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Boko Haram's Covert Front

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Introduction.

Insurgents tend to be associated with guerrilla warfare, often a necessary amalgam of tactics insofar as irregular forces face state forces that possess, more often than not, superior capabilities. The insurgent however has much to consider if he is to field, and be successful at fielding, an overt front. This overt front — effectively a standing army — is necessary for the realization of territorial ambition; insofar as territory cannot be held, secured and administered by covert operatives. Much, however, is involved in mobilizing, equipping, training and deploying an army. The process of preparing the army itself takes time. An army deployed today may have taken years of planning and preparation. Moreover, even a well-trained and well equipped overt front still faces an uphill task, if open confrontation of state forces is the objective. Traditional state forces after all tend to have the doctrine, capabilities and, often, the experience, to engage comparable conventional forces, relative to irregular threats. Thus, even having a trained and equipped standing army, itself a considerable enterprise, does not guarantee battlefield success for the insurgent; insofar as he will be engaging the counter-insurgent in an area of warfare, warfighting, where the latter is strongest.

Surely then, given militaristic challenges of open confrontation, it would be better for the insurgent to simply remain a guerrilla? This is what John Mackinlay suggests where he unpacks post-Maoist approaches to violently contesting state power, and points out that this category of insurgent more often than not frustrates government forces by avoiding the engagement altogether. Rather than provoking the engagement, the archetypical insurgent chooses to wear out state forces by striking from covert positions and then retreating, usually to the countryside. Where the insurgent in question is an “urban guerrilla” — operating in built-up spaces — he blends in with the local population (Mackinlay, 2012). Regardless of where the insurgent chooses to pitch his tent, the doctrine is one of war avoidance, so activity is limited to the lower rungs of the conflict escalation ladder: kidnappings; jailbreaks; suicide bombings; market raids to replenish supplies; ambush tactics against small police and military detachments; acts of sabotage; acts of propaganda; minor skirmishes with security forces; and disruption of daily life, whether in urban or in rural areas.

Over time such minor acts add up to discrediting governance and the rule of law, in contested areas. Major battles are not required for governance and the writ of the state to eventually collapse. Indeed, such is the effectiveness of the guerrilla, that rampancy is not even required. Infrequent attacks, at low levels of combat intensity, will suffice to strike terror into locals.

Better still if the government interprets the low intensity nature of conflict to mean military superiority should be asserted. This could eventually lead to an over-reactive target response: the detention of people, the kicking down of doors, indiscriminate use of force, and similar acts of coercion. The insurgent feeds off the blowback from this sort of target response. Some insurgency theories —Earnesto “Che” Guevera’s *Focoism* idea system for instance — even suggest a target response by the state, marks a turning (Guevara, 1968). This is because the insurgent, beyond that point, becomes a viable alternative to a state that not only failed in its duty of governance and security but that brutalizes its population in addition. By reacting with coercion in a way that affects the local populace, the government’s dereliction of duty provides an avenue to the insurgent to insinuate himself within the local population. He becomes the ultimate threat if he can do so: an enemy that can hide in plain sight is an enemy that cannot be defeated unless he can be separated, one way or another, from the population that looks just like him. Not surprisingly, guerrillas since antiquity have favoured this covert approach, to warfighting and direct confrontation. The theories are rich with contributions around why this approach to insurgency is more effective against the state, than the overt activity of a standing army.

Famous Argentine Marxist revolutionary, Enersto “Che” Guevara, for instance was not an advocate of open confrontation against state forces. Che Guevara preferred rather the use of “irregulars” to provoke the state into a target response. Indeed, Che’s focoist approach entirely skips Mao Tse-tung’s third phase of insurgency (open confrontation once a critical mass of local support is gained). Che instead places much emphasis on guerrilla warfare (1968), with the local population as the *foco* (Spanish for focus). For Guevara, guerrilla warfare is an indispensable part of revolution. It is a means by which to discredit the state; a means by which to provoke a target response by the state; a means to gain local support; and, ultimately, a slow vehicle towards political legitimacy, if and when a critical mass of local support can be reached. Focoism, the ideology on which Guevara bases his approach to revolutionary warfare, therefore does not recommend undeliberate progression from the guerrilla phase of contestation (1968). And there is a reason why guerrilla warfare is so popular with rebels, historically and in contemporary instances: it works.

Indeed, so successful have loosely organized bands and irregulars been at frustrating much larger, professional and organized forces; and so often has guerrilla warfare been the choice of smaller, weaker forces; that irregulars may well have become the dominant military threat today (Gates, 2011; Boot, 2013). Commenting on the preponderance of insurgent warfare, Max Boot observes that “since World War II, insurgency and terrorism have become the dominant forms of conflict—a trend likely to continue into the foreseeable future” (2013, p. xx). For Boot, guerrilla warfare is appealing to the insurgent because “it is cheap and easy; waging guerrilla warfare does not require procuring expensive weapons systems or building an elaborate bureaucracy. And it works. At least sometimes” (2013, p. xx).

Guerrilla warfare constitutes a staple in Boko Haram’s insurgency strategy; it is a critical element of Boko Haram’s military doctrine; and it is the platform on which Boko Haram launched its campaign since the Bauchi Prison jailbreak of September 2010. Now, some may be surprised at how effective Boko Haram’s guerrilla plank has since gone on to be. Yet the evidence supporting the viability of guerrilla warfare, against a more powerful opponent, is difficult to refute. In over thirty centuries of war, irregulars have confounded much larger, considerably better equipped militaries, time and again (Boot, 2013).

Boko Haram exploited the numerous advantages of guerrilla warfare, in making its covert front the main plank of anti-government resistance, between 2011 and 2014. As the overt plank of Boko Haram’s operations came into its own by 2014, there was a noticeable reduction in covert operations as military fighting and a territory-seeking doctrine was implemented by Boko Haram’s army of irregulars. Yet, even in such circumstances, the insurgent’s covert front remained a formidable background threat; one that never went away. Consequently, with its overt front losing 90 per cent of its territory and greatly degraded by March and April of 2015, Boko Haram reverted to first principle, and to guerrilla warfare. This is not surprising. Boko Haram as an insurgent has been more effective as a guerrilla, rather than as a war fighter. I make the case for this argument, in the pages that follow.

Efficiency versus Effectiveness.

Boko Haram is an efficient guerrilla. At one point in its campaign, Boko Haram was causing so many civilian casualties, with so few attacks, that no other perpetrator group in the world — not even Daesh — had its casualties-per-attack ratio. Figure 4-2 highlights the comparative casualties-per-attack ratios of Boko Haram and Daesh, between 2013 and 2014.

