boko Haram.

Several analysts, notably Anaele (2013) have attributed the failure of government to the religious dimension that the war has assumed with the leadership of Christianity and Islam (the two dominant religions) been accused of half-heartedness in their effort to confront the menace of Boko Haram.

Highlights of the atrocities of the group include; April 15, 2014 kidnapping of 276 female Secondary School students in Chibok, (a predominant Christian community) in Borno state, June 16 2011 bombing of the Police headquarters and the August 26 2011 bombing of the United Nations building, both in Abuja among several others.

Timeline of Boko Haram Activities

- July 26, 2009 – Police allegedly killed the sect's leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in police cell after soldiers, who arrested him, handed him over to the police alive
 - April 22, 2011 – Boko Haram attacks prison in Yola, Adamawa, frees 14 prisoners
 - May 29, 2011 – Boko Haram attacks several communities in northern Nigeria
 - June 16, 2011 – Boko Haram claims responsibility for attack on Abuja police headquarters
 - June 26, 2011 – Boko Haram bombs beer garden in Maiduguri, 25 killed, 12 injured
 - July 11, 2011 – University of Maiduguri closed down over Boko Haram threats
 - August 26, 2011 – The Islamic sect bombed the UN Building, Abuja, killing workers and visitors
 - August 12, 2011 – Boko Haram shoots dead Liman Bana, prominent Islamic cleric
 - December 25, 2011 – Sect bombed the Catholic Church, Madalla, killings several worshippers
 - Feb 8, 2012 – Boko Haram claims responsibility for Kaduna army headquarters bombing
 - March 8, 2012 – Efforts to free Italian, British captives abducted by BH fails as they're killed before they could be rescued in Sokoto
 - April 26, 2012 – Bombers hit ThisDay office in Abuja
 - June 17, 2012 – Boko Haram suicide bombers attack 3 Kaduna churches, 50 killed
 - Sept 19, 2012 – Nigerian army arrests BH militants, says it killed Abu Qaqa
 - March 5, 2013 – Sultan calls for Amnesty for Boko Haram members
 - Mar 18, 2013 – Suicide bombers attack Kano bus stop, kill 22, 65 injured
 - Apr 5, 2013 – Jonathan sets up Boko Haram Amnesty committee
 - Apr 17, 2013 – Jonathan sets up amnesty implementation committee to engage BH
 - July 6, 2013 – Boko Haram attacks Government Secondary School, Mamugu, killing 29 students
 - Sept 29, 2013 – BH attacks College of Agriculture in Gujba, kills 40 male students
 - April 24, 2013 – Jonathan sets up Boko Haram amnesty committee
 - May 14, 2013 – Jonathan declares state of emergency in Borno, Yobe, Adamawa states over BH attacks
 - August 2013 – Abubakar Shekau said to have been shot and deposed by members
 - Chief of Defence Staff said the military would wipe out Boko Haram by April, 2014 – Jan, 2014
 - April 14, 2014 – BH kidnaps Chibok schoolgirls at Govt. Sec. School, Chibok, Borno
 - April 14, 2014 – BH suicide bombers attack Nyanya bus station in Abuja, 90 killed
 - May 1, 2014 – Car bomb attack in Nyanya area of Abuja, 19 killed, scores injured
 - May 18, 2014 – BH suicide bomb attack in Kano, five killed
 - May 20, 2014 – Twin bomb explosions in Jos, 118 killed
 - September 17, 2014 – Nigeria military claims it killed Abubakar Shekau 'again'
 - September 2014 – Australian Stephen Davis names some alleged 'sponsors' of Boko Haram
 - Sept 2014 – Boko Haram captured some towns –Damboa, Gwoza, Bama and most Nigeria's border towns with Cameroon in Borno State and Mubi, Madagali and Michika in Adamawa State
 - Sept 2014 – Nigeria's military fought back Boko Haram's attack to retake Konduga, killing about 115 of the militants, several insurgents surrender their weapons
 - September 2014 – The sect claimed it shot down a Nigeria military jet and captures one of the pilots alive. It released the video of how it beheaded one of the pilots
 - October 17, 2014 – VOA reports a meeting of a delegation of the Federal Government and Boko Haram members on Saudi Arabia
- SOURCE: PUNCH NEWSPAPER ONLINE: OCTOBER 17, 2014.*

II. Contemporary Global War On Terror

Never has the world been resolute in pursuit of a cause as it is now in the fight against international terrorism. Violent religious extremism can be rightfully situated as one of the greatest challenges facing the international community in the twenty-first Century (Knox: 2014).

