Boko Haram: the forgotten Islamic State

Jeremy Dewar Mon, 16/03/2015 - 10:22
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Last year Boko Haram declared the area under their control an Islamic state, part of the Iraqi Islamist Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi?s global Caliphate. How has its influence grown and what is the attitude of the West? Jeremy Dewar investigates

An oil rich nation, once a colony, now exploited by Western multinationals. A corrupt political elite systematically excluding the vast majority from any share in the country?s natural wealth. Beset by sectarian divisions encouraged by the ruling class, and now subject to a brutal jihadist insurgency with a thoroughly retrogressive Wahhabi interpretation of Islam.

Sounds familiar? Most will immediately think of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria. But this description fits just as well for Boko Haram in Nigeria.

Boko Haram shot to infamy in April 2014, when it kidnapped 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, a largely Christian city in the north-eastern state of Borno. Its leader Abubakar Shekau revealed the full brutality of his movement?s misogyny when he ranted on video:

?I am going to marry out any woman who is twelve years old, and if she is younger, I will marry her out at the age of nine. You are all in danger. I am the one who captured all those girls and will sell all of them. Slavery is allowed in my religion.?

A Twitter campaign went viral when Michelle Obama lent her support to #BringBackOurGirls. Even a startled David Cameron? held up a placard for the camera. And as ineffective as it was, this is probably the USA and UK?s most visible show of concern to date for what is happening in Nigeria today.

Boko Haram has been active as a paramilitary force since 2009, launching devastating attacks on the United Nations headquarters in the capital Abuja in August 2011. It controls much of Borno state and parts of neighbouring Yobe state, and its activities cross over into Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

Around 130 towns and villages have fallen to it, with tens of thousands of civilians killed and close to a million displaced. It has experienced both victories and defeats, taking and then losing Chibok in November 2014. Chadian fighter planes and Cameroonian troops have fought it alongside a poorly resourced, underpaid and grossly demoralised Nigerian army. Early this month Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Cameroon and Benin formed a Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF).

But Boko Haram?s most remarkable defeats have been inflicted on it by self defence groups, as in Baga and Mubi in northern Borno, where some of the heaviest fighting has been. Nevertheless, it has strengthened enormously over the last 18 months, probably more than doubling in size to around 12,000 fighters.

Who is Boko Haram?
Founded in 2002 in Borno’s capital Maiduguri by Mohammed Yusuf, with a name that translates as “People Committed to the Prophet’s Teachings for Propagation and Jihad”, it initially recruited madrassa and university students. It was in this period that the group earned its unofficial title, Boko Haram (?Western education is forbidden?).

Yusuf’s outpourings are far-fetched to say the least and are seemingly oblivious to Islam’s long association with scientific enquiry. As well as rejecting the theory of evolution and a spherical Earth, Yusuf even questioned the water cycle, saying that “We believe it [rain] is a creation of God rather than an evaporation caused by the sun that condenses and becomes rain.”

Nigeria’s northern states provided Yusuf with rich pickings. After military rule ended in 1999, many northern oligarchs turned to Islam to gain a social base. Twelve northern states have declared Sharia Law as the basis of their legal system, despite sizeable non-Muslim minorities.

The northern ruling elite at first turned a blind eye to Boko Haram’s “excesses”, with some even funding it as a bargaining chip with the Christian dominated south. Divisions between a mainly Hausa-speaking Muslim north and a Yoruba-speaking Christian south were encouraged under British colonial rule and benefit the ruling class in both parts of this vast, 176 million-strong country. The capitalists of one community typically react to an election defeat by trying to make the country ungovernable for their opponents.

It was only when the charismatic Yusuf began to appeal to disaffected and unemployed young men in his regular television appearances that the authorities started to worry. In 2009, Yusuf was arrested in Maiduguri. He was then recaptured after an alleged “escape attempt” and summarily executed in public. Hundreds were killed in the fierce fighting that followed his death.

But if the police, notorious for extrajudicial killings, thought this would cut the head off his movement, then they were proved wrong. Shekau soon emerged as Boko Haram’s new leader and launched a bloody military offensive. Unemployed youths provided him with a flow of recruits.

Ideologically, the group seems not to be that well defined. It has been linked to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the past and corresponded with Osama bin Laden. More recently, it has declared its affiliation to IS’s global “Caliphate”, although it is far from clear that this move has been or will be reciprocated.

In substance, however, Boko Haram has more in common with al-Shabaab in Somalia and the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria, and has benefited from the flow of weapons into the region from mercenaries fleeing Libya after Gaddafi’s defeat. In short, it may well be inspired by “jihadist” Islamism in south-west Asia, but it is is very much a product of Africa.

