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Global powers and resilience of Boko Haram

By Armsfree Ajanaku
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Although it is over one decade since the Boko Haram insurgency began raging in Nigeria's North East, the seeds of insurgency were planted and watered much earlier.

A poisonous cocktail of politics, failed governance, combined with extremist strands of religious pedagogy to birth the monster.

During the years of the military, brute force was used to suppress earlier agitations and insurrections motivated by religious fundamentalism. The Maitasine riots of the mid 1980s were brutally suppressed by the military, without a corresponding programme of de-radicalisation to prevent future manifestations of conflicts fuelled by religious extremism. It was therefore a matter of time before another monstrous situation inspired by fundamentalist doctrines reared its head. In the case of Boko Haram, however, the context had changed. With the return to democracy in 1999, state actors could not merely shoot the problem out of existence. The consequential failure of democracy to deliver good governance, reduce poverty, illiteracy and protect basic human rights of citizens in the North East came back to haunt the state.

To win elections and appear populist, politicians empowered persons of doubtful loyalty, but extremist with ideologies. Such were even offered portfolios in government.

As expected, where the state failed to engage and listen to citizens, extremists quickly filled the void. Right before the eyes of the state therefore, a band of fanatics organised, recruited and grew their numbers to the point of being able to challenge the authority of the state. The nascent groups, which metamorphosed into Boko Haram began with skirmishes in which they targeted policemen, police stations and every other representation of the authority of the state. Emboldened by the weak and nonchalant response of the government, the extremists founders of Boko Haram took their nefarious agenda a step further by vowing to establish a so called Caliphate within Nigerian territory. It was at the point that the state began to take the threat seriously.

The military quickly moved in to smash the insurgency, but one decade later, the talk of victory has been episodic and subjective. At various times, government has made claims that it has subdued the terrorists on the field of battle.

In this context, the government announced the technical defeat of the insurgents. The point about the technical defeat presupposes that there remained a substantial part of the conflict yet to be resolved. Another way of putting it is that the war against Boko Haram was a reaction to the symptom of a much more fundamental problem.

To move from technical defeat of the insurgency to substantial victory, would therefore require digging deep to understand the domestic and international dimensions of the insurgency. The diagnosis would then give birth to effective response, both on the field of battle and in terms of a sociological response to the issues fueling Boko Haram.

As has been observed, the shooting war involving guns and bullets would record better successes if the inter-connected domestic and international factors are decisively



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That process would involve asking very important questions; what motivated a subset of Nigerians, once declared as the happiest people in the world to resort to terror as a means of communicating their frustrations with the Nigerian State. On the internal front, Nigeria is yet to answer the critical questions revolving around how Boko Haram has been able to mobilise and induce thousands of young Nigerians to join its camp, so much that it could sustain an insurgency against the Nigerian State for over one decade and counting.

While it is understandable that the insurgency was a direct result of the internal contradictions within the Nigerian State, there are also notable international dimensions to grapple with in understanding why Boko Haram has remained resilient up till this point. Notwithstanding the offensive by the security forces, which has decimated the ranks of the terrorists, they (terrorists) have still been able to build notable alliances with other terror networks across the globe.

For instance, the insurgents frantically searched for partners across the world from the league of other troublemakers, especially in the Middle East. The facts on the group suggest it has been very successful in building those synergies with like-minded doers of evil.



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Nigerian officials and commentators have for instance pointed at the Libyan connection in the persistence of Boko Haram's reign of terror. The theory is that after the disintegration of Libya with the killing of strongman, Muammar Ghaddafi, there was an influx of fighters and weapons into the Lake Chad basin. Boko Haram may have leveraged on this boost to bolster its arsenal, and has therefore not been shy to take on the Nigerian military.

Another clear manifestation of Boko Haram's capacity to synergise, and build relationships with other terrorist franchises would be gleaned from its relationship with the Islamic State. Again, with the Nigerian State looking on, Boko Haram was able to link up with ISIS, and it eventually rebranded to become the Islamic State of West Africa Province (ISWAP). Since the move to gain affiliation to the larger terror network across the globe, Boko Haram has become much more strategic. Its tactics have also evolved, mirroring a revamped capacity to carry on the dastardly mission of gaining a territorial foothold in West Africa, attacking soft targets, and remaining a constant threat to the peace and stability of the Nigerian State.

In comparison with the urgency with which the United States and its coalition partners moved in against ISIS to decimate, and substantially overawe it, perceptions are rife that the international community has not gone the whole hog to help Nigeria finish off the insurgency.

Although the United States in 2013 designated Boko Haram a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO), citing its growing impact in Cameroon, Niger, and Chad, the level of commitment to helping Nigeria end the insurgency has come under close scrutiny.

According to the United States Congressional Research Service, U.S. officials have increasingly sought to support programmes to improve counterterrorism coordination between Nigeria and its neighbours, and to improve each country's capacity to contain the group.

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