Rebel governance?

A literature review of Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province

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Introduction

The literature on rebel governance has fundamentally challenged the idea that 'governance' is the sole prerogative of 'government' (see Duyvesteyn et al., 2016). Despite important advances over the past decade, studies have largely addressed rebel governance from an 'institutionalist' approach. Scholars have tended to focus on three constitutive dimensions of rebel 'governance': territorial control, the development of institutions, and the provision of public services (Zachariah, 2011; Arjona, 2014; Arjona et al., 2015; Arjona, 2016). This review seeks to go beyond an 'institutionalist' approach, by understanding 'governance' as the 'whole set of practices and norms that govern daily life in a specific territory'(Duyvesteyn et al., 2016). Drawing on a thorough review of literature on Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), this article analyses five under-examined independent variables that shape rebel governance in Nigeria's north-east and in Niger: illegitimate state practices, community resilience and cohesion, external counterinsurgency actions, 'big men', and ideology.

The emergence of Boko Haram

Since May 2011, Boko Haram has been responsible for over 37,500 deaths and the displacement of 2.5 million people in north-eastern Nigeria. Its activities have led to a decimation of economic, healthcare, and educational infrastructure in the region. The origins of the movement, originally Jamaat Ahlussunah Li-Dawa wal-Jihad (JASDJ), are disputed. Some scholars trace Boko Haram to an entity called 'Sahaba', founded as early as in 1995 (Adibe, 2013), but most hold that the start came in 2002,with a group of young Islamist members of the Alhaji Muhammadu Ndimi Mosque in Maiduguri, north-eastern Nigeria (Walker, 2012). In that year, a sub-set of the group left the city to settle in a village called Kanama, claiming that the Islamic establishment in Maiduguri was corrupt and irredeemable. Their leader, Mohammed Ali, instituted strict, radical interpretations of Islamic law, which he saw as "true" Islam; he called on other Muslims to join the new Kanama community. The group built a mosque and a school, where poor families from Nigeria, Chad and Niger sent their children. Local people came to refer to the movement as the 'Nigerian Taliban'. In December 2003, the group was involved in its first armed confrontation with Nigerian security forces, seizing police weapons and making off with them. The Nigerian army responded forcefully, clamping down on the mosque and conducting a shootout that killed 70 members of the group, including Mohammed Ali, their leader.

The name 'Boko Haram' was given to the surviving members of the initial group, who returned to Maiduguri after the confrontation. In Hausa, the name translates as 'Western education is forbidden'. The new leader, Mohammed Yusuf, led the members to establish their own mosque – the Ibn Taimiyyah Masjid – and oversaw the expansion of the sect into at least three other states of Nigeria: Bauchi, Yobe and Niger State. Yusuf was a Salafist jihadist, inspired by the scholarship of Ibn Taymiyyah (Sergie et al., 2014) a fourteenth-century Islamic fundamentalist, and an important scholarly figure for Middle Eastern terrorist organizations. At the time, the group operated largely undisturbed by the authorities. Funding for the group is said to have come from Salafists in Saudi Arabia and wealthy northern Nigerian elites.

The turning point came in 2009. In July, a large group of Boko Haram members violently clashed with the police of Borno State over a refusal to follow helmet laws. This led to a cycle of police crackdowns on Boko Haram and further uprisings by the group in Borno, Yobe and Kano. In Maiduguri, members rampaged the town for three days, killing civilians and fighting the police. Yusuf also released videos threatening the Nigerian state. The events culminated in mass arrests of Boko Haram members and summary executions by Nigerian security operatives. The exact number of Boko Haram members who died in the government clampdown is unknown, perhaps between 700 and 800 (Walker, 2012; Adibe,2013). The group was eventually suppressed, and Yusuf died in police custody just hours after his arrest. There are allegations that the police killed him, but the official account is that Yusuf was shot when attempting to flee custody. Between 2009 and 2010, the remaining Boko Haram members dispersed into local cells, and were traced to various terrorist training camps in Algeria, Mali and across the Sahel. Abubakar Shekau, the de facto new leader, also went into hiding.