Poverty and inequality

Nigeria is Africa’s largest oil producer and a full member of OPEC. Yet this wealth has had little, or even a negative impact on the lives of millions, especially the further one travels from the former capital Lagos and the more developed south-west.

An indicator of Nigeria’s under-development is that it has practically no oil refineries; petrol has to be re-imported and is subsidised from oil revenues for sale in garage forecourts. Its energy industry is plagued by corruption and tax evasion. When former central bank chief Lamido Sanusi claimed in February 2014 that state oil company revenues worth $20 billion had gone missing, President Goodluck Jonathan sacked him.
Theft by syphoning off oil from pipelines is rampant, accounting for as much as 20 per cent of production. This has its corollary in the growth of piracy and in the degradation of the land, something that provoked mass protests in the 1980s, and which has gotten even worse.

In the north, however, there is no sign of these huge riches. According to The Economist:

?Nowhere else in the world are more children out of school. Fewer than 5 per cent of women in some parts can read or write. Estimates put three out of four residents in the northeast below the poverty line, around twice as many as at the southern end of the country.? 

No wonder Boko Haram can recruit more quickly than the army can kill its fighters. But this alone does not explain why the army is losing to it.

Nigeria?s officer caste developed its present taste for wealth, power and corruption during the Biafran war in 1967-70, with several coups and counter-coups since. Few people believe much of the $4 billion annual military budget reaches its intended target, and the recent $1 billion additional military spending appears to have disappeared without trace. As a result, soldiers often go without pay for months on end, leading them to set up apparently ?official? checkpoints with the sole purpose of extracting bribes from civilians.

As for Sunni Muslims in today?s Iraq, there seems to be little to choose for the local population between the corrupt and murderous Nigerian army and Boko Haram. Nor is there much faith in the country?s politicians. Nigerian senators are paid $1 million a year, the biggest pay packet of any group of politicians in the world.

What can be done?

The roots of Nigeria?s social, economic, political and now military problems have to be located in its exploitation by Western imperialism in conjunction with the local bourgeoisie.

The USA only declared Boko Haram a terrorist organisation in 2013, four years after its insurgency began. It has done very little to combat it since. Why? Because imperialism is solely interested in Nigeria?s booming south, where GDP growth is on course for 7 per cent a year, potentially taking Nigeria into the top 20 world economies.

So oil majors like Chevron Texaco, Exxon Mobil and Shell invest billions in the oil sector, massively boosted by trade with China, but northern states like Borno can go hang, as far as Obama, Cameron and Xi Jingpin are concerned.

The only force capable of and willing to stand up to Boko Haram is the Nigerian working class, allied to the peasants, nomads and fisherfolk of the north-east. Their patience and belief in the government, army and international agencies to come to their aid has long run out.

Meanwhile, there have been numerous examples of villages and towns arming themselves and taking on Boko Haram, sometimes successfully. What they lack is weapons. While Boko Haram has stolen tanks and armoured personnel carriers, the self defence groups have only machetes and clubs. They should demand weapons from the government, fraternise with the soldiers and if necessary raid barracks so they can defend their communities.

As many men ? and women ? as possible need to be organised, armed and trained. The sooner Boko Haram?s raw recruits meet their match among the villagers, the sooner their morale will crack.

The remnants of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign continue to picket government offices, often attacked
by the police in a blatant attempt to silence them. They must not be silenced, but link up with councils of workers and peasants in the towns and villages, and appeal to the wider labour movement for support.

The Nigerian Labour Congress and Trade Union Congress launched a successful general strike three years ago against massive hikes in petrol prices. Millions heeded its call. Yet both organisations and the small reformist Nigerian Labour Party have been effectively silent over the war.

The Democratic Socialist Movement, the Nigerian sister party of the Socialist Party in England and Wales, has called for solidarity against Boko Haram’s advance, but has largely confined its demands to calling for regular payment of and arms for the rank and file soldiers. Scandalously, it extends this call to the corrupt and hated police.

But the soldiers don’t just need to be paid; they also need to be won to the side of the workers and the peasants and away from their officers. Socialists should demand the election of all officers and the dismissal of those guilty of corruption and brutality; for the right of soldiers to hold political meetings, to strike and to join political organisations.

There have been widespread reports of mutinies and even shootings of officers. These spontaneous acts of rebellion need to be made more conscious and linked to the goals and organisations of the working class and poor peasants.

If Nigerian socialists can over the coming months argue for these goals and link them to the wider goal of working class control of the oil sector and the banks, then the crisis caused by Boko Haram can become a launchpad for the fight for revolutionary socialism.

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