Boko Haram is also efficient because the overall financial and military cost of its insurgency — comparative to the millions displaced, the thousands killed, the military mobilization to counter its threat, and indeed the scale of the conflict it has generated in north-east Nigeria — is negligible. As Boot notes, insurgency, is “cheap” (2013, p. xx).

Boko Haram also is an effective guerrilla. Its attacks have been able to penetrate even hardened Nigerian Army, security and government locations. As far back as 2011, even before Boko Haram was proficient in martyrdom operations (*al-amaliyyat al-istishhadiyya* or *istishhad* for short), the group was able to successfully deploy vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) at the United Nations building, and at the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) headquarters, in 2011 (The BBC, 2011b; The BBC, 2011c). Both of these locations were in Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory; far away from Boko Haram’s contested areas in north-east Nigeria. In addition, the police HQ bombing at Louise Edet House, Abuja, was Nigeria’s and Boko Haram’s first ever suicide bombing. Since then, Boko Haram further improved its understanding of both IED making and the utility of *istishhad* as a terror weapon. Loss of its bomb makers in 2009 and 2012, appeared to have had no real effect on the pace of bombings. Boko Haram, regardless, has been able to hit targets almost indiscriminately, particularly in the areas of north-east Nigeria at the heart of its insurgency. Boko Haram’s ability to strike terror, by causing large casualties per attack, has become a mark of its technical proficiency in guerrilla warfare.

Between 2013 and 2014 for instance, Boko Haram was so effective in its covert activity that it might have become the foremost perpetrator group, or violent non-state actor (VNSA) in the world. Indeed, during the above period, the *increase* in the number of overall wartime casualties caused by Boko Haram was said, by the Institute for Economics and Peace, to be “the biggest ever recorded” within the Global Terrorism Index (2015, p. 18). Chart 4-1 below shows the relative threat of Boko Haram between the years of 2013 and 2014.

LARGEST INCREASES IN DEATHS: 2013 TO 2014

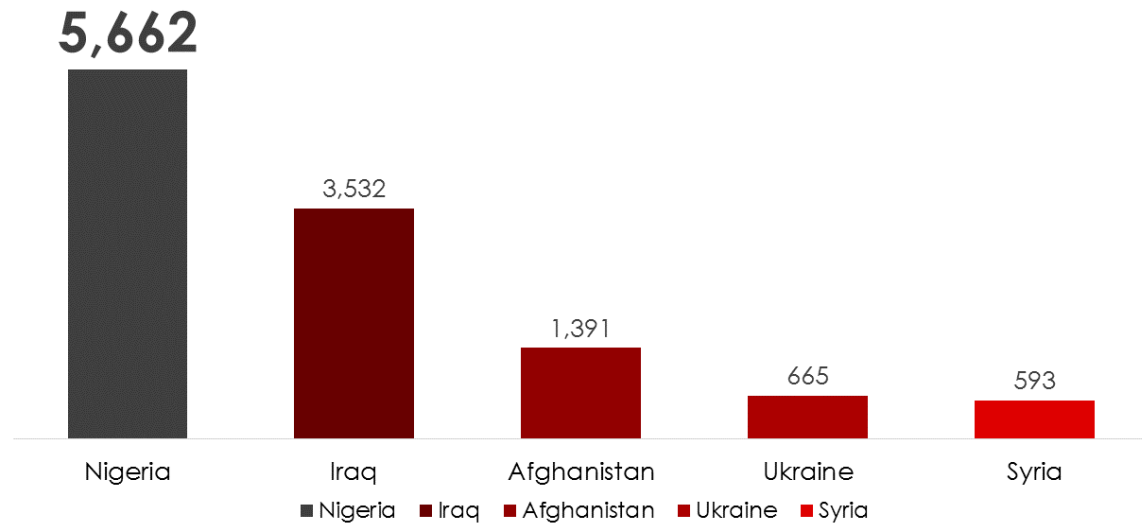


Chart 1-1: Largest Increases in Terrorism-Related Deaths, Globally (2013-2014)¹

As seen in Chart 4-2 below moreover, between 2013-2014, Boko Haram arguably came to surpass even Daesh in terms of violence resulting in civilian deaths. It is striking that even with almost 2.5 times the number of attacks conducted by Boko Haram, Daesh caused considerably less casualties — specifically, deaths — over the same period. Also, in relative terms, Boko Haram was responsible for almost a quarter of worldwide terrorism-related deaths during this period. Caroline Varin, drawing from the same data sets that I do², comments that “on a global scale, out of 32,658 people killed by terrorism in 2014, Boko Haram was responsible for 7,512 deaths, equivalent to 23% of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide. This also represents an increase of 300% over 2013 suggesting the growing potential of the terrorist group” (2016, p. 3).

Scale of violence (2013-2014): BOKO HARAM v. DAESH

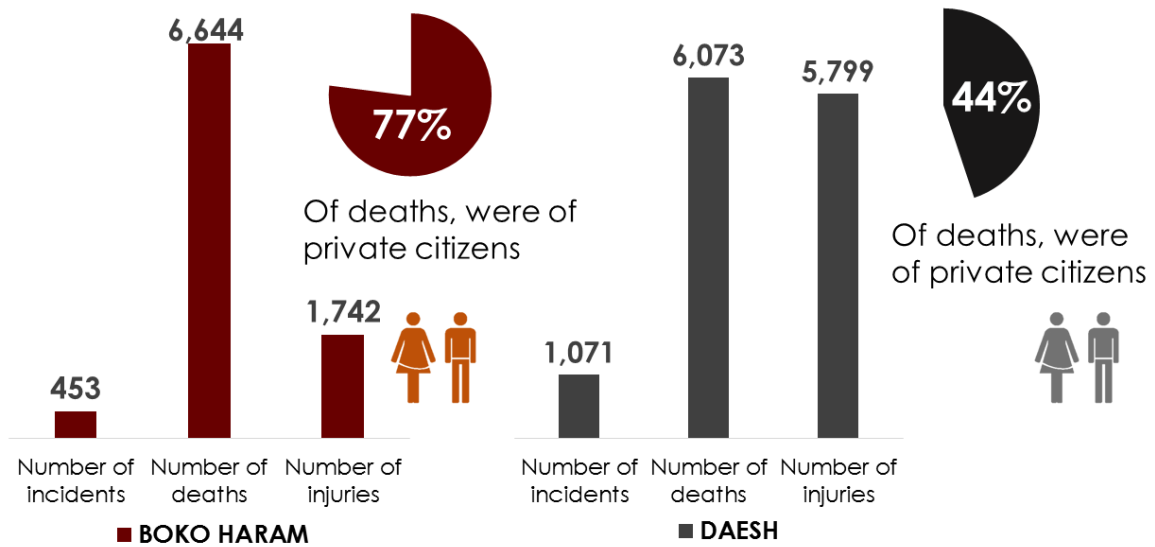


Chart 1-2: Relative Scale of Boko Haram Violence³

Over 15,000 Deaths as a Consequence of Insurgency (2009 – Feb 2015)