In 2010, the group re-emerged, more violent than before. Boko Haram members terrorized Borno and Yobe – killing policemen, leaders who had cooperated with the police, and civilians deemed antagonistic to their efforts. Boko Haram's first bombings were on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve of 2010 in Jos and in Abuja, the national capital. The group's signature was the use of gunmen on motorbikes; these gunmen engaged in a spree of assassinations, raids, and abductions, expanding beyond initial police targets to villages and towns. Bombing targets included churches, bars, barracks, bus parks and the UN headquarters in Abuja. In 2013, Boko Haram was designated a 'foreign terrorist organization' by the US Department of State and was entered on the UK list of Proscribed Groups (Sergie et al., 2013). In May that year, a state of emergency was declared in the three Nigerian states that were Boko Haram strongholds – Borno, Yobe and Adamawa (BBC News, 2013).

Boko Haram is considered to have peaked in 2014–2015 (Campbell & Hardwood, 2018). After they had taken control of significant swathes of territory in the north-east, the Nigerian government, in partnership with other governments in the Lake Chad basin (Cameroon, Chad and Niger) responded with ever-higher levels of military action. By late 2015 Nigerian's President Muhammadu Buhari declared the group 'technically defeated"' (BBC news, 24 December 2015). That assertion was inaccurate, but it was certainly true that Boko Haram had lost most of its territory and that factions already in existence in the movement had come to the fore.

The Islamic State in West Africa faction

Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) was formed in 2015, as a renaming of a faction of Boko Haram post its allegiance with Islamic State (IS). But after only a year, ISWAP factionalized, as Shekau fell out with IS's Daesh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In August 2016, Al-Baghdadi announced Abu Musab al-Barnawi as the new leader of ISWAP (Onuoha,2016). Shekau responded by releasing an audio message in which he reaffirmed his status as the true leader of Boko Haram and declared al-Barnawi an infidel (Onuoha,2016). Further, Shekau revived JASDJ (or JAS), a group with marked differences from ISWAP.

ISWAP did not rely on IS for daily tactical orders, but adjusted their propaganda to be more in line with the global Islamist agenda. For instance, they used more Arabic (as opposed to the local Hausa) in their messaging; and they improved their media strategy. By contrast, JAS remained more embedded in the Nigerian context. The group addressed Nigerian clerics and critics of Boko Haram, and its messages were primarily directed at Nigerians (Zenn,2020c). JAS was also less sympathetic to other Muslim communities than was ISWAP. Although global IS has made partnerships with Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, and ISWAP primarily attacked Christians and Westerners (Onuoha, 2016), JAS did not ally with any local Muslim communities. Instead, they brutalized non-affiliated Muslims. All these factions have been extremely brutal, but Shekau's JAS faction engaged in the most indiscriminate campaigns of killing civilians, while ISWAP spoke of a focus on military targets (Pieri and Zenn, 2016).

In 2019, ISWAP got a new leader, Ba Idrisa, after Al Barwani was demoted (Pieri and Zenn, 2016). Since then, with the rise in infighting, even as Al Barnawi reemerged in May 2021 as interim leader of ISWAP, It is unclear who the current leader of ISWAP is. Infighting and ideological schisms are nothing new to Boko Haram: they predate the present cycle of militant leaders. Ever since its formative stages, there have been competing factions divided by disagreements over doctrine, targets, tactics and even the concept of Islamic jihadism. While the death of Shekau in May 2021 marked a setback for Boko Haram members and a symbolic victory for ISWAP, his passing also bears uncertain security ramifications, leaving a chaotic security landscape for future counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations in the northeast and the Lake Chad regions.

Illegitimate state practices

It has been held that insurgency groups like Boko Haram, ISWAP and other successor movements, as well as splinter factions, exploit ungoverned spaces, but Raleigh and Dowd (2013) argue that the term itself is incorrect: the terrorist organizations exert and compete for governance in these regions alongside the Nigerian state. This is not a question of a simple 'vacuum' of power. The Nigerian state has historically shown itself unable to secure basic preconditions or levels of security for residents. Yusuf (2013) sees the rise of Boko Haram as the result of a governance crisis in Nigeria. With extensive government corruption, as well as the widening gap between the country's rich and poor, fertile breeding grounds for Boko Haram recruitment were developed, and sustained. Without ignoring the ideological motivations of Boko Haram, Yusuf argues that poverty, corruption and lack of state legitimacy are the key explanations for the group's continued appeal.

