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NIGERIA'S BOKO HARAM ANALYZED THOUGH CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK BY

Laura Feliu and Rafael Grasa

MVZ 489 Causes of Political Violence

Research papeR

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Obsah:

1. Introduction:

Nigeria is a typical post-colonial African country, where the artificially made boundaries enclose a large but incoherent population. Roughly 150 million Nigerians are divided into almost 350 ethnic groups. According to the Collier and Hoeffler's (2004) findings it would be safe to say, that this level of fragmentation is way too significant to shape a sufficiently large movement to conduct an internal conflict. [1] However, Nigeria's society is divided also on the basis of religion, splitting the country in two between 50% of Muslim population and roughly 40% of Christians. And when it comes to conflict with a religious foundation, its uncompromising objectives make it truly hard to solve.

Since 2002, Nigeria experiences brutal attacks conducted by an Islamic militant group Boko Haram. The group's original name is *Jama'atul Alhul Sunnah Lidda'wati wal jihad*, what means "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad," or *Wilayat Gharb Afriqiya*, a name that referrs to the group as a part of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant Movements. However, Nigerians renamed the group Boko Haram after its demands. It translates as "Western culture/influence is forbidden" (Roggio 2013). As for this objective, the militants have attacked Christian churches, schools where girls are educated, United Nation buildings, politicians and Muslim critics of their activities.

According to the conflict resolution and peace research, conflict always has a multi-dimensional character depending highly on the historical and socio-cultural specification of

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[1] According to Collier and Hoeffler's findings, the share of ethnic groups within a state that is more prone to outburst in a violent conflict is when one of the groups constitutes between 45% and 60% of population.

each case. On the other hand the scientist argue, that these specific cases usually nonetheless work on similar bases, following some particular principles, being affected by the same factors (Feliu and Grasa 2013). In the Middle East and North Africa – or the MENA region – one of the most significant factor observed in the region's frequent conflicts is the religion. Laura Feliu and Rafael Grasa have analyzed the role of religion in their paper and stated six assumptions on the role of religion in the conflict eruption. Also, they have provided their readers with few necessary steps to take while analyzing conflict with a religious background.

This paper will look for causes of emergence of Boko Haram movement within Nigeria and also look for the dynamics of the conflict. As a tool we will use the approach given in the paper of Feliu and Grasa (2013). Their theory will be described in the following part of our text. The main body of the work will consist of the comparison between Boko Haram actual activities with the theory presented by selected authors. It will allow us to see what the true origins of the conflict with Boko Haram are, whether or not it could have been prevented or defeated, and possibly also reveal gaps in Feliu and Grasa's conceptual framework. All findings will be summarized in the conclusion.

2. Conceptual Framework

Laura Feliu and Rafael Grasa have presented a new perspective on the religious dimension in the dynamics of the internal violent conflicts. *Their article Armed Conflicts and Religious Factors: The Need for Synthesized Conceptual Frameworks and New Empirical Analyses – The Case of the MENA Region* offers a new conceptual framework for this purpose. This text will use given framework in practice by applying it to a specific case.

The selected case is a terrorist organization Boko Haram in Nigeria. It had been chosen due to its position in MENA region as well as because of author's subjective interest in the case. Another reason lies in Boko Haram's relative similarity to ISIS. If we take the authors' premise, that religion based conflicts in MENA region are similar enough to be studied as a whole, we might be allowed to generalize the findings as well. Through analyzing Boko

Haram we can find some contributing information about other large Islamic movements without the need to break into the overly complicated Syria conflict.

The Feliu – Grasa approach builds on three initial assumptions framing the holistic approach to analysis. They are necessary to accept before initiating the analytical process. First, conflict is a type of interaction between others and their interests. Second, conflict is in the nature of human beings and thus present on all analytical dimensions. The final assumption refers to the conflict as a dynamic process with phases of escalation and de-escalation.

We will also assume authors research question, only with a small modification for the specific purposes:

i. How does religion contributed to the outbreak of violent conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government?

ii. How does the religion contribute to the dynamics of violent conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government – accelerating or containing?

To answer these questions, we will follow the toolbox given by Feliu and Grasa. It is a combination of conflict resolution and peace research findings, assumptions developed by Isak Svensson (2012) and authors own findings. The final six points of conceptual framework may be summarized as follows:

1. As conflict are multi-causal and complex, it is necessary to find whether the religion's role is in origin or in the dynamic of the conflict, and also to identify other elements.

