

Confronting BOKO Haram Terrorist Group

Dr. Norbert Ebisike*

Assistant Professor
Department of Criminal Justice
Cheyney University
Pennsylvania

Introduction

This Article examines Boko Haram terrorist group in Nigeria, discussing the potential ways of defeating this terrorist group. In analyzing Boko Haram and its future, a comparison has been made between Boko Haram and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Both terrorist groups have some common characteristics. What led to the demise of LTTE and what lessons can be learned from their demise in our efforts to dismantle Boko Haram? Does Boko Haram have the military capability to sustain the group? Will the group's leadership structure lead to their demise? What does the future hold for Boko Haram?

Boko Haram

Boko Haram is an extremist Islamist terrorist group based in the north east of Nigeria. This jihadist group was formed in 2001 by Mohammed Yusuf. Their headquarters is in Maiduguri, Borno state, Nigeria. Boko Haram is anti-west, maintains that western education is forbidden and is seeking to establish sharia law in Nigeria. Boko Haram "... believes politics in northern Nigeria has been seized by a group of corrupt, false Muslims. It wants to wage a war against them, and the Federal Republic of Nigeria generally, to create a "pure" Islamic state ruled by sharia law."ⁱ This terror group has political and religious goals. Ironically, Mohammed Yusuf, the founding leader, did not lead by example. In fact, he did almost everything he preached against, including living a western lifestyle. In 2009, a fight broke out between Boko Haram and Nigerian forces in the state of Bauchi. Mohammed Yusuf was killed during this battle. Boko Haram had no clear leader after the death of Yusuf. It was not until January 2012, that Abubakar Shekau was proclaimed as their new leader.

Since its formation, Boko Haram has proved to be very dangerous and it is estimated that they have killed more than 15,000 people. In April, 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped 276 female students from a Secondary School in Borno State, Nigeria. There was an international outcry, which attracted the attention of the First Lady of The United States, Michelle Obama who joined the campaign to free the girls (Bring Back Our Girls). To date Boko Haram has not released the girls, despite the fact that the current Nigerian Government has indicated that they are willing to negotiate the release of the girls. Boko Haram were responsible for the bombing of three churches in the State of Kaduna in June 2012, and the killing of more than 20 people at an evangelical church in Kogi State in August 2012. On August 11, 2011, Boko Haram carried out an attack on the United Nations compound in Abuja, capital of Nigeria. In July 2009, Boko Haram was involved in a sectarian violence that killed about 1,000. There are several other brutal attacks. This group does not have a well-organized structure but they are ruthless. Boko Haram has been recruiting members from other countries such as Niger, Chad, Mali and Algeria. This group has been involved in suicide bombings, abductions, and assassinations. Their funding comes from several sources, including donations from members, funds from other terror groups.

The current Nigerian Government under President Muhammadu Buhari recently (June 2015) formed a regional force to tackle Boko Haram. This is a joint military operation involving Benin, Chad, Cameroun, Niger, and Nigeria. This is a step in the right direction. To succeed, this force needs foreign government assistance, in terms of logistical support. It should be noted that there have been several forms of negotiation between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government in the past but all the attempts failed. These failures have been attributed to many factors. It has been noted for instance, that "it is difficult to see how there can be meaningful dialogue between the government and the group. The group's cell-like structure is open for factions and splits, and there would be no guarantee that someone speaking for the group is speaking for all the members."ⁱⁱ This is a serious problem for Boko Haram and one that will contribute to their demise. This is exactly what happened in the case of the LTTE.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was formed by Velupillai Prabhakara on May 5, 1976 in Wannu region of Sri Lanka. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam can be described as one of the most highly organized, lethal and well-funded terror groups in living memory. This terrorist group had its own military, made up of The Tigers (Infantry), Sea Tigers (sea wing), and Air Tigers (air wing). The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam carried out series of devastating attacks and assassinations. In May 1991, they assassinated former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at a campaign rally. In May 1993 they also assassinated the Sri Lankan President, Ranasinghe Premadasa. This group was very powerful until May 18, 2009 when its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran was killed during the Eelam War IV when The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam was defeated.

The LTTE had the political goal of creating their own ethnic state for Tamils, who felt oppressed by the Sinhalese majority ethnic ruling group. They sought to create a state called Tamil Eelam State in the northern and eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam had a two-tier organizational structure. There was a military wing and a political wing. A 5-member governing committee headed by Velupillai Prabhakaran made the decisions. The group had an elite fighting force called the Charles Anthony Regiment, a suicide commando unit called the Black Tigers, and a secret intelligence unit. Sevarasa Pathmanathan succeeded Velupillai Prabhakaran. He was arrested in Malaysia in August 2009. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam received donations from expatriate Tamils, from shipping businesses, sales of weapons, taxes, sea piracy, money laundering, and passport frauds. It is believed that The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam maintained offices, cells, and operations in about 54 countries. They were involved in very successful fund-raising and publicity operations and were also involved in drug trafficking, especially in heroin, which they trafficked from Southeast and Southwest Asia.

