Extreme Religious Ideology and Violence in Northeast Nigeria: The rise and rage of Boko-Haram

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Abstract

Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, the country has experienced violence rooted in religious and ethnic causes resulting in significant human and material losses. This violence is largely fueled by the nation's deep religious sensitivities, which have created an environment conducive to the rise of religious radicalism and fundamentalism. This paper examines the relationship between extreme religious ideology and violence in Nigeria's North-east. Adopting an ex-post-facto research design and relying on secondary data sources, the study applies the Islamic Theocratic State Theory as its analytical framework. Findings reveal that religious ideologies have not only set a precedent for extremism but have also emboldened conservative Islamic groups in their attempts to impose a rigid interpretation of Islam on Nigeria's secular state. This has led to widespread violence and destruction, causing immense suffering among the general population. The paper recommends that advocacy for a return to orthodox Islam, as championed by Boko Haram, should be pursued through peaceful preaching and persuasion rather than through violent means.

Keywords: Ideology, Insecurity, Radicalism, Religion, Violence.

Introduction

Religion, whether Traditional, Christian, or Islamic, constitutes a core element of human existence, encompassing belief systems, rituals, and obligations. Nigeria exemplifies religious pluralism, with Islam predominant in the northern regions and Christianity more prevalent in the southern areas. This religious diversity has historically contributed to ethno-religious and socio-political tensions, manifesting in conflicts such as the *maitatsine* uprising of the 1980s in what was then Gongola State (now Taraba state). Many of such conflicts were forcibly contained during military rule, yet intergroup violence periodically erupted across different communities. Walker (2012, p.2) observes that "these conflicts seem like ones with religious undertone since parties to these conflicts are usually Christians and Muslims". Despite military suppression, certain conflicts persisted, while their supporting organizations found new avenues for expression during civilian governance. Consequently, since Nigeria's transition to democratic rule in 1999, the nation has experienced a proliferation of these conflicts, generating numerous threats to national security. The establishment of democratic governance after more than 16 years of military control initially inspired public hope that democratic benefits would reach all segments of Nigerian society. However, these expectations have largely been unfulfilled as security conditions have deteriorated significantly, leaving citizens vulnerable to terrorists, kidnappers, armed criminal groups, and militants throughout the country.

The rise of Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria represents one of the most significant security challenges in West Africa over the past two decades. Emerging from religious

ideological roots in the early 2000s, the group has evolved into a multifaceted insurgency with devastating consequences for Nigeria's national security and regional stability (Adesoji, 2010; Thurston, 2017). This sect, whose name roughly translates to "Western education is forbidden," embodies the complex interplay between religious extremism, socioeconomic grievances, and governance failures that characterize many contemporary terrorist organizations (Walker, 2012).

The group's evolution from a relatively peaceful religious movement under Mohammed Yusuf to a violent insurgency following his extrajudicial killing in 2009 highlights how religious ideology can become weaponized when intersecting with political marginalization and state violence (Onuoha, 2012; Zenn et al., 2013). Under Abubakar Shekau's leadership, Boko Haram adopted increasingly radical tactics, including suicide bombings, mass kidnappings, and territorial conquest in pursuit of establishing an Islamic caliphate in northeastern Nigeria (Pérouse de Montclos, 2014).

This study examines how Boko Haram's religious ideology serves as both a recruitment tool and a justification for violence, analyzing its selective interpretation of Islamic texts to legitimize attacks against both the Nigerian state and civilian populations (Kassim & Nwankpa, 2018).

Theorizing the Discourse

This paper employs Islamic Theocratic State theory as its theoretical framework, drawing on contributions from prominent Islamic thinkers including Mohammed Rashid Rida (1865-1935), Abu'l Ala Maududi (1903-1979), Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), Khomeini (1902-1989), and Ahmed Bashir (1989). While "Islamic state" broadly refers to an independent entity where Muslims constitute the majority population, fundamentalist interpretations assign it more specific political significance. In this latter context, Islamism fundamentally opposes modern nation-states based on national sovereignty, instead advocating for theocracies implementing Sharia law to reflect "Allah's Sovereignty" (Roberts, 1988, p. 557).

One central Islamist political objective involves utilizing Islam to undermine and replace secular nationalism with theocratic Islamic governance. Such an "Islamic state" requires governance consistent with Sharia law, where "executive and legislative function and authorities must obey and assist Sharia law" (Roberts, 1988, p. 557). Islamic theocratic state theory thus functions as the guiding ideology for Islamic political opposition to secular regimes, significantly influencing contemporary Islamic revival movements. This theoretical framework enables examination of both the historical development of contemporary Islamic "state theory" and the emergence of Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria, whose name roughly translates as a prohibition on Western education.

Within Islamic theocratic state theory, political community identity derives not from modern nationalist constructs but from connection to the Umma a faith-based community transcending racial, ethnic, and geographical boundaries. This conception "refers to the concept of the Islamic *Umma...* the Islamic government based on Islamic law, Sharia is to safeguard its existence" (Roberts, 1988, p. 557). Regarding state power, Islamic theocratic theory explicitly rejects secularist national sovereignty, advocating instead for Islamic states founded on "Allah's sovereignty." Islamists oppose secularism and promote theocratic governance where state rule must align with Sharia law, with governmental functions serving Sharia principles (Roberts, 1988, p. 557). Proponents argue that Islam prohibits state-level Sharia from coexisting alongside secular federal systems, claiming that foreign governments fail to serve religious interests, that the international system competes with and undermines religions, and that this system exerts

corrupting influences. Consequently, religious terrorism connects to global trends including secularization, modernization, and Westernization (Lengmang, 2011).