2. Develop a hierarchy of causes, levels and dimensions of the conflict. Where does religion play the biggest role or is a priority?

3. Combine different explanatory frameworks to reach a complete understanding of the problem (such as structural, social or empirical) as they all are designed to uncover different information.

4. Explore, whether there are institutions that promote war while perhaps using religion as a facilitator.

5. Identify, whether the religion in a conflict plays a role of a structural cause, accelerator or a trigger. Also identify, whether it is a necessary or sufficient cause.

6. Empirical and area studies are crucial for studying impact of religion on the dynamics of conflict.

Perhaps excerpt the last point, we will use these six instructions to navigate through the origins of Boko Haram violence. Some of the emerging questions will be answered right in the main body of the text while answer for more complex points will be left for the conclusion. Limits of the work lie in the inability to truly explore the conflict in all possible dimensions as Feliu and Grasa suggest.

3. Origins of the conflict

Unfortunately, the exact genesis of Boko Haram still remains in doubt. According to Adesoi (2010) the movement is not young, emerging from the example of Al-Quaeda or ISIS, but rather has its origins in the Yan Tatsine riots[2] from the 80's and religious-ethnic tension that followed after finally establishing democracy in 1999. That provides us with no clear answer on whether the role of religion is primary or secondary. Yan Tatsine riots were protests of Islamic community against Islamic government that followed death of a rather humble-living Islamic priest, however the establishment of democracy in 1999 meant for the Islamic north nothing but a loss of power. After a long era of dictators from the majority northern groups, the establishment of democracy have brought a first Christian president (that was still in power when Boko Haram emerged).

The only thing known for certain is that Mohammed Yusuf founded Boko Haram in 2002 in Maiduguri, Borno State with the purpose to establish sharia government in there. Even though Sharia apply in northern federal states since 1999, in the north-eastern states it only does apply for personal issues and does not involve criminal law and neither does other laws that are in the competence of the central government. At first, Yusuf did a great amount of community work in Borno state. However, he soon became started recruiting fighters to attack local government, officials and policemen. (Umar 2011)

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[2] Yan Tatsine is a name of the militant group led by controversial Islamic preacher Maitatsine (Mohammed Marwa). His preaching was aimed to criticize mainstream Muslims and failing values in Nigeria, politicians and religious teachers. Yan Tatsine comprised mainly from economically disadvantaged people and youth.

However, one cannot argue – as Umar does – that these large ambitions are sign of departure from religious goals. It is certainly possible for a convinced leader to want to apply his religious objectives in the bigger picture.

In 2004 when first attacks occurred, Boko Haram bared a name Taliban. It consisted exclusively from jobless and disaffected youth. 'Nigerian Taliban' was disapproved by many members of local communities, however there were also signs of support. (Boyle 2009). The group under Yusuf leadership targeted only politicians and policemen, not Muslim civilians.

We are not sure about Yusuf's religion pursuits, however we know that he was trying to collect a sufficient number of followers for his pursuit of *coup d'etat.* There probably was a strong political motive under the movement and it is not surprising. Since gaining sovereignty, Nigeria witnessed four *coups d'etat,* four years-long civil war fueled by ethnic and religious differences, while violent deaths are an omnipresent phenomenon within Nigeria as a failing state. That being said, it confirms Collier's theory that a history of conflict increases a risk of further conflict. Besides, when we look at the Nigeria's past conflicts, we can see it being fought mainly over natural resources and political power (source of money). Therefore, from this context alone, religion emerges not as sufficient, but rather as a necessary cause of the Boko Haram violent movement.

4. Structural dimension

According to Feliu and Grasa, the structural factors are one of the most crucial to explore (2013: 443). We will try to take look at them from more perspectives, as the authors suggest, namely empirical and socio-cultural dimensions.

From the empirical point of view, Nigeria has been classified as a failed state. For a long time the country holds an upper position (currently 14th place) in Fragile State Index by *Fund for Peace* for (2015). Thanks to the vast amount of resources coming from diverse sources (natural resources and fishing) Nigerian GDP is rising, however the vast corruption diminishes these results. Rougly 108 million people out of total 182 million live under the poverty line, making Nigeria 152 out of 185 within a *Human Development Index* (2015).