How did the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam end? Several things led to their demise. First, is the Sri Lankan government's aggressive and persistent use of military force against the group. Second, was the internal split by some of the top leaders. It should be noted also that the United States helped train the Sri Lankan terrorism and counterterrorism forces. This terrorist group also suffered from inadequate funding after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. The United States' war on terror led to the cutting off of sources of funding for most terrorist groups including the LTTE. The first sign of trouble for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam began when one of the key players, Vinayagamorthy Muralitharan also known as Karuna Amman, decided to break away from the LTTE. He formed his own terror group – Tamil National Front, and a political wing called Tamileela Makkai Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP) in 2004. The final blow for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam came on May 18, 2009, when the Sri Lankan Government forces killed Velupillai Prabhakaran, during a war known as the Eelam War IV. It should be noted that in 2002, there was a cease fire agreement between the government and LTTE. A power sharing agreement was reached. However, violence attacks resume in 2004 and 2006. The cease fire was put on hold, fighting continued but ended on May 18, 2009 when the LTTE were defeated. Following the death of their leader, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam accepted defeat and laid down their arms.

Comparative Analysis

The Nigerian government seems to have adopted a two-way approach to dealing with Boko Haram – negotiations and military force. Nigerian forces are constantly going after the group's leaders. Any attempt to destroy Boko Haram must involve cutting off their sources of funding, sustained military action by the Nigerian forces, capturing and killing of the group leaders, and assistance from the United States government, especially help with freezing bank accounts of Boko Haram sponsors. Some scholars have argued that radical police reform is needed in Nigeria as well. In fact, it been observed that the Nigerian police is generally corrupt, ineffective, lack intelligence and training.ⁱⁱⁱ

Arguably, Boko Haram shares a lot of characteristics with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Political motivations, for instance. I believe that sustained military action against Boko Haram is necessary to dismantle them. Boko Haram have been involved in very sophisticated attacks that are very expensive to put together. The group will not be able to maintain the military/financial costs of carrying out sophisticated attacks in the long run. John Campbell sees five possibilities for the future of Boko Haram. He maintained that Boko Haram could burn out as a result of internal divisions and casualties in action; defeated by the State; may evolve into a mini-state; could continue smoldering indefinitely, and “under some creative negotiation from the government, the more radical parts of the sect could be isolated and the moderates reintegrated into the mainstream.”^{iv}

It is safe to say that Boko Haram will not be able to achieve their political and religious objectives. Drawing from the problems that led other terrorist groups to end and drawing from the problems encountered by The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in particular, there is no doubt that Boko Haram's *leadership style, continuing and aggressive military assault* by the Nigerian forces, as well as the *cutting of the sources of funding* will eventually incapacitate Boko Haram. I see a future where Boko Haram becomes more of a pressure group/lobby group than a terrorist group. Leadership problems, identity crisis, lack of local Muslim leaders' support, and an aggressive and sustained military force by the Nigerian government will dismantle Boko Haram. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam engaged in suicide bombings, used women and children. They were involved in assassinations (including the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991, and the Sri Lankan President, Ranasinghe Premadasa in May 1993), over 200 suicide attacks, over 70,000 deaths, bombed transport facilities, government office buildings, Buddhist shrines, involved in abductions, extortions. My analysis reveals that Boko Haram has copied almost all the tactics of LTTE.

Conclusion

Boko Haram has several problems which make them most likely to fizzle out very soon. As mentioned earlier, this group seems to have identity crisis. This view has also been expressed by other scholars. Campbell maintained that "Boko Haram is several things at once" arguing that "Boko Haram 'writ large' is a movement of grassroots anger among northern people at the continuing deprivations and poverty in the north, he says. It is also a core group of Mohammed Yusuf's followers who have reconvened around Abubakar Shekau and who are exacting revenge against the state for their treatment. Campbell says there is also another aspect to the group that is often overlooked. The group could also be seen as a kind of personality cult, an Islamic millenarianist sect, inspired by a heretical but charismatic preacher."^v

From the above discussion, it is clear that Boko Haram has several goals and issues to deal with. These are clearly unobtainable. Furthermore, Boko Haram, even though they are seeking to instill sharia law in Nigeria, does not even have the general support of local Muslim leaders. Boko Haram has killed both Muslims and Christians. In fact, it has even been noted that Boko Haram has killed more Muslims than Christians.^{vi} Boko Haram has leadership problems, identity crisis, no sustainable support from local Muslim leaders, and will eventually succumb to the continuing and aggressive military force by the Nigerian government, aided by the United States, France or Britain.

• Dr. Norbert Ebisike is currently an Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at Cheyney University of Pennsylvania. He is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Golden Gate University, the University of Kent at Canterbury, and the University of Westminster, London. His publications include *An Appraisal of Forensic Science Evidence in Criminal Proceedings*, London: Greenway Publishers, (2001); *Offender Profiling in the Courtroom: The Use and Abuse of Expert Witness Testimony*, Connecticut: Praeger Publishing, (2008); *Controversies in Criminology and Criminal Justice*, Mechanicsburg, PA., Sunbury Press, (2014); "Investigative and Evidential Uses of Cheiloscopy (Lip Prints)", 47 *Criminal Law Bulletin* 4 (2011); "The Evidence of Children", 44 *Criminal Law Bulletin* 5 (2008).

Note

ⁱ Walker, A., "What is Boko Haram?" Special Report, United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC. June 2012.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} See, Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Johnson, T., "Boko Haram," Council on Foreign Relations, December 27, 2011.