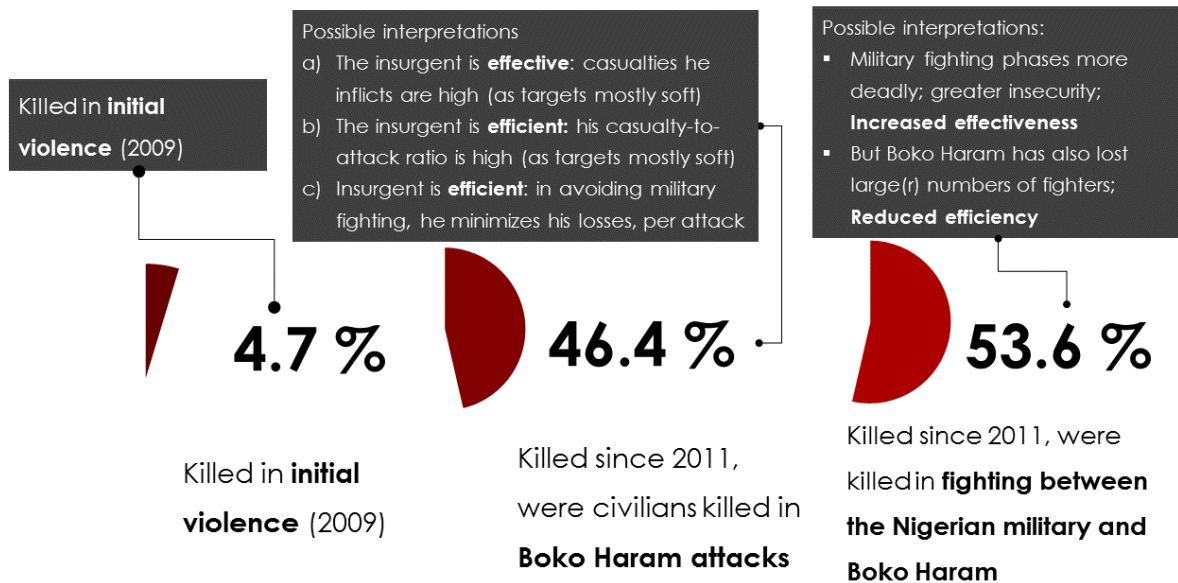


Chart 1-3: Casualties as a Consequence of Boko Haram’s Insurgency.

Chart 4-3 also indicates that whereas Boko Haram has been a deadly insurgent over the course of its campaign, the phases of military fighting in particular have seen an overall increase in casualties. Civilians, the landscape, and infrastructure, also have not been spared in this contest; especially where military fighting has occurred in populated areas.

Military fighting however has also brought about heavy losses for Boko Haram itself; losses that have forced a shift in its calculus of war. By deviating from a war avoidance doctrine, and in choosing to engage the Nigerian military, Boko Haram has lost large numbers of irregulars, but also platforms and equipment. Some of these platforms (heavy armour in particular), seized from the Nigerian Army, would be difficult or impossible to replace.

The Cost of Military Fighting.

The cost to Boko Haram, of a territory-seeking strategy underpinned by military fighting, was not immediately apparent. Indeed, Boko Haram's insurgency escalated even as military fighting came to dominate its calculus of war. In particular, rapid gains between late 2014 and early 2015 may have misled Boko Haram into believing that an enduring doctrine of military fighting will serve it as well as one of war avoidance. Confidence in the territorial gains made by its overt front for instance led Boko Haram to prematurely declare its captured territories as the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Comolli & Robertson, 2015b). Brimming with confidence in September 2014, Abu Shekau, its leader, would say that "Allah used us to capture Gwoza [so-called capital]; Allah is going to use Islam to rule Gwoza, Nigeria and the whole world" (Windrem, 2014). Shekau's comments came in the months preceding the start of Boko Haram's Harmattan Offensive; a period that led to spectacular territorial gains by the end of Harmattan season, in February/March 2015. Shekau's remarks however, ultimately proved illusory. Boko Haram's overt front *would*, eventually, lose Gwoza to military fighting. Indeed, as the insurgent's overt front tried to assert itself in defence of other captured territories, the inefficiency of military fighting compared to guerrilla warfare came to be experienced by Boko Haram. It was a bitter experience; one the insurgent is yet to fully recover from as of April 2017.

Supplies, logistics, troop movement, provision of morale, the sustainability of land objectives, defensibility of each location, reinforcements (or the lack thereof). Each of these are the warfighter's concern; and this is even aside from the actual business of warfighting. The guerrilla on the other hand simply needs to have war avoidance doctrine that he can skilfully implement. Avoid major engagement at all costs; and avoid being caught, while harassing the government and terrorizing locals using minimal resource exertion, and the guerrilla is efficient at establishing his threat. Where said harassment becomes such a concern that the government's ability to secure its own territories is discredited, then the insurgent is also effective at his task. In this sense, an effective guerrilla should not be confused for an effective warfighter.

As the above charts indicate, Boko Haram's effectiveness as a terrorist guerrilla outfit is unquestionable. Yet its military fighting, and its decision to pursue a territory-seeking strategy, has been costly.

Specifically, Boko Haram's losses and casualties — as a trade-off for temporary territorial gains — have greatly undermined the viability of its army of irregulars; its overt front. Such have been these losses that Boko Haram's ability to capture and hold further strategic territory, without a lengthy period of remobilization and remilitarization, is unlikely. Degradation of Boko Haram's army of irregulars is therefore important to understanding the intensity and phase of the insurgency as of early 2017. Without a viable standing army there can be no realistic control of strategic, administrable, territory; akin to the phase of insurgency circa November 2014 to January 2015. A few armour pieces, dozens of armed men, and hundreds of coerced unarmed civilians in propaganda videos should not be confused for a "standing army". Such videos, still released by Boko Haram, suggest a show of strength detached from reality. This reality is that Boko Haram, since mid-2015, has failed to demonstrate on the battlefield that its irregulars can pose the same threat that they did by late 2014.