However, empirical data cannot quite grasp the nature of Nigeria society that have produced Boko Haram (perhaps as well as the economical and institutional failure). As Feliu and Grasa suggest in their work, we will derive our assumptions on this matter from works of experts on relevant area studies. At the same time, we have to take into account that all prospect of human behavior are permeated by religion and thus we cannot exclude it from the next part as well.

A French anthropologist J.P. Olivier de Sardan in 1999 has issued a complex study on Africa that were derived from decades of studies in Nigeria that he had conducted. He found out that the most influential factor taking priority on every level of analysis is the topic of corruption. However, nature of corruption in the MENA states differs from its limited western-centric perception that we possess. Sardan (1999) thus prefers the term *corruption complex.* Understanding it is crucial for correct recognition of the role of religion that is tied to every aspect to the society as well.

First of all, Nigerians see as a corruption whole set of issues from bribery through nepotism to passing discrete information or using influence given by the office. It is an omnipresent phenomenon, affecting every single level of Nigerian society. Even though the corruption in highest ranks is the most damaging as it withdraws almost all the money needed for public purposes, its vast presence in the lowest ranks of the society creates a structural problem and sets a tone for of the state apparatus functioning as well as for Nigerian society in general (Keller 1995). The basic narrative goes: "*Take advantage or you will be taken advantage of*". Put in other words, in a state where it is necessary to bribe somebody every day, it is also necessary to require the bribes back from others. Therefore, corruption is seen as a necessity from ones/ones' tribe perspective. However, simultaneously it is seen as a crime when looking to others.

According to Sardan (1999), this everyday struggle against the society forces people to live in a constant "us vs. them" position. However, this 'demarcation of identity' is very fluid for Nigerians. It may be seen as family vs. family, tribe vs. tribe, in terms of the large number of ethnic groups, larger ethnic conglomerations based on native language, or – on the national level – in terms of religion.

Meanwhile, corruption in the form of complex is enormously stigmatized in a public discourse. According to Bayart (1992), Nigerians have the perception of corruption as an indefinable, all-embracing evil responsible for the extreme poverty that they live in (and they are quite right). Then it is not surprising, that corruption has a large mobilization potential. In Nigeria alone, all the past revolutions were conducted in a name of dealing with corrupted politicians and it remains a main topic in democratic elections as well. Boko Haram is no exception in benefiting from this phenomenon. The group only uses it on religious level.

Just as new political candidates blame their opponents in office for corruption, Boko Haram goes further and blames the concept of democratic government as a whole. In their premises, corruption is wickedness brought from Western countries during colonization. According to them, secular government (whether dictatorship or democracy) will be inherently corrupt and thus seeks to establish rule under Sharia law (Akanji 2015). Of course, subsequently Nigeria would join the larger (and corruption-free) caliphate. As it was stated previously, in the Nigerian's way of perception, corruption is not just about money but about basically every wrongdoing of state officials, state employees or bureaucrats.

Therefore, as a structural factors we may identify the vast poverty in a combination with corruption complex embedded in a society as a whole. It is possible to find it on every level of analysis from interpersonal to national and from the gathered information it might be stated that it is a priority on all of them. Religion plays a role of a quick solution to an omnipresent large-scale problem. It is a fight led for a great cause, while the religions grants violent events a moral transcendence.

Regarding the structural factors, Feliu and Grase themselves state that in MENA region there is a "specific global, regional and area processes converging on specific location, raising religion to the position of sources of ideas for mobilization." (2015: 445) That statement is certainly supporting previously stated theory of this text. However this statement might be still a little bit too western-centric, lacking the understanding of importance of religion for the people. It is possible, that the specific historical and socio-economic circumstances merely fit the religion's demands. Therefore, this text hesitates to put religion and other factors into a hierarchy as Feliu and Grase recommend.

5. Dynamics of the conflict

European Union estimates that in its most vital era two years ago, Boko Haram consisted of circa 6000 followers from across Northern Nigeria, as well as from Chad and Niger (Barna 2014). Although it doesn't seem much in a context of 182 billion Nigerian population, the group has caused more than 22 000 deaths over the years. Boko Haram adopted the live-off-the-land life style in north-eastern area of its origin and looted local villages. As Campbell (2013) states, the group's demography was not evolving beyond its former member base and continued to attract only unemployed youth with knowledge encompassing only words of Quran. That is somewhat understandable, citing the previously mentioned structural factors such as vast poverty, enormous level of corruption, and offer of quick and radical solutions.