As distinct from the traditional or old, the new terrorism has a dangerous will and an unmistakable agenda to destroy some societies and some marked ethnic and racial groups without any regard to the chivalrous ethics of proportionality and discrimination between the innocent and the guilty (Agwu: 2007).

From the bombing of the World Trade Centre (popularly referred to as 9/11), to the activities of the Al-shabab in Somalia, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Talibans in Pakistan, Hamas in the Gaza strip, Hisbolla in Lebanon, Boko Haram in Nigeria and very recently, ISIS in Northern Iraq and Syria, the activities of terrorists have continued to leave on its trail, tales of woes, horror, and devastation.

Hence, for Knox, “new approaches are needed to reduce their influence, counter their ideology, and prevent further violence. Therefore, understanding how they operate, recruit, and employ messaging strategies will be key”.

However, the sign that the line had been drawn between the forces of light and darkness began on Tuesday, September 11, 2001 when the United States of America came under what Kegley Jr. and Blanton (2011), described as perhaps, the deadliest and most coordinated terror attack of all times by the Islamic terrorists group al-Qaeda. About 2,996 people were killed and infrastructure worth at least \$10 billion was destroyed in one fell swoop. This remarkably marked the beginning of organized global war against terror.

Nevertheless, successions of terrorist attacks greeted the aftermath of the 9/11 to the extent of historians agreeing that the world has witnessed a major turning point in the history of international relations likened to the fall of the Berlin Wall (Aaron, 2011).

A historical perspective of the Nigerian military and crisis resolution in Africa

As the seventh largest producer of oil and gas in the world and the largest in Africa, and with a population of 140 million, Nigeria, a fledgling democracy is not only Africa's most populous country but also one of the most endowed with natural resources. Notwithstanding, majority of Nigerians are poor, and the nation has suffered through a number of bloody conflicts in her short history with the trio of the Civil war, Niger Delta militancy and the current Boko Haram insurgency leading the pack.

There are over 250 ethnic groups within 36 states, and the population is nearly evenly distributed between Muslims and Christians. The Muslims have strong presence in the north, while Christians and followers of the African traditional religion live predominantly in the south. Whether Christian or Muslim, Nigerians find great strength in their religious and cultural heritage.

Nigeria has a rich tradition of crisis resolution in Africa. Consequently, it is expected that now that she is in a crisis, such nations should readily come to her aid. Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, Africa has been the centerpiece of her foreign policy, and successive Nigerian governments have deployed vast human and material resources in pursuit of this objective.

Nigeria intervened to end apartheid in South Africa and her unalloyed commitment to peace resulted in the resolution of the conflict in Sudan. Nigeria also played a major role in the mediations under the aegis of the African Union and the United Nations which ultimately culminated into the consensus on the Declaration of Principles through which the warring parties (the Central Sudanese Government and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement) agreed on the principles and conditions for self-determination for the Southern Sudan.

Under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Nigeria led the moves to resolve crises in the West African sub-region. Nigeria played a leading role in the resolution of the crisis in Liberia, which spread to Sierra Leone. Nigeria was not only largely instrumental to the creation of ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), but also contributed hundreds of troops to these war torn countries for restoration of peace. This action was largely responsible for ending the civil wars, and the rebirth of democracy in both countries.

The Military and the score card on the war against Terror

In contrast, the Nigerian troops with such outstanding global record of professionalism has been struggling to hold their own against a rag-tag army of Boko Haram terrorists, threatening not just the corporate existence of the Nigerian nation, but the peace and stability of the entire West African sub-region.

Nigerians have continued to be inundated with the news of flags being hoisted in towns and villages under Boko Haram occupation. Communities have had to abandon their homes to sleep in the bushes, to avoid being slaughtered by this band of terrorists. The camps of internally displaced people are growing at an alarming rate, with women and children clearly the greatest casualties.