Boko Haram's posture by April 2017 — an unmistakable reversion to tactical guerrilla warfare — also suggests its battlefield losses in the preceding 18 months of military fighting were not strategic, calculated losses: the loss of a battalion of irregulars to permanently discourage the Nigerian Army from attacking a certain location; the sacrificing of valuable heavy armour to allow holding reinforcements to arrive; that sort of thing. Rather, Boko Haram's losses were losses that betrayed questionable decision-making, a faulty war calculus, and poor comprehension of the difference between capturing and holding strategic territory. In this sense, Boko Haram's pivot away from military fighting to covert activity aimed at terrorizing locals and keeping the Nigerian military presence on edge, should be seen as a sign of weakness; though not as a sign of imminent collapse. If Boko Haram had a combat-ready army of irregulars, it is incomprehensible that its overt front formations will not be fielded for over a year. Armies require food, equipment and supplies, the absence of disease and the availability of water; but they also need to be active, whether via exercises or actual operations, in order to stay combat ready and disciplined. The logistics and supply chain required to maintain an inactive standing army for months, is considerable; especially where the army itself does not work for the resources it uses.

There is a caveat to what has been said so far. Insofar as Boko Haram's ability to field an overt front has been degraded, this does not rule out the possibility that more individuals can be conscripted or otherwise recruited as fighters. A high incidence of military-aged males in insurgency always poses the possibility that the insurgency, through persuasion or coercion, can exploit this demographic to replenish its ranks (Kolenda, 2013). Boko Haram has exploited the environment in this way, to recruit its supporters in the past; and this remains a possibility for the future, too. Nonetheless, there are more present implications for the losses suffered by Boko Haram's army of irregulars.

First, numbers alone do not make an overt front. Even assuming Boko Haram can convince or coerce sufficient fighters into its rank and file; training, acquisition of equipment and arms, and reestablishment of cross-border logistics and supply chains, would be more challenging as of 2017. This is largely due to the two counter-insurgency focused Army divisions in Borno state, as well as counter-insurgency operations by Chad, Niger and Cameroon around their border regions. All of this not exist, or only had marginal impact in being newly formed, a few years ago. Second, military fighting has now been subordinated to guerrilla warfare and terrorism, within Boko Haram's campaign. This may well become an enduring feature of the insurgency; yet, so deep into the conflict's life, this sort of terrorism is unlikely to yield long-term strategic benefits. Used at the start of the insurgency, covert operations helped Boko Haram trade space for time. Guerrilla warfare, quite unlike military fighting was not as useful for territorial ambitions; but it bought Boko Haram time: to build a reputation; to mature its campaign; to build local networks within local communities; to strengthen cross-border links, and to build combat-readiness capabilities. Conducted early on in the conflict life cycle, such covert operations also slowed the momentum of the traditional Nigerian military response, and even forced a panicked Nigerian government to float the possibility of strategic negotiations. But with the conflict now mature, and with military counter-insurgency operations greatly expanded in the last few years, Boko Haram's reversion to a war avoidance doctrine suggests it simply is too weak and in no position to deploy an irregular army across so many fronts, inside Nigeria and cross-border in Chad, Niger and Cameroon. Yet, by focusing on terrorism and guerrilla warfare as the main tactical plank of its insurgency, Boko Haram's threat can still extend into these countries while also enduring in north-east Nigeria.

Terrorism as a tactic of insurgency, what Neumann and Smith refer to as “strategic terrorism”, suggests some sort of clear strategic objective is in play (Neumann & Smith, 2005; Neumann & Smith, 2008). Now, Boko Haram has lost most of its captured territory, possibly thousands of irregular fighters, large amounts of *matériel*, and has had cross-border operational links severed or weakened. Crucially, Boko Haram has also lost virtually all local support. With millions displaced, several thousand killed, entire villages deserted or semi-deserted, and hundreds coerced into fighting for Boko Haram, locals have come to deeply despise the group and what it now represents. Bearing all this in mind, it therefore becomes unclear what Boko Haram’s “strategic” use of terrorism is. There seems to be no real overall or long-term objectives to the scores of suicide bombings and attacks on local communities. These incidents do not take the insurgent any closer to his territorial ambition, they do not serve to convince victims that Boko Haram is a viable alternative to the Nigerian state’s dereliction of duty, and they do not serve to dissuade further escalation of the military’s counter-threat. Rather then, Boko Haram’s terrorism thus appears to be an end in and of itself; not a means to a viable strategic end, but a sign of desperation.

For military planners tasked with countering this threat, the task at hand is as intractable as it is vexing because there is no longer a clear sense of what the insurgent is fighting for. If the insurgent’s objective is the capture of a certain town, or the defence of a particular location, the counter-insurgent can plan ahead, mobilize forces and set out a task. Such a task, moreover, is more likely to have clear parameters for its completion; and so, progress can be measured. If, however, the insurgent reverts to guerrilla warfare doctrine — striking at random without a clear objective or pattern — then military counter-insurgency operations are more vaguely defined; parameters for task completion are more unclear and trickier to measure. Such becomes the counter-insurgent’s dilemma.

Having lost so much, however, and now being denied the ability to operate as it did in the past, guerrilla warfare may be the one approach that can protract Boko Haram’s campaign and simultaneously make Nigerian Army forces tasked with security, look amateurish. Here, indeed, Boko Haram may well be at its most dangerous. There is now less need to calculate for the long-term; less incentive to be methodical, and more benefit in being spontaneous and highly unpredictable. Cumulative campaign losses also mean that, for Boko Haram, objectives must now be smaller and limited: tactical, rather than strategic.

The (Suicide) Bomber Might Not Always Get Through, but Istishhad Still Gives War Avoidance a New Meaning.

In Boko Haram's return to guerrilla warfare as a main operational plank, one tactic stands out: the suicide attack. This tactic has a threat permanence that has greatly complicated military operations to stabilize north-east Nigeria. No military today has a failsafe doctrine against the suicide bomber⁴; and suicide bombings, each time they occur, roll back public perceptions around COIN progress. Furthermore, Boko Haram's martyrdom operations, in lending war avoidance a new meaning, give the lie to the notion that the Nigerian military can dominate at every rung of the conflict intensity ladder. At the lowest levels of intensity such as in suicide attacks where the engagement is avoided altogether, it is Boko Haram, not the Nigerian Army, who dominate.