Violent responses on the part of the state have undoubtedly sustained the insurgency. The mission of Boko Haram has been abetted by the harsh responses from Nigerian security forces, as victims of their indiscriminate violence are readily recruited for the insurgent side (Amaliya and Nwankpa, 2014). The state use of extra-judicial killings means that it has for all intents and purposes become a 'non-state' actor that operates outside the rule of law in its interactions with the populace (Ojo, 2010). To provide the Nigerian state with legitimacy, education in human rights must be widespread, amongst the populace and the police. Dowd (2015) notes that the marginalization of religious groups and their separation from the state allows gri-

evances to fester, bolstering Boko Haram recruitment. The bulk of 'foot soldiers' on whom the movement relies can be characterized as disaffected locals with grudges against the Nigerian government (Okoro,2014). As Tonwe and Eke (2013) argue, even though the goals of Boko Haram may not be to alleviate poverty or end corruption, the movement serves as a platform from which disenchanted youth can attack the state, which they see as the cause of their misfortune.

With its militaristic approach, the Nigerian government, relying more heavily on the stick than the carrot, has struggled to counter Boko Haram effectively; indeed, it may have served to escalate the conflict (Agbiboa,2013). This problematic use of violence stretches back to the transformation of the movement into a violent insurgency, with the Nigerian state's heavy-handed approach leading to the death of founder Mohammed Yusuf in prison in 2009. According to Allen (2017), 'the deciding factor in the rise of Boko Haram was the Nigerian government's brutal repression of the movement that caused it to turn towards violence and terrorism'. Others lay the blame specifically on the political class who, it is argued, constantly exploited the Nigerian people, thereby creating fertile ground where insurgencies like Boko Haram could gain legitimacy. Iyekekpolo (2016) argues that the underlying factors that caused Boko Haram's formation, such as poverty, corruption, and unemployment, as well as a fervent belief in sharia, have always been present in Nigeria's north-east, but that the transformation of these issues into an insurgency came from failures of the political class.

Ongoing insecurity has provided ample opportunity for military corruption at the highest levels. Indeed, some argue that the political elite sees the Boko Haram threat as an opportunity for directing state resources into their own private coffers, further fuelling political insecurity and conflict (Ojo et al.,2020). The fact that Boko Haram violence has been aided by high-profile Nigerians who remain apathetic or benefit directly from the group has undermined the capacity of the Nigerian state and military to respond effectively to the violence – to such an extent that the greatest threat posed by Boko Haram is arguably its capacity to undermine the monopoly of the Nigerian state on the use of force (Amaliya and Nwankpa, 2014). According to Edeh and Ugwueze (2014), as corruption and insurgency continue, the state loses legitimacy, a cycle which feeds both corruption and the insurgency.

Community resilience and cohesion

Most sources characterize the period of Yusuf's leadership (2003–2009) as relatively peaceful, although members frequently criticised northern Muslims for what they considered shallow practice of Islam. Except for the assassination of Sheikh Ja'afar Mahmoud in 2007, violent activity by the group was minimal. Boko Haram focused on building state-like institutions, including a legislative cabinet, religious police, a school, and a large farm. The welfare infrastructure built by the group facilitated rapid recruitment of members, who were mostly poor Nigerians or citizens of neighbouring countries who had been under-served by their formal governments (Chothia, 2013).

Since 2009, Boko Haram has generally been a guerrilla group without significant territory. Its most significant territorial expansion campaigns took place between 2013 and 2015, when it

temporarily controlled a region the size of Belgium (Allen, 2019). But, following international military collaboration among the four countries of the Lake Chad basin, Boko Haram lost almost all its territory in the course of five months. Since then, it has returned to its cellular guerrilla structure and modest territorial conquests. Today, Boko Haram factions tend to occupy small villages, remote forests, marshes and islands (International Crisis Group, 2019).

