

Economy, Geography and Insurgency: Understanding the External Factors Behind Boko Haram's Rise

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Abstract: Over the last decade, Boko Haram has been a major security threat to Nigeria. The terrorist organization has launched numerous attacks and kidnappings on both civilian and military targets. Despite ongoing efforts by the Nigerian government and its military forces, the insurgency remains active, and ultimate victory over the group has yet to be achieved. Many scholars attribute Boko Haram's emergence and continued existence to a combination of extreme religious ideologies and the government's failure to develop an effective counter-insurgency strategy. However, these factors alone do not fully explain the group's success. Throughout its development, external factors such as the economy and geography provide significant advantages to Boko Haram, ranging from recruitment to supply and concealment. This paper examines the economic, educational, geographical, and regional context of the Boko Haram insurgency to demonstrate how social and natural conditions can promote insurgency and offer new insights into the ongoing global anti-terrorist campaign.

Keywords: Socio-Economic, education, geography, regionality, insurgency.

1. Introduction

Boko Haram rises in the early 21st century as a Salafist Sunni Muslim reform movement originating in Borno State, in northeastern Nigeria. Being its leader, Muhammad Yusuf was against more moderate form of Islam, Christianity and Western influence, wanted to establish a purely Islamic state that practices strictly Shariah laws [1]. Following the murder of Yusuf by the Nigerian police in 2009, the organization vowed to avenge for its founder and turned towards terrorist activities, including assassination, kidnappings and attacking government and civil facilities [2]. While on the surface, many would argue that the Boko Haram insurgency was primarily driven by political and religious motives, the group's later development illustrates a different reality. In 2016, ISWAP, led by Mamman Nur, split from Boko Haram, led by Abu-Bakr Shekau. Although both groups aspired to establish Islamic states, they displayed fundamental differences. ISWAP leaders condemned Boko Haram's brutality against Muslim civilians, leading to violent rivalry between the two factions [3]. However, despite ISWAP's comparatively more humane treatment of civilians, they still resorted to violence against the government to achieve their objectives. Both groups continued to employ similar tactics, including attacking military bases, kidnappings, and forming connections with other terrorist organizations. The similarities in actions between these rival terrorist groups suggest that it is not solely political or religious beliefs that distinguish peaceful petitions from bloody insurgencies, but

rather certain social factors within a country that either promote or discourage the use of violence to achieve political goals—in other words, factors that make insurgency the easiest solution.

2. Social and Economic Factors

Over the past four decades, Nigeria has consistently ranked as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. In 2021, Nigeria was ranked 154 out of 180 on the Transparency International corruption perception index, making it the second most corrupt country in Western Africa [4]. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), a leading professional services firm, corruption in Nigeria could potentially cost up to 37 percent of its GDP by the year of 2030, which is equivalent to around \$1,000 per person in 2014 and around \$2,000 per person by 2030 [5]. Since gaining its independence, corruption has been a pressing issue to Nigeria's economy. It affects government funding, business investments, and most importantly, individual's standard of living. The government's persistent borrowing for recurrent expenses, rather than investing in development, has made the Nigerian population the primary victims of this governance failure [6]. Despite making steady progress in national economic growth, more than thirty percent of Nigeria's population still lived on less than \$2.15 per person per day in 2019, falling below the international extreme poverty line. Many within this population also have no access to basic infrastructures such as water and electricity [7].

The financial mismanagement of the government has not only denied economic opportunities for its people but has also exacerbated wider social issues. For instance, Nigeria's education system has greatly suffered from poor government funding. Long existing high level of corruption has led to poor infrastructure, nonpayment of teachers' salaries and absent of qualified teachers. Although education is free and mandatory in the country, one out of every five out-of-school children on the planet is in Nigeria. More than 10 million of Nigerian children between the age of 5 and 14 are not enrolled in school up until today. In some poorer areas like the northern part, the net attendance rate is barely more than 50 percent [8]. The absence of basic education leads to another major social issue—unemployment. Many youths received no education have limited opportunities to legal employment, so they resort to joining gangs as the easiest survival strategy [9]. When the economy declines, as it did in the 1990s, exacerbating unemployment leads to surges in crime.

Understanding the socio-economic context of Nigeria helps understanding the “success” of Boko Haram. Poverty and unemployment make Nigeria a place nurturing violence and crimes, giving insurgencies like Boko Haram natural advantages in its formation, particularly for recruitment. One of Boko Haram's first recruitment strategies was micro-lending to impoverished individuals and small business owners. These people, denied by the economic opportunities in Nigerian society, some through coercion and some willingly, ultimately turned towards Boko Haram [10].

An insufficient education system, similarly, contributes to Boko Haram's recruitment process. In northeast Nigeria, where gave rise to Boko Haram, eighty seven percent of the population is Muslim. Thirty-five percent of the children among this population go to only Qur'anic schools, meaning they will not be literate nor study any formal curriculum [11]. These children, along with those who had no access to education at all, became easy targets for Boko Haram recruitment. In fact, between the year of 2009 and 2019, about 10,000 children were co-opted into Boko Haram's ranks, and this number may be even higher due to limitations in the available data [12].