Increasingly since 2011, Boko Haram's suicide bombings or martyrdom operations (what I will simply refer to as *istishhad* for short) have been central to its calculus of war. Why, however, is this tactic favoured by guerrillas? As François Géré asks, "What does it [self-sacrifice] offer that could not be gained from the skilful use of an ordinary weapon?" (2007, p. 392) Two reasons can be used in response to Géré.

First, with *istishhad*, Boko Haram has a means to redress the asymmetry between its forces and those of Nigeria. Despite having irregular elements of the Infantry, Artillery and Armour as the three combat arms of its standing army, Boko Haram remains vastly inferior to the Nigerian military in conventional terms; except in highly localized instances of the direct engagement. As an aggregated series of confrontations however, that is, at the theatre level, Boko Haram cannot hope to dominate in any of these three areas. Moreover, Boko Haram also cannot rely on airpower as a fourth additional arm; this is a potentially crippling handicap for the insurgent. Finally, at least one of Boko Haram's other three combat arms, in armour, is highly underdeveloped with only a few motorable pieces. All of this makes the task of military fighting, as a sustainable objective, daunting for Boko Haram. A battlefield decision against the Nigerian Army consequently is improbable, to say the least; due to such asymmetry.

In *istishhad*, therefore, Boko Haram has introduced a highly unconventional tactic, by which it can redress this asymmetry. Using this tactic, Boko Haram can render the Army's large formations and capabilities ineffectual.

Large convoys of heavy armour, which cost resources to maintain and stay motorable even for short periods, are not much use against irregular forces that refuse to engage. In this way, Boko Haram can tie down incommensurate amounts of state forces' resources, as part of a COIN campaign against it. Through the use of *istishhad* moreover, Boko Haram has a tactic the counter-insurgent cannot ever use, no matter the desperation of proceedings. This is a very one-sided tactical advantage; one that Boko Haram, like guerrillas elsewhere, has exploited to devastating effect.

A second response to Géré's question regarding the appeal of suicide bombing to guerrillas, has to do with the nature of suicide bombing itself. No military or state can claim, with iron consistency, to be defensible against suicide tactics. If anything, suicide bombers have proven time and again that theirs is a tactic extremely difficult to guard against. To borrow a statement by Stanley Baldwin (Middlemas & Barnes, 1969, p. 722), reinterpreted for the contemporary popular discourses on martyrdom operations, it has been argued that "the [suicide] bomber will always get through" (The Economist, 2005; Bishop, 2004). Now, as has been pointed out, suicide bombers do not in fact *always* get through (The Economist, 2004; Corte & Giménez-Salinas, 2009). There are countermeasures and levels of vigilance to potentially identify likely bombers and, failing that, to guard against the detonation having maximum effect; even if the chances of entirely preventing it are still low (Dzikansky, Kleiman, & Slater, 2012). Here, however, surprise and subterfuge remain perhaps the bomber's most valuable secondary resources; availability of which drastically improves the chances of the bomber reaching the target. At that point, it is left to the skill of the bomb maker, to the quality and quantity of available materials, to the bomber's discretion, and to the availability of nearby soft targets, to determine casualty numbers.

As an example, Boko Haram's suicide bombing success rate was virtually 100 per cent when the tactic was first introduced. With the Army and security forces used to gun attacks, there was no inbuilt resilience against the threat of the suicide bomber, when the first ones struck in 2011. And with freer access to external operational assistance for *istishhad*, as well as less restricted movement of seemingly innocuous IED materials such as Ammonium Nitrate (Adeoye, 2012), Boko Haram's introduction of *istishhad* would change the calculus of war in north-east Nigeria. Indeed, *istishhad* brought about a marked shift of traditional tactical warfare; thrusting the Nigerian military into territory with which it had little to no experience against.

In Maiduguri for instance, even though the Nigerian Army was the nucleus of the land component, the police were the only component with bomb disposable capabilities and had to be called when the threat emerged, as it did on occasion (Adeoye, 2012).

Over the years however, as security forces built resilience to Boko Haram's bombers, there have been increased instances of failed attempts by Boko Haram. Some denotations have been premature and casualties thus limited; others, initially failed, were eventually detonated remotely by specialist bomb squads (Adeoye, 2012). And on a few occasions, the bombers — being unable to penetrate the series of army, police and civilian vigilante checkpoints that have come to punctuate parts of north-east Nigeria — end up as the only fatalities (Marama, 2016; Iaccino, 2015; Abrak & Ola, 2014; Vanguard, 2016d). Still, perhaps the broader point being made by proponents of the “suicide bomber always getting through” thesis is that, on the balance of probability, if the insurgent keeps refining his plans, reselecting targets and sending more suicide bombers, the chances of one eventually getting through, are high (Dzikansky, Kleiman, & Slater, 2012).

More than just an ability to penetrate defences, however, the tactic of suicide bombing also gives war avoidance a new meaning insofar as the insurgent can project power “cheaply”, with low relative cost to overall campaign resources (Dzikansky, Kleiman, & Slater, 2012). And the larger the capabilities gap between insurgent and counter-insurgent, the more the impact of each successful bombing, as a show of strength aimed at bridging that asymmetry. This is consistent with Géré's observation that “the suicide volunteer is the response of last resort in a strategic situation marked by fundamental asymmetry between the adversaries” (2007, p. 392). Indeed, just because the insurgent employs *istishhad*, does not mean it is a tactic of first choice; all else being equal. In the case of Boko Haram, around the period when it was able to reduce asymmetry by other means — such as by fielding an overt front, training it, acquiring platforms and equipment and so on — tactical dependence on *istishhad* also reduced. Thus, as the graphic below suggests, between 2013 and early 2015, military fighting and credible attempts to capture and defend territory greatly escalated within Boko Haram's insurgency, compared to previous years.