The literature generally agrees that Boko Haram has not sought to replace the state but has simply exploited its weakness or absence. Ladbury et al. (2016) argue that Boko Haram's 'state-building' differs from other jihadist movements by failing to establish its own governing institutions or provide services and benefits to civilians, and terrorizes women and children, offering no space for them in the movement. Barlow (2016) agrees that Boko Haram has shown no real interest in governing or improving the standard of living in territories under its control. People drawn toward Boko Haram may find within the group some sort of 'legitimate' state that they cannot find in the Nigerian government, but this remains tenuous.

Rather than creating a replacement for the state, Boko Haram has simply managed to remind the populace of the failures of the state, even during the insurgency. Ojo (2020) argues that terrorists readily exploit ungoverned spaces for recruitment as well as for operations. The porous borders in Nigeria's north-east allow for the transport of weapons, as well as human trafficking and materials for bomb-making, which can allow it to retain control of territory while continuing to fight against the state. Osumah (2013) has even held that confirmation of Boko Haram's self-projection as a powerful military force is implicit in the military response from the Nigerian government, further legitimizing Boko Haram's cause and furthering radicalization and recruitment.

Boko Haram's belligerent approach differs from that of ISWAP, which has focused more on levying taxes on goods by promoting trader-friendly policies and clearing military bases along Niger's borders to boost the economy . According to Anyadike (2019), it is recognized that, whereas the government has shown itself unable to care for its citizens, ISWAP, with its ability and shown commitment, would get considerable support as a political party if the violence were to stop.

ISWAP has undertaken the most extensive state-building endeavours of the Boko Haram factions. In its core region of control along the banks and islands of Lake Chad, it has administered taxation schemes, as well as establishing a Sharia-based justice and security system that has led to low crime rates and rapid dispute resolution. For instance, the problems of banditry, cattle rustling, and farmer-herder clashes have become minimal within ISWAP territories. In line with Sharia, the ISWAP criminal code includes brutal punishments like executions, beatings and forced limb amputations for offences ranging from adultery to using phones in areas where they are banned. Smoking and drug use are prohibited, and public worship is mandated.

ISWAP also has significant social welfare policies. It provides Islamic education and primary healthcare services to militants and civilians, leveraging voluntary and captive healthcare specialists. Medicines for the sick are sourced by theft or purchase, and some critically ill patients have been transported to hospitals in neighbouring countries. In some areas, ISWAP has made

strides in sanitation and public health by building latrines where no modern plumbing existed, and by allowing polio vaccinations. The group holds its combatants to standards of accountability and punishes them for human rights abuses against civilians in the territory.

According to Hassan (2018) ISWAP taxes villagers, but it also undertakes community projects like well-digging, aiming to build trust for the movement in the countryside. In the ISWAP-controlled northern Borno region bordering Lake Chad, it is reported that ISWAP provides alms to internally displaced persons, and soft loans – a tactic once utilized by Boko Haram's founder, Yusuf, to win converts. Authorizations are granted to regulate professions like fishing; and agricultural inputs like seeds, fertilizers and wells are provided to local farmers. Youth and farmers are also granted micro-loans from ISWAP to facilitate economic activity. As a result, agricultural productivity has significantly increased in some ISWAP territories. At the same time, the group regulates the prices of locally produced commodities, in order to encourage affordable food supply. By providing state-like services, ISWAP has achieved a growing local legitimacy that has remained beyond the grasp of Boko Haram and other factions.

External counter-insurgency actions

Berlingozzi and Stoddard (2020) emphasize the effectiveness of ISWAP's strategy in subverting counterinsurgency strategies from Nigeria and Niger. Those strategies, which focus on violence as the solution, reinforce ISWAP's assertions of bad governance and re-assert the purpose of insurgency. In addition, Niger has been facing external pressures from France and surrounding countries to retaliate, leading to collaboration in multilateral joint efforts. This has enabled ISWAP to position itself in narratives as the loyal defender of the territory.