Conspiracy theories anchored on religion have been rife. The President- Goodluck Jonathan had admitted the infiltration of his executive council by fifth columnists. The military high command had also

severally arrested and tried officers and men who were alleged to be religious moles sympathetic to the cause of the Boko Haram, and whose actions and in-actions have been less than patriotic in the prosecution of the war on terror.

Another twist to the military war on terror is the mounting concern both at domestic and international fronts on the flagrant abuse of human rights. The Nigerian authorities must of necessity launch comprehensive investigations into crimes against humanity; multiple allegations of uninformed detention, torture and extra-judicial killings allegedly committed against suspected but non- proved Boko Haram members by security forces.

The 2014 Amnesty report titled, "Welcome to Hellfire: Torture and Ill-treatment in Nigeria", documented alleged abuses by the Nigerian Army and the Civilian Joint Task Force. But nothing has been heard yet of the promise by the government to probe the incident. According to Bayo Olupohunda (2015)

"All over the world, military forces who are engaged in wars often commit war crimes. But the difference is that the military high command of those countries often responds to investigate and punish perpetrators of human rights violation. When the United States' soldiers allegedly desecrated the Quran in Afghanistan, the US investigated and the perpetrators were punished. In Nigeria, the military high command will engage in blame game even in the face of evidences linking soldiers to human rights violations"

The government is unable to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of displaced and vulnerable communities in north-east Nigeria. Mohammed Adoke, the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice posits that "Since the insurgency began, close to 650,000 Nigerians have been internally displaced in the North Eastern part of Nigeria; and another one million, as refugees in neighbouring countries of Cameroun, Chad and Niger. This situation has posed grave humanitarian situations in the affected areas including the neighbouring countries".

As the war intensifies, Nigerians must begin to take a second look at the military. They must begin to ask hard questions. When the military tell us they have taken a town or village from Boko Haram, we should ask about the fate of the indigenious population. Are they safe? Were they evacuated before engagement began? These questions have become pertinent because many innocent Nigerians have died needless and painful death when the military carry out operations without respecting or observing the rule of engagement. The notoriety of the Nigerian Army during internal military operation has been well-documented." (PUNCH NEWSPAPER, March 3, 2015).

III. Boko Haram And The Dialogue Paradigm

Generally, the term inter-religious dialogue can be used interchangeably as inter-faith or inter-belief dialogue. Interreligious work can be a symbol of unity across civilizations and it can also reverberate amongst the followers of the faith (Mona Siddique: 2010). It "refers to cooperative, constructive and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions (i.e., "faiths") and/or spiritual or humanistic beliefs, at both the individual and institutional levels" (en.wikipedia.org).

Interreligious dialogue is a time tested tool in resolving longstanding, deep-rooted conflicts. It seeks to address the underlying needs of the conflict parties and also prioritizes their relationship. The long term aim is the creation of a dynamic and sustainable peace by addressing the conflict at both religious and cultural levels. It attempts to change the ethno-religious structures that are contributing to the conflict or hindering its resolution so as to alter the attitudes and behaviours of conflict parties that have created, and continue to sustain, the conflict.

The documents of the church speak about four types of dialogue; they are dialogue of action, the dialogue of Life, the Dialogue of Intellectual Exchange, and dialogue of Experience (Kasmir Nema :2009).

Dialogue of action encourages all faiths to emphasize a strong sense of fairness and harmony and on respect for human dignity. In Nigeria, Christianity and Islam must see human beings as stewards of God's creation, entrusted with the care of the earth. There will be a need to make conscious effort to reach out, to understand, to break down our own prejudices and to overcome the barriers, stereotypes and suspicions that constitute the differences.

Dialogue of life is where people try hard to exhibit the spirit of good neighborliness and live in peace and harmony. This can be hard for a people of a common background but, where religious and cultural differences exist, more effort is needed. We have to be tolerant, willing to listen and to accept that people are different, or have a world-view different from our own.

The Nigeria Interreligious Council (NIREC)

The idea of interreligious dialogue is not completely new in Nigeria. The first shot at interreligious dialogue was the birth of the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council, (NIREC) a charitable fifty (50) membership organization (25 Christians and 25 Muslims) formed by the representatives of the two major Religions - that is, Christianity and Islam- on the 11th day of September, 1999.