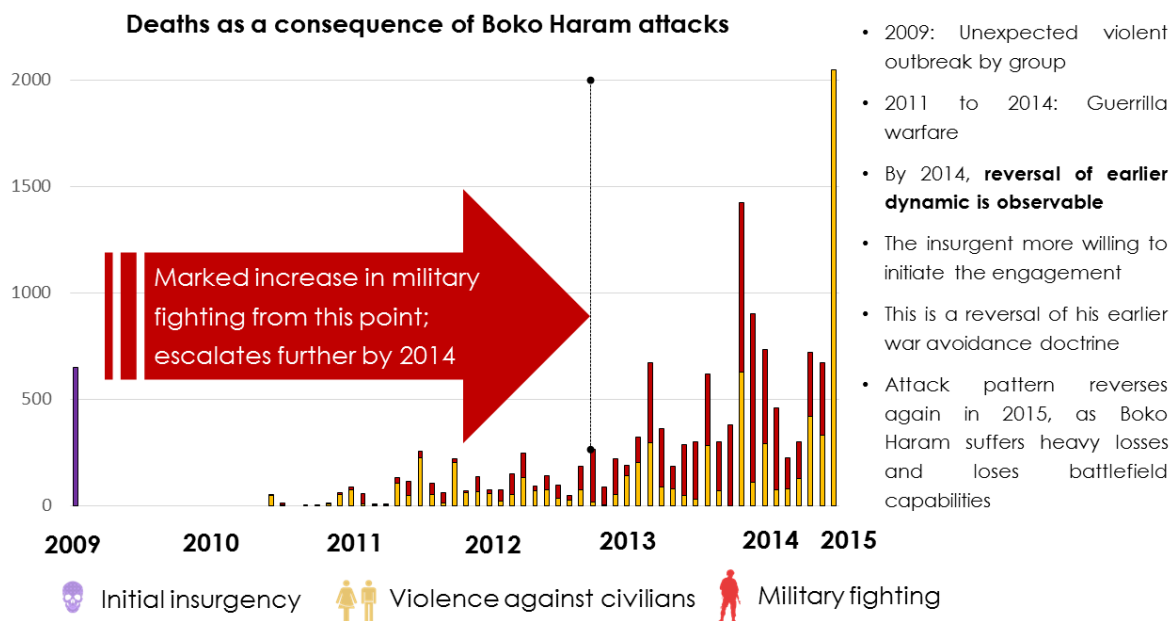


Figure 1-4: Boko Haram’s Changes in Attack Patterns (2009 – 2015)

Boko Haram’s reversion to guerrilla warfare and war avoidance — choosing to attack civilians and soft targets rather than fight hardened military locations for territory since 2015— therefore suggests that *istishhad* is a last resort, not a first; a tactic born of necessity, rather than selected from a pool of equally viable military options. This idea that martyrdom operations are acceptable in irregular warfare, where the insurgent is being hammered and faces imminent defeat, is mired in controversy.

Understanding the Religious Debate: Is Istishhad Permissible Under Any Circumstances?

As much today as historically, the debate on whether or not *istishhad* is permissible, as a military option in violent (lesser) jihad, is conflicted. Shi'a Islamist militant group, Hizbu ‘llāh, who at a time were prolific in the use of *istishhad*, said in 1999 that “if we [Hizbu ‘llāh] had possessed conventional weapons with which to fight the Israeli invader, martyrdom would have been an illegitimate means. It was necessity that permitted recourse to martyrdom operations” (Géré, 2007, p. 392). Some scholars however adopt the opposite view, that use of *istishhad*, by radical Islamist groups, is fundamentally entrenched into their ideology; *istishhad* in this context, is not some a last resort but is always a viable tactic: for the offense, or for survivability.

Schweitzer and London for instance refer to *Istishhadia*, “in a deeply malicious corrupting of the religion's true tenets” by Salafi-Jihadist networks like al-Qaeda, as “a sixth pillar of Islam” (2009, p. 321). And Noah Feldman concludes that “suicide bombing has become the archetype of Muslim violence...” (2006). There are, however, a series of important rebuttals of this thesis.

Both Kaplan and Whine for instance are categorical that “there is no link whatsoever” between terrorism tactics [such as *istishhad*] and religion (Schmid, 2011, p. 23). Other counter-arguments present variations of this broad position. Shaykh Afifi al-Akiti, in his fatwā (response by a qualified Muslim scholar) against the killing of civilians in the name of Islam, notes that suicide bombing is an innovated practice that has no basis in Islamic law (Sharia). Indeed, Shaykh al-Akiti disputes the notion that suicide bombing is ever a form of martyrdom, writing that “murderous suicide is never martyrdom but rather perversion” (al-Akiti, 2005, p. 8). A London-based Islamic studies think tank, Ihsanic Intelligence also published a two-year study report, *The Hijacked Caravan: Refuting Suicide Bombings as Martyrdom Operations in Contemporary Jihad Strategy*. One of the report’s main conclusions was that “the technique of suicide bombing is anathema, antithetical and abhorrent to Sunni Islam. It is considered legally forbidden, constituting a reprehensible innovation⁵ in the Islamic tradition” (Ihsanic intelligence, n.d.). An important fatwā in this area is also that issued by Ayatollah al-Udhma Yousof al-Sanei; important as Ayatollah al-Sanei is one of the highest ranking marja clerics within Shia Islam⁶. Ayatollah al-Sanei dispelled the notion that *amaliyat istishhadiya* (martyrdom operations) are permissible in Islam, decreeing a fatwā against suicide bombing, which he declared to be a terrorist act.

Despite this demonstrable degree of consensus within both Sunni and Shia Islamic jurisprudence on the illegitimacy of martyrdom operations in jihad, some schools of thought, and of course the perpetrator groups that employ *istishhadia*, do not view the practice as innovation. Many of these groups even justify its operational use; specific examples are Al-Qaeda, Hizbu ‘llāh, Fatah al-Majles al-Thawry (Abu Nidal), Haqqani network, Boko Haram, and Al-Shabaab. The notion, moreover, that these groups do not understand the Qur’an or that they are “misguided” may not be entirely true. Such groups simply have may have chosen to interpret it differently. As Assaf Moghadam notes, in a quoted excerpt from an interview with Alex Schmid, groups using terrorism in the name of Islam do not necessarily represent “deviant sects”, but are often guided by a radical interpretation of the religion (Schmid, 2011, p. 25).

The debate of whether it is permissible under any circumstances aside, the fact remains that, on the strategic, operational and tactical levels, *istishhad* is viable tool for the insurgent. As Géré observes, “On the strategic level, it [martyrdom operations] at least partially redresses imbalances in capacities. On the logistical level, it is a useful, effective, inexpensive, easily renewable weapon. And on the tactical level, it is effective because it relies on human intelligence” (2007, p. 392).

The Tactic of Istishhad (Martyrdom Operations) in Boko Haram’s Insurgency.