Establishing authority through 'big men' models

Zenn (2020a) explores the impact that breakaway members of Boko Haram who trained with Al Qaeda had upon their reintegration into Boko Haram. His work reflects on the power of 'big men' to create variations in the operations of these groups – in particular, the impact of Abubakar Shekau's failure to prevent splits in the group through his poor leadership. A 2018 Stanford University study also highlights the significance of leadership on Boko Haram's success (MMP, 2018). Under Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram was less political and more religion-oriented, whereas under Shekau's more aggressive leadership, the organization underwent a drastic shift. This shows how a change in leadership can drastically change the trajectory of a group. Zenn (2019) argues that Boko Haram's strict leadership under Shekau created greater loyalty to both him and the cause. His analysis supports the view that internal dynamics, structural, and individual frames are the three most important frames of analysis for explaining why terrorist groups pursue their goals.

In Nigeria, jihadist leaders have used videos to communicate and address both Nigeria and the territories they control. Zenn (2020b) has analysed the differences between al-Barnawai

(ISWAP) and Shekau (Boko Haram) in terms of their visual signatures. al-Barnawi has prioritized combat and IS in his videos; Shekau has focused on brutalities and fighters. al-Barnawi seeks to build a state, whereas Shekau has wanted to monopolise power. After assuming command of ISWAP, al-Barnawi cultivated a people-friendly approach, identifying himself as adhering to the pure Islamic ideology. He accused Shekau of killing Muslims and living in opulence with his family while women and children were starving.

Moreover, as Mahmood and Ani (2018) have documented, ISWAP's command structure appears much more structured than that of Boko Haram, which has remained heavily reliant on its leader. ISWAP has the Imam and Shura Council at the top, with departments and fighters below. Its various departments are split into multiple areas covering food, weapons, welfare, finance, recruitment, education in specific territories. Fighters are arranged in ranks, with Qaid at the top, then Munzir and Nagib, with Amir at the bottom. After the recent death of the Boko Haram leader, it remains to be seen how the movement will reorient itself. At present, ISWAP appears to have much more space and less competition as regards taking over more territories in Nigeria.

Ideological basis

Salafism emerged in northern Nigeria in the 1960s and '70s. Salafis became prominent in the media, with sermons and Izala preachers gathering mass audiences through annual events and lectures. Campbell (2017) has argued that the main effect of Salafism in northern Nigeria is how Muslims talk about and view authority in a more critical manner. In the early 2000s, the Salafist movement became increasingly critical of the Nigerian government; and Boko Haram – and later ISWAP – were quick to exploit that criticism to their advantage. Work from scholars outside of Nigeria, such as Alvi (2014), shows how Salafism has been viewed in the Middle East and South Asia as a source of danger and intra-Islamic violence diffusion. That intra-Islamic violence increased in areas where Salafi ideology was strong suggests that the evolution of Boko Haram into splinter movements like ISWAP was expected and may well continue further. Oriola and Akinola (2018) note how Boko Haram presents the frames of a 'return to Islam', injustice, and 'war against the infidel'. This demonstrates how religious fundamentalist ideology defined political violence in Nigeria before the rise of Boko Haram, and how, in turn, this history informs the operations of Boko Haram. Omenma et al. (2020) hold that, instead of being a strictly religious crusade, Boko Haram is a movement that seeks to establish a physical 'community of Ummah' in West Africa. Arguing that Boko Haram's ideology fundamentally rejects the validity of Nigerian statehood, they view the country as a construct of British colonialism, and regard union with the larger secular democratic state as entailing the degradation and pollution of the North. To return the North to its former glory, therefore, Boko Haram aims to implement a caliphate in communities that formerly constituted an Islamic state. Pieri and Zenn (2016) argue that Boko Haram's goal of establishing a caliphate in Nigeria is heavily inspired by the 1804 movement of the jihadist Usman Dan Fodio. They posit that Boko Haram draws much strength from the remnants of this original caliphate, as evidenced by the fact that most members speak the Kanuri language of the caliphate, and that Boko Haram is strongest in territories formerly under the caliphate of Dan Fodio. However, it is debated how much Boko Haram draws on, and extends, historical radical Islam in the region. Montclos (2015) is critical

to the trend of equating historical Islamic rebellions with modern Boko Haram under the banner of 'radical Islam'.