First violent attacks appeared already in 2004, yet under Yusuf's leadership it was not the Boko Haram we know today. The group targeted mainly politicians and allegedly corrupted policemen and clerks. In these times, public support for the group grew and so did their numbers. However, tension with police escalated as well and culminated in 2009 with a banal trigger – refusal of motorbike-helmet law. Escalation of the situation was quick, turning into an uprising in four northern states. It was stopped by heavily armed police intervention. Fights caused over 800 casualties and Muhammed Yusuf was detained, later publicly executed (Johnson 2013, HRW 2012).

If we pay attention to the trigger, according to Feliu and Grasa we shall be able to explain the sufficient causes of the conflict, while structural factors would only provide us with the necessary causes. Even though the trigger itself does not really say much, its closer observation does leads us to another structural factor. According to locals in 2009, government was reluctant to warnings about Boko Haram over the years. The most probable explanation is that it was both incapable and unwilling to handle the situation. (Boyle 2009)

After Yusuf's death, Boko haram contracted, however was not defeated and only took time to regroup. The group returned in 2010 under the leadership of Abubakar Shakau, severely radicalized. Boko Haram acquired advanced tactics such as suicide bombings or mass shootings. (Marchal 2012) In a wake of this strong wave of violence, Boko Haram targeted police headquarters and United Nations buildings in Abuja, causing over 900 deaths in 2012 alone (HWR 2012).

However, the group faced major fractionalization following Yusuf's death. The US House of Representatives (2011) talks about two factions: a domestic one and a global one. However other authors, such as Marchal (2012), report three faction different in their attitudes towards the violence or negotiation with possible compromises. The amount of violence also causes public support to diminish. Yet, the government led by former president Goodluck Jonathan was not able to face the movement. Number of casualties during his presidency (2010 to 2015) reached 22 000.

Feliu and Grasa warn in their text about governmental institutions that fuel the internal conflict. Former Nigerian government apparently did that – only indirectly. Since 2010 top officials had stolen $15bn intended for war against Boko Haram, as for last years of Jonathans mandate there were no money for the military equipment whatsoever. (BBC 2016) Share of the blame that Jonathan's government takes is visible as his successor Muhammadu Buhari has diminished the movement in one single year. Although, it is necessary to note that Boko Haram is still relevant threat and others are emerging (see Obasi 2016).

6. Conclusion:

After the analysis of both origins, dynamics and adding necessary structural factors, we will be able to answer given research questions.

First question tackled the contribution of the religion to the outbreak of violent conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government. According to this documents, religion have not played the primary role, yet a very necessary one. As the nature of targets of Boko Haram under Yusuf's lead shows (policemen and politicians, no civilians), their primary objective was to dismantle the government and its institution as a reason of dissatisfaction

with contemporary situation in a state. Religion was in a position of the "only solution" for the situation and at the same time a connecting link within an ethnically factionalized society. However, conclusion that religion was only a tool during the origins of the movement would be a western-centric foul.

The second question has asked how does the religion contributes to the dynamics of violent conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government, whether it has an accelerating or containing effect. Counting on the fact that the stunningly corrupt president during 2010 – 2015 was a Christian, it might be safe to say that the religion differences had accelerated conflict at least on lower dimensions of analysis. However, during the conflict the role of religion declined for the benefit of other factor: excessive violence. It caused the group to fractionalize, it diminished the public support and it made Christian electorate to vote for a Muslim candidate. That makes the violence a truly significant factor.

If the religion was a primary factor, a sufficient cause, we would see violence spread from a different part of Nigeria then the homogenously Muslim north-east. The conflict would rather occur on the line between Christians and Muslims. Or at least the targets would be primary Christians, but no. The nature of the targets (civilians practicing anything western) shows, that the group rather sees the problem within the society as a whole. At that point, it is confusing to identify the identity of a militant group. Boko Haram defines itself by religion but simultaneously it stands against everybody.

Major factor in the conflict is its structural cause. That is a long term poverty, corruption complex affecting a whole society and continuous disparity on various levels within the country. As an accelerator of the violence we may also identify the global boom of Jihadism that flourished under Al-Quaeda and is further promoted by ISIS. Establishing Caliphate is seen by militants as the only way out from the structural imbalance that is for decades imposed on the constantly failing Nigeria. Unfortunately, defining the structural problems as the main cause for the conflict gives Nigeria no good prospects for the future.

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