The establishment of NIREC as a Council was necessitated by the incessant ethno-religious crises which pervaded the sociopolitical landscape of northern Nigeria. The Council from inception was Co-Chaired by the President-General, Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) and the President of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). The pioneering National Coordinator/ Executive Secretary of the Council from 1999 - 2007 was the then State House Chaplain, Rev. Professor Yusuf Obaje.

NIREC, also known as the Council, is a permanent and an independent body saddled with the responsibility of providing religious leaders and traditional rulers a veritable platform to engender healthier interface and understanding among the leadership and followers of the Christian and Islamic religions, as well as put in place a solid structure for lasting peace and religious harmony in Nigeria.

However, after 14 years of operation, NIREC is still far from achieving this major objective. The leadership of the group from all indications lack honesty and sincerity of purpose. There is also mutual distrust and suspicion.

“Against the background of the lingering ethno-religious crisis in the country especially in the north where contradictions between the two religions is sharp, the introduction of Shari’ah is a confirmation of the suspicion by non-Muslims of attempts to Islamize the country beginning with the judiciary” (Human Rights Monitor: 2010). S.L.S Salifu, a former Secretary-General of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), posited:

“It is always difficult building relationships of trust with the Muslim community. At the national level we are trying to foster deeper understanding between Muslims and Christians. At lower levels, our efforts are less well developed. A few states have created state NIRECs or NIREC like structures. Interfaith meetings are springing up slowly throughout the country. Unfortunately, further cooperation is still limited by the high level of suspicion that still exists at these lower levels”.

Another challenge of NIREC is that the organization is not holistic and comprehensive enough in its composition and approach towards stemming the tide of violent religious extremism in Nigeria. The leadership structure and negotiating teams which are heavily skewed in favour of men without recourse to the youth and womenfolk, two critical stakeholders in the fight against religious extremism, attest to this.

Sadly enough, while youth provide the ready pool for recruitment of foot-soldiers (suicide bombers) for Boko Haram and allied groups, women remain the most vulnerable to internal displacement, rape and other unprintable war crimes.

According to Sahara Reporters, New York January 03, 2014, “The Boko Haram group stormed Malari, in Damboa Local Government area, on the eve of the New Year at about 9pm and abducted the youths, who by some estimates were about 50”. Pointblanknews.com reported that “at least 24 youth (aka Civilian JTF) were killed by suspected Boko Haram terrorists in fresh attack while 36 others were also declared missing when the youth invaded a Boko Haram Camp in Mongno Local Government Area of Borno State”.

Similarly, “sixty women were reportedly abducted by suspected members of the deadly Boko Haram sect at Waga Mangoro and Garta villages, both in troubled Adamawa State during a fresh attack” (PUNCH :2014) and according to Amnesty International, “Nigerian militants shot a woman midway through giving birth to baby”.

IV. Conclusion

Most nations of the world have rarely if ever closed out military conflicts smoothly and effectively. Rather, they have repeatedly stumbled across the finish line without a clear sense of what would come next or how to advance national interests amid the chaos.

The point therefore, must be made that, in spite of the internal contradictions of the NIREC, dialogue between Christian and Muslim leaders still remains the panacea for genuine reconciliation and lasting peace in the current fight against the Boko Haram terrorists in north-east, Nigeria.

It is in this sense that this paper subscribes to the use of counter-insurgency instead of full military solutions in the fight against Boko Haram.

V. Recommendations

The paper recommends the following;

- The establishment of a more comprehensive and all-inclusive interreligious committee that is made up of religious leaders, women, youth and all other stake-holders to dispassionately iron out all the grey areas in the efforts to stamp out the menace of terrorism.
- The need for sincerity of purposes on the part of leaders all religions, particularly, Islam and Christianity when they engage each other on thorny national issues such as the menace of Boko Haram.
- When the war is finally over, the federal government should begin a healing process by designing a comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration Programme for repentant insurgents to ensure that we do not

have on our hands large numbers of armed, jobless youths living on the edge of frustration. It worked with the Niger Delta repentant militants; it can also work in the North-east.

- Finally, efforts must also be made by the governments to rehabilitate, reintegrate and reunite with their families and communities, all refugees, internally displaced persons and other victims of the war. Those who lost their means of livelihood should also be encouraged financially to begin life afresh.

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