In her analysis of statements by Boko Haram's two key leaders, Apard (2015) argues that the rhetoric of Mohammed Yusuf as well as that of Abubakar Shekau demonstrate that the appeal of Boko Haram rests on more than the simple need for employment and security. Rather, it is comparable to the inspirational rhetoric of many other Islamic revolutionaries, spurring youth to fight for a Jihadist ideal. According to John Azumah (2015),the teachings of several key Islamic figures have been instrumental in guiding Boko Haram's specific conceptions of jihad. Furthermore, he argues that the specific way in which Boko Haram operates is guided by the tradition of Usman Dan Fodio and the history of northern Nigeria.

Religious divisions in northern Nigeria have impacted Boko Haram, and in turn has affected these divisions. Brinkel and Ait-Hida (2012) found that the group's ideological legitimacy rests on an anti-Western jihadistist understanding of Islam; Boko Haram uses this to create polarization and division within the Muslim community in Nigeria, as well as encouraging large-scale violence between Nigerian Muslims and Christians. Adesoji (2010) noted how the ambivalence of Islamic leaders towards the movement, rather than active condemnation, resulted in its gaining further strength amongst the populace. This was particularly the case prior to 2009, when, under Mohammed Yusuf, the group became more radical, but still operated within the framework of dialogue, rather than violent jihad.

Voll (2015) has examined how the ideology of Boko Haram shapes its operations and exercise of control. Writing in 2017, he diagnosed the current state of Boko Haram as one in which the goal of achieving a caliphate had been 'achieved', and operations focused on exercising further control over what was already deemed part of the caliphate.

This dynamic has changed now. Boko Haram is in control of significantly less territory than in 2016, but still represents a significant threat to residents of the region and the state as a whole. However, fully combatting the Boko Haram insurgency will require not only a military response but also the creation of a 'superior ideology'. Egbegi et al. (2018) argue that military victories are not enough to eradicate Boko Haram, as success on the battlefield cannot fix the perceived lack of state legitimacy that drives recruitment and growth to the insurgency. The state must make it clear to the populace that it has the 'superior ideology' needed for society to advance.

Conclusions

In contrast to established institutional approaches, this review has focused on re-examining rebel governance about Boko Haram and ISWAP. Viewing rebel governance through a more holistic approach has highlighted the institutional and agential factors governing daily life in Boko Haram and ISWAP territory. Heavy-handed governmental responses to Boko Haram, coupled with corruption and poor standards of living, has served as a platform for mobilising grievances, fuelling the region's sustained rebel governance. However, the ability of the factions to mobilize by building community resilience (in the form of socio-economic welfare initia-

tives by ISWAP) highlights how extremist factions can act as a competitive form of governance rather than merely an occupational force in the case of a power vacuum.

Further, ideological motivations should not be underestimated: they can serve as a powerful tool in the emergence and maintenance of rebel governance. The religious, ideological platform through which Boko Haram and ISWAP seek legitimacy has the power to make or break rebel governance in the region. The fundamentally differing application of Salafist Islamic teachings has already splintered Boko Haram into two competing factions – a development that has blunted Boko Haram through the killing of Shekau. However, it should also be noted that the extent to which these factors have influenced rebel governance has varied between the splintered Boko Haram and ISWAP factions. ISWAP is better organized, and has bolstered its ability to tap into community resilience and cohesive factors to build rebel governance. Moreover, due to the rigid command structure of its operations, ISWAP is less reliant on the decisions of a 'big man', whereas Boko Haram must lean more heavily on a singular figure.

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About the author

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Idayat has consistently provided thought leadership at different phases of Boko Haram's development. She was involved with Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) from its inception, providing foundational ideas and operational advice. She provided conceptual clarity on the Boko Haram phenomenon during its heyday, presenting analyses of the group's motives and methods at, amongst others, conferences in Nigeria and internationally. She then turned her efforts to proffering robust pathways to sustainably mitigate Boko Haram's threats. Her work revolved around three approaches to counterinsurgency: a decentralised, bottom-up approach, a de-radicalisation, rehabilitation and reintegration approach, and a transitional justice approach. Her recent work sees her continuing to provide conceptual clarity and engage in mitigation.

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