

In the aftermath of Boko Haram's audacious kidnapping of 276 Nigerian schoolgirls, John Chisholm examines the group's history and ambitions, and asks how they can be stopped

BOKO HARAM TAKING LIBERTY

The April 2014 kidnapping of an entire class of girls by Boko Haram in northern Nigeria has propelled the organisation into the global consciousness. Public figures as lofty as Michelle Obama held up cards demanding "Bring back our girls", and a group that had not been widely known outside West Africa and the security community became international news. But Boko Haram is, even by the standards of Islamic fundamentalists, a peculiar organisation and one that is difficult to pin down, even figuratively.

Boko Haram, like many Jihadist organisations, is not a formally structured group with a recognisable chain of command. There are, at the very least, three cells plus one probable splinter group. They all share a broadly common aim: an Islamic state in West Africa under Sharia law, but they sometimes differ on approach and tactics. They do all fall under the umbrella name of "Boko Haram", however, which is a mix of Arabic and Hausa whose precise definition is disputed. Possibly the most accurate reflection is "Non-Muslim teaching is forbidden", although other options advanced include "Western education is sinful" or "bogus education is sinful". But wrapped up in this title is the opinion that anything Western is negative, a threat to Islam and should be rejected.

The leaders of Boko Haram have shown themselves to be practitioners of this intellectual Omerta. Former leader Mohammed Yusuf, who died in police custody in 2009, is a case in point. Despite a graduate education and flawless English, Yusuf rejected the notion of a spherical Earth as "contrary to Islamic teaching". Following the spherical Earth into the intellectual waste bin was the entirety of Darwinian natural selection and the fact that rain was water originally evaporated by sunlight. They are also happy with the concept of slavery, particularly of women.

But Boko Haram is not the formal and official name. The group also rejoices in the title of "The Congregation of the People of Tradition for Proselytism and Jihad", and it is important to note the word "tradition" in that title. This is very firmly a group dedicated to putting the clock back, but arguably there is nowhere to put the clock back to which has reliable written records. Indeed, this is a flight away from Westernisation, globalisation and democracy, but towards a mythical past that exists only in imagination. In this sense, Boko Haram is a true flight from reality into fantasy. They are, though, on firmer ground with "tradition", as they can call upon considerable Hausa cultural traditions – for example



slavery and female genital mutilation (of which the latter has no mention in the Koran and was not practiced by Mohammed). This has left the group with an interesting melange of Hausa tradition and Wahabbist Islamic ideology.

It is also worth commenting that the past that Jihadists look back upon did not exist either. Mohammed died leaving no instructions for a successor or guidance as to

More than 900 people are thought to have died as a result of Boko Haram's attacks under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau

AM: TIES



how an Islamic state was to be managed. The result was that his successors were left to make things up as they went along, making pragmatic political decisions in light of Koranic teachings that often presented successors with major headaches. As the Islamic world expanded, things became tougher. With no clear guidance as to the transition of power, the Islamic world was bedevilled by

civil wars and assassinations while wealth gradually slid into control of small elites.

One aspect that must trouble Boko Haram is the racism at the core of the Islamist agenda, if they indeed base things of the political structures created by the Rightly Guided Caliphs. Mohammed was perfectly clear that all Muslims were equal. On his death this principle did not last long. In effect it was decided that the Caliphate could only pass to an Arab, and an Arab from Medina at that. This was the Sunni tradition. The Shia went one step further and decreed that leadership could only stem from Mohammed's descendants or family. This is why Ayatollahs in Iran are keen to emphasise their Arabic roots and deny the long history and culture of Persia. This eventually manifested itself in the extension of taxation from non-Muslims to non-Arabic Muslims when the money from conquest started to run dry.

Most Islamists are unaware of the facts of the history of the rightly guided Caliphs and their successors. Through teaching heavily funded by Saudi Arabia and influenced by Islamist scholars, they have been fed a mythology. Anything that contradicts current Islamist thought is either downplayed or simply excised from the record – the fate of Mohammed's family after his death is a case in point.