Islamists contend that Western education neither stimulates meaningful development nor aligns with Islamic principles. They argue that corrupt and ineffective local political leadership has implemented failed Western ideologies, contributing significantly to religious terrorism. The Islamist rise to power in Iran catalyzed Islamic resurgence throughout the Muslim world. As Mozayyan (2009, p. 242) cited by Alozieuwa (2012) observes:

> New standards are now set and a new discourse gained currency that targeted the 'enemies of Islam' through revolutionary militant and martyr-oriented strategies. Life becomes readily expendable, especially if it hindered the advancement of Islamic agendas. Islam thus becomes a means and an end for the frustrated masses, giving rise to leaders who speak in terms of Islamic communities and pushed the need to restore Islam to its former position of power by removing the corrupting western influences that hinder the promotion of their own millenarian beliefs."

Islamic principles further prohibit financial interest transactions, autocracy, and Western-style democracy, proposing instead an Islamic democracy based on consultation principles. While Islamist theoreticians generally share universal features emphasizing religious community identity and advocating for Islamic states embodying Allah's sovereignty, specific emphases vary among thinkers.

The Islamic Theocratic State theory faces significant criticism from both Islamic and secular perspectives. An-Na'im (2008) argues that the theory misinterprets Islamic tradition by conflating the religious and political spheres in ways that were not practiced during formative Islamic periods. He contends that enforced religious law contradicts the Quranic principle that "there shall be no compulsion in religion" (2:256).

From governance perspectives, critics highlight the ambiguity regarding who legitimately interprets divine will in practical governance matters, creating potential for authoritarianism justified through religious rhetoric (March, 2015). El Fadl (2004) emphasizes that historical Islamic jurisprudence was remarkably pluralistic, with multiple valid interpretations coexisting, contradicting the modern Islamist claim to singular religious authority.

Empirical challenges to the theory emerge from the experiences of contemporary states implementing various forms of "Islamic governance," where practical implementation has proven problematic due to modern economic and political realities (Bayat, 2013). Furthermore, diverse interpretations of Sharia among different schools of thought and sectarian divisions complicate claims of a unified "Islamic" governance model (Hallaq, 2013).

The Islamic Theocratic State theory provides crucial theoretical framing for understanding Boko Haram's ideology and operations in Northeast Nigeria. Boko Haram's founder, Mohammed Yusuf, explicitly drew upon the writings of Maududi and Qutb to formulate his rejection of the Nigerian secular state and Western education (Thurston, 2017). The group's original Arabic name, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad), reflects its self-positioning within this theoretical tradition (Zenn, 2020).

The group's declaration of a caliphate in territories under its control in 2014 represents a practical implementation attempt of the Islamic Theocratic State model, seeking to establish governance based exclusively on their interpretation of Sharia (Mahmood, 2017). Their rejection of Western education ("Boko Haram") stems directly from the theory's position that Western

systems of knowledge contradict Islamic epistemology and undermine divine sovereignty (Onuoha, 2012).

Boko Haram's violence against both state institutions and Muslim populations who do not adhere to their interpretations reflects the absolutist elements within radical Islamist theories that divide society into believers and non-believers (Brigaglia, 2015). As Alao (2013) observes, the group employs the concept of takfir (excommunication) to justify violence against fellow Muslims considered apostates for participating in secular governance or education.

The group's evolution demonstrates how the Islamic Theocratic State theory can be radicalized to legitimize extreme violence when combined with local grievances, poor governance, and socioeconomic marginalization (Pérouse de Montclos, 2016). Their selective interpretation of Islamic texts to justify violence against civilians demonstrates how religious ideology becomes weaponized in pursuit of political objectives (Kassim & Nwankpa, 2018).

Understanding Boko Haram through the lens of Islamic Theocratic State theory helps explain why the group has persistently rejected negotiations with the Nigerian government that do not acknowledge their fundamental rejection of secular statehood (Higazi et al., 2018). This theoretical framework reveals that Nigeria's security challenges with Boko Haram are not merely operational but fundamentally ideological, requiring comprehensive approaches that address both security and governance dimensions (Sampson, 2016).

Islamism and the Emergence of Boko Haram: Historical Foundations and Ideological Evolution

The genesis of Boko Haram can be traced through multiple historical accounts, with scholarly consensus pointing to ideological roots in the teachings of Muhammad Marwa (Maitatsine), a fundamentalist who vehemently rejected the British educational system imposed following the colonial conquest of the Sokoto Caliphate in 1903. Historical evidence indicates that resistance to Western education was embedded within certain Muslim sects in Northern Nigeria dating back to the era of the Sokoto Caliphate—a region spanning Northern Nigeria and Northern Cameroon under Usman Danfodio's rule until 1903 (Dearn, 2011). During British colonial administration, this revolutionary Mahdism garnered support from both social elites and disenfranchised peasantry, galvanized by radical clerical preaching that sought to overthrow colonial authority controlling the Caliphate established by the jihadist Usman Danfodio.

Marchal (2012) identifies Boko Haram's foundational ideology as rooted in preceding Islamic jihadist principles in Nigeria, particularly aligning with Jamaat Iszalat al Bid'a Wa Igamat as Sunna—translated as "Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna Doctrine" and commonly known as Izala or Yan Izal. The escalation of domestic terrorism in Nigeria resulting from Boko Haram's activities—whose name roughly translates to "Western Education is forbidden"—has generated profound concern among Nigerian authorities and the international community. These activities present severe implications for economic stability, social cohesion, and psychological wellbeing throughout Northeast Nigeria, where the group maintains significant territorial influence and ideological sway.

Muhammad