Within the range of tactics employed within Boko Haram’s covert front, *istishhad* in particular has been an area the Nigerian Army has failed to fully understand much less implement a failsafe counter against. Boko Haram’s mastery of *istishhad* is consistent with the experience of other terrorist organizations. This area of guerrilla warfare is one where several other perpetrator groups, globally, tend to get proficient at fairly rapidly (Moghadam, 2011). This should not be surprising insofar as the logistics themselves are fairly unsophisticated: a belt, explosives, sometimes a vehicle, and either a willing or a coerced suicide bomber (Géré, 2007, pp. 391-392). However, so much could go wrong between bomb-making and eventual detonation, that many suicide attacks also end up being unsuccessful. This is seldom a tactic with a hundred percent success rate, because “success” is dependent on a range of factors outside the bomber’s control. For instance, even a last-minute change of venue, or additional unscheduled security measures on site, could mean that even if everything else goes to plan, the bomber has much fewer victims, or limited access, on arrival. For such reasons, the casualties-to-suicide attack ratio has in many cases been typically low (Moghadam, 2011); especially considering the bomber is typically counted as a fatality in each successful detonation.

Use of *istishhad* so relatively early in its life cycle, and so efficiently — virtually all Boko Haram’s early bombings resulted in successful detonations and multiple casualties — served as an indicator of Boko Haram’s forthcoming battlefield innovations. It also indicated that Boko Haram was technically proficient, even more so than the average insurgent, at the tactic of suicide bombings. And because this particular guerrilla tactic also had never been used in Nigeria, the shock and awe effect of each attack was magnified. Indeed, scepticism greeted the first few suicide bombings. Some Nigerians who heard of the new tactic dismissed it as one-off, or said it simply confirmed suspicions that Boko Haram fighters were not Nigerian; because Nigerians love their lives too much, to blow themselves up.

Yet the rampancy of the tactic since 2011 made it clear that suicide bombing was not a one-off tactic by Boko Haram; it had become, sadly, a Nigerian phenomenon that somehow had to be dealt with.

Istishhad as a tactic has been almost exclusive to Boko Haram's covert front. It very rarely has been employed in combination with overt irregulars, on offensive operations. In understanding the tactic therefore, it becomes necessary to further study Boko Haram's covert front.

Boko Haram's covert front initially constituted a loose network of "sleeper" terrorist cells across northern Nigeria. Reference to northern, as opposed to north-eastern, Nigeria is intentional. Covert cells that employ *Istishhad* have penetrated as far south as Abuja and as far north-west as Zamfara state; both of which lie far outside the reach of Boko Haram's standing army. Due to the considerable and multi-actor planning in a suicide operation (McChrystal, 2013), it is inevitable that bombers cannot simply arrive in a town and head to the target. What is far more likely, and what typically occurs based on the experience of perpetrator groups elsewhere, is that a covert cell would infiltrate normal neighbourhoods, would remain passive, and would coordinate with local handlers, until the agreed time (Dzikansky, Kleiman, & Slater, 2012).

In the Nigeria case, for instance, a typical example of a suicide attack that would have required localized planning, inside knowledge and reconnaissance, as well as resident operatives to support and handle the operation, was Boko Haram's attack at St Andrew Military Protestant Church at the Armed Forces Command and Staff College (AFCSC), Jaji Cantonment, in November 2012. Yet, as devastating as such bombings have been, Boko Haram has sophisticated the tactic even more, using a combination of more powerful IEDs to cause larger casualties, and women and children, to introduce a heightened element of surprise.

Use of Women and Children in Suicide Attacks.

Use of female suicide bombers since 2014 further evolved Boko Haram's covert threat (Pearson, 2014a; 2014b). The female suicide bomber, however, is not a uniquely Nigerian phenomenon. As François Géré observes, "Islamist groups are by no means averse to recruiting women. Even nowadays women arouse somewhat less suspicion, and they are as highly motivated as men" (2007, p. 389). Nonetheless, in Nigeria, and even by the standards of Boko Haram, use of female suicide bombers introduced a new and disturbing element to insurgent

warfare. There already have been stories of young boys in Borno being paid paltry sums, or otherwise coerced, to act as IED couriers; without knowledge of what exactly they were to deliver, or that their packages could be detonated remotely. However, in the introduction of women and young girls for *Al-Amaliyat Al-Istishhadiya* by Boko Haram, the already difficult task of guarding against these variations of martyrdom operations has been made even more challenging for Nigerian military and security forces.

“Taboo Between the Sexes”

No longer has it been necessary for Boko Haram to embed a sleeper agent locally and then activate the individual, almost always a male, when required. Increasingly since 2014, a tactic has been adopted by the insurgent whereby an IED is strapped on to females and concealed using some form of the veil covering – the hijab, niqab or burka, which only females use as part of their attire in public. This tactic, from the perspective of Nigerian military forces prosecuting COIN, is even more difficult to guard against for a number of reasons.

Males are already forbidden to inappropriately interact with females publicly, in many parts of northern Nigeria that have adopted Islamic law. There are punitive consequences, typically canings, for those who run afoul of this custom; and this is more so the case if the female in question is wearing a form of covering. Now, states like Borno, Yobe and Adamawa, where Boko Haram has been the most active, are a subset of this Sharia-adopting region of Nigeria. This means that soldiers deployed in these states, to prosecute COIN, would most likely cause a stir in situations where they have to pat down local females; especially those wearing the veil covering in any of its forms – which would be most girls and women in a state like Borno, with strict Sharia laws. This in many ways is the counter-insurgent’s dilemma: institute security at all costs (in this case by vigorously searching everyone in certain situations, regardless of gender); or be more sensitive to the customs and daily life of locals and risk a less secure environment (in this case, allowing freer movement by local women wearing the veil covering, but risking being exploited by the insurgent who employ women and children for suicide attacks).

It already is disruptive enough for a prolonged, heavy, military presence imposed on everyday civilian life. Some prominent voices such as the governor of Adamawa State, Vice Admiral Murtala H. Nyako (Retd), have already likened the prolonged Nigerian Army presence to an occupation force (Scan News, 2014).

Such views, critical of the scale of Army disruption of life in north-east Nigeria, have been echoed elsewhere for years (Daily Trust, 2012); even though they generally are not popular. But when deployed soldiers begin to pat down women wearing the veil covering in full view of everyone, in intentional or inadvertent disregard of local customs, this could play right into the hands of the insurgent as much as those who have been uncomfortable, but hitherto more tolerant, with the Army's prolonged campaign in the north-east. Unless related by blood or marriage, certain interactions between men and women are strictly forbidden in public. That the men in questions are soldiers prosecuting COIN, does not create a waiver for this custom.

It is, as a result, highly inadvisable for such pat downs to occur; as they break local customs around the taboo between the sexes. Indeed, anything other than minimal public interaction between male soldiers and local civilian women adhering to strict Islamic laws, may be problematic. This has been the case elsewhere, moreover – it is not a northern Nigerian phenomenon.

In Iraq, for instance, a serving officer once pointed out, regarding this separation between sexes and the counter-insurgent's resulting dilemma, “you really have to have female counter-insurgents if you are expecting to have a successful counterinsurgency strategy [...] if you cannot access or even deliver a message to half of the population just because of this taboo between the sexes, you're at an enormous disadvantage in trying to persuade people that you're there for reasons that are in their interests” (Thompson, 2011). Writing her article, *When half the Country is Off Limits*, Caitlin Thompson highlights the fact that female civilians do not want to be searched publicly by male soldiers; and, for male civilians watching such incidents, they tend to feel more than uncomfortable. In Iraq, Thompson notes, “‘Lioness’ teams of female Marines had to be formed, to “conduct searches of local women” (2011).

One possible solution then, would be to use female soldiers to pat down female civilians. And, certainly, as far back as 2012 in the north-east Nigeria insurgency, there have been female personnel, typically from the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), who have been trained and assigned to pat down and search females at checkpoints and duty posts (Danmadami, 2012). The JTF ORO Assistant Chief of Staff, Operations (ACOS G3), Colonel Musa Danmadami, pointed out to me that this was a role that the NSCDC female personnel adopted across the theatre, in security protocols at mosques, for instance.

However, these non-military female personnel were a tiny fraction, less than one per cent if that, of total male operatives. The extremely low number of non-military female operatives meant that female-specific searches have in turn been rare and infrequent.

For Boko Haram, this infrequency of female searches, relative to males, meant that the planning around avoidance of checkpoints became largely moot; particularly when the tactic was first introduced. Such females, typically young girls, had easier access through checkpoints and military roadblocks – in many cases, they were just let through. Pat downs and searches by male soldiers who manned virtually all locations may otherwise have been construed as harassment of local women; as even the public at the time was unaware that Boko Haram had identified the local customs and perceptions around public interaction and physical contact with women, as an area to be exploited. Consequently, the compulsory use of some form of covering, typically the niqāb in areas affected by the insurgency, appears to have provided a tactical opening, in Boko Haram’s perversion of Islamic practices, to facilitate its suicide bombings.

Istishhad as an Incredibly Asymmetric Weapon

In this regard, Boko Haram’s use of women and young girls in *istishhad*, as female suicide bombers, makes it one of the few perpetrator groups in the world willing to use this particular demographic, for martyrdom operations. It is, however, an incredibly asymmetric weapon with great tactical value to the insurgent. As Debra Zedalis writes, “terrorist organizations use women as weapons because they provide tactical advantage: stealthier attack, element of surprise, hesitancy to search women, female stereotype (e.g., nonviolent); increased number of combatants; increased publicity (greater publicity = larger number of recruits); psychological effect” (2004, p. 7). For a guerrilla that has more or less exhausted his tactical options, and thus spent his element of surprise, introducing female and child suicide bombers reignites that element and could present the illusion that a degraded and weakened insurgent is still potent and able to strike at will. This is the power of *istishhad*, especially where women and children become operatives of the tactic. In the words of Magnus Ranstorp, Research Director of the Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies at the Swedish National Defence College, the tactic of the female suicide bomber “...is the ultimate asymmetric weapon” (Don Van Natta, 2003).

Conclusion

In discussing Boko Haram's covert front of operations, to focus solely on *Istishhad* would be to neglect the broad activity spectrum of the group's covert activity. Martyrdom operations are indeed central to Boko Haram's guerrilla warfare tactics, and use of the tactic itself is unique within the Nigeria context, but also in most other cases of irregular conflicts across Africa, with a few exceptions – notably Al Shabaab's insurgency in Somalia, and less consistently within activity by Al Qaeda affiliates in the Maghreb. However, martyrdom operations are not the only way individuals are employed within Boko Haram's covert front. Other covert roles for male and female operatives alike include spying and reconnaissance, creating distractions, acting as intentional human shields (to, for instance, discourage military fire in a given location), and dressing as females with the Niqāb to discourage pat downs and searches. This final role could be especially useful, not just for *Istishhad* but also for increased protection of the insurgent's couriers.

Moreover, whereas females have played an increasingly prevalent role in Boko Haram's covert front; so too do military-aged males. Roles in which MAMs in particular can be deployed within the covert front include the infiltration of military barracks and other areas, prior to an offensive. This could provide valuable recce and subsequent intel, from the inside. Younger MAMs can also be an innocuous source of intelligence for Boko Haram. The Wall Street Journal article tells the story of Abba, a 12-year old from a local *tsangaya* (Qur'anic school, typically for children of a social class called *almajiri*⁷). Abba, the report notes, was given a cell phone and ask to call “whenever he saw soldiers pass”. For months, this individual played no other role, save this singular covert one, for Boko Haram (Hinshaw & Parkinson, 2016). MAMs also play a more insidious role, within the covert front however, namely that of active sabotage. Young boys between the ages of nine and 15 for instance “said they had been given \$30 and a keg of gasoline to set fire to their schools” (Hinshaw & Parkinson, 2016). Such individuals may not be part of the army of irregulars that train and live together in Boko Haram camps. These are merely local children exploited by Boko Haram based on the poor socio-economic conditions, worsened by insurgency. The role of this category of Boko Haram operative, in this context, is ad-hoc. Specifically, just because an operative is covert, does not mean they cannot play a more combat-active overt role, within Boko Haram's standing army.

Notes

¹ Uses data from the Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015)

² Data mined by the Institute for Economics and Peace, in its Global Terrorism Index (2015).

³ Uses data from the Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015)

⁴ Conversations with British Army forces deployed to Afghanistan, as part of Operation Herrick – the British COIN in Helmand province.

⁵ What is this term, “innovation”? Bid'ah (heresy, innovation). Bid'ah: Linguistically the term means "innovation, novelty, heretical doctrine, heresy". In contrast to the English term “innovation”, the word bid'ah in Arabic generally carries a negative connotation and, in many cases, and unlike in worldly matters, is generally considered as sin, or sinful.

⁶ Controversial practices such as Taqiyya (methodology) and *Istishhadia* originate the larger Shia ideology (Moghadam, 2011, pp. 11-12). However, these practices themselves are considered innovation amongst Shiite scholars.

⁷ See Omeni (2015a) for details on the *almajiri* system and the debate on its role in insurgency and violent conflict in northern Nigeria

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