This has not stopped Boko Haram from making links with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other similar organisations. Disorganised and ramshackle though they may be, they share a common idea: hatred and fear of the West. That they share a common idea of what they are fighting for – an Islamic State – is another matter entirely.

This very confused, and in some cases contradictory, ideology has led Boko Haram to raise Cain in northern Nigeria since 2009. Nigeria is ethnically and religiously mixed, and it shouldn't be overlooked that the predominantly Christian areas to the south are the more prosperous and have gained from the Western investment in oil along the coast. Although founded in 2002, Boko Haram was a largely peaceful organisation until members began a campaign of violence and terror in 2009. This seems to have been stimulated by the Nigerian government, which began an investigation into the group amid rumours that they were stockpiling weapons. This was true, and in response to the government crackdown they began to use them. By the end of 2009, and following 700 casualties, it seemed that Boko Haram was finished, its leaders imprisoned or killed. But instead it was only in remission, and in 2011 it came out shooting under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau.

Shekau proved to be ruthless and driven, holding a dry, ultra-orthodox and strident Islamicist ideology. According to Human Rights Watch, more than 900 more people have died as a result of his attacks. Targets have included police stations, churches, schools and Christian Nigerians. Tactics have included shootings, kidnappings and bombings – including suicide bombings. Boko Haram has not had it all its own way, however. In May 2014, the villagers of Menari, Tsangayari and Garawa fought back, leaving an estimated 200 Boko Haram

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militants dead and an unknown number wounded. Despite the continuous and large-scale killings, it was the April kidnapping of schoolgirls that thrust Boko Haram into the international spotlight. Two hundred and seventy six schoolgirls were taken from the village of Chibok while they were sitting their exams. Shekaau was quick to appear on video claiming responsibility and making demands – in this case for the release of imprisoned Islamic militants. There have been rumours that a deal was discussed, but that the Nigerian government called it off. Certainly any obvious deal would undermine Nigeria's anti-terrorism operations and Shekau is not likely to provide a face-saving cover story; instead, he is likely to maximise the humiliation of the government. Shekau has threatened to sell the girls into slavery if his demands are not met.

The Nigerian army, meanwhile, has displayed a mind-boggling unwillingness to do anything out of fear of a bloodbath. It now claims to know where the girls are being held, but also has made clear its intention to do nothing about it. The US, France and Britain have sent advisors in counter-terrorism, drones and quite possibly Special Forces. There is the option of a rescue operation under international auspices, but this may simply expose the Nigerian government to accusations of impotence. At the Paris summit in May, Western nations pledged expertise and training to help the Nigerians fight terror groups such as Boko Haram.

But training such a force to have an effect on the situation will take some time – time the girls probably do not have. The short-term result, as has already been seen at Menari, Tsangayari and Garawa, is vigilante groups of armed villagers and "hunters" taking matters into their own hands. These are, after all, their communities and they could just have easily been their children.

But the kidnapping has been followed by other attacks: more than 110 people were killed by a car bomb in Jos on 20 May. On 5 May at Gamburu, a marketplace was witness to the slaughter of more than 330 people. In the space of a month, Boko Haram has killed more than half as many people again as they had in the period 2011-2014. Against a backdrop of perceived – or indeed actual – military impotence, local people are taking defence into their own hands. They are arming and organising. This is bad news for any terrorist organisation. They generally aim at the forces of the state and treat civilians as helpless victims. In this case, Boko Haram may have made a serious miscalculation.

These people know the local areas, and if they were ever backed up by the army with modern weapons and equipment and Western technology, Boko Haram would probably be defeated in weeks. And the girls? Four have managed to escape. Others may find their way home. But it would be a rash person indeed who was able to predict their fate: freedom, death or slavery. But in taking this step, and launching this offensive, Boko Haram may have bitten off more than they can chew.

The kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls by militants has led to international protests against Boko Haram

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