Nigeria's poor economic condition and institutional corruption have not only severely damaged the education system but have also had a devastating impact on the national security sector. According to statistics from 2017, 69% of Nigeria's government revenue came from the oil industry, which has a well-documented history of being deeply intertwined with systemic corruption [13]. This pervasive corruption within the government has not only stunted the country's economic growth but has also critically undermined its ability to combat Boko Haram effectively. Funds intended for military equipment were frequently embezzled, leaving soldiers under-equipped and demoralized, which

directly contributed to the failure of numerous counter-insurgency efforts. For example, in 2019, despite the Nigerian government allocating nearly \$80 million per quarter to anti-Boko Haram campaigns, soldiers were still reported to lack sufficient ammunition and medical care, while Boko Haram fighters appeared far better supplied and organized. This deficiency placed Nigerian soldiers at a significant disadvantage and led to low morale. Many chose to flee or abandon their posts rather than engage Boko Haram in combat [14]. For this reason, Boko Haram had been able to carry out frequent attacks on military targets, during which they not only gained tactical victories but also seized valuable supplies and weapons. These successes allowed Boko Haram to further strengthen its forces, recruit more fighters, and expand its influence across northeastern Nigeria.

The socio-economic background of Nigeria has, in a way, built the foundation for Boko Haram's rise and pushed many of its citizens toward them. Boko Haram's case reveals that preventing insurgencies is not about addressing a single social issue. Insurgencies can arise from any malfunction in a society. Establishing an effective government that facilitates a healthy economy and responsibly runs government programs can fundamentally reduce the likelihood of insurgencies.

3. Geography and Regionality

Geography is another key factor contributing to the long-lasting Boko Haram insurgency. The Sambisa Forest of Nigeria covers an area of about 60,000 square kilometers. It occupies across the states of Kano, Bauchi, Gombe, Yobe, and especially large parts of Borno, where Boko Haram originated [15]. The Sambisa Forest is vast, very sparsely populated and full of trees that provide cover from aerial surveillance. It is also rocky, with a hilly terrain and very few roads, posing a tremendous challenge to ground search [16]. Boko Haram has undergone several fierce counterattacks from the Nigerian government forces but has been able to hide in the forest and recover from its losses. They even incorporated this geographical advantage into their operations. For example, they kidnapped 230 schoolgirls in 2014 and kept them in the Sambisa Forest for more than a decade, using them as hostages to bargain with the government. The prolonged captivity of the schoolgirls created a national and international outcry, further exposing the government's inability to secure the region and protect its citizens. Many of these girls were never able to regain their freedom [17].

Boko Haram's geographical advantages are not limit to their gains from local terrain, but also the benefits they received from nearby countries. On the other side of the Sambisa Forest is Cameroon, where Boko Haram had extended heavy influence long ago. The historical and cultural connections between communities across the border and the unique geography made smuggling and illegal crossing possible. In addition, rampant corruption among border officials continued to provide conditions to the traffic of illegal commodities such as firearms, leading to increased criminal activities [18]. This natural passage allowed Boko Haram to maintain an endless supply line and always remain sheltered.

Connection to Cameroon was only the beginning of where geography played a role. During its more than decade-long insurgency, Boko Haram established close connections with several foreign insurgent forces, including MUJAO, AQIM, and Ansar al-Dine [19]. Forming ties with Al Qaeda and similar organizations won Boko Haram tremendous foreign support, leading to another important insight: anti-terrorism must be a group effort. According to Overall Terrorism Index Score of 2023, two of Nigeria's neighboring states, Niger and Cameroon had index scores of 7.27 and 6.98, ranking 10th and 12th in the world. Burkina Faso and Mali, bordering Niger and very close to Nigeria, had the index scores of 8.57 and 8.00, ranking first and third in the world. In fact, on a global scale, the 29 countries with the highest overall terrorism index of a 4.0 and above are mostly bordering one or more countries within the same category, with only three exceptions [20]. The longevity of Boko Haram can be attributed to support from its regional alliances, as is the case with other insurgencies.

Studying Boko Haram on a world map reveals that insurgencies are more likely to arise when there are similar forces nearby, and they exhibit high levels of connectivity.

Based on these observations, it is important to note that paying close attention to geography and regionality is crucial in anti-terrorist efforts. Geography and landscape can be extremely beneficial to violent uprisings. In underdeveloped areas, building effective infrastructure and transportation becomes significant in preventing terrorism, as it reduces the chances for rebels to hide and operate. More importantly, anti-terrorism should be considered an international affair that always requires multinational cooperation. Boko Haram's case illustrates the interdependence and connectivity between regional insurgent forces. Launching multinational cooperation could be much more efficient than limiting it to a domestic issue.

4. Conclusion

Boko Haram's rise can be attributed to a combination of socio-economic, geographical, and regional factors. Nigeria's high levels of poverty, unemployment, and corruption have created fertile ground for insurgency, while the region's difficult terrain and cross-border connections have given Boko Haram geographical advantages over fighting against the government. Furthermore, the group's regional alliances with other insurgent forces have reinforced its strength. Therefore, a multifaceted approach that includes addressing socio-economic issues and fostering multinational cooperation is essential for effective counter-terrorism efforts and long-term stability in this region as well as other conflict zones in the world. Future counter-terrorism strategies must not only focus on military solutions but also address the systemic social and economic factors that allow such groups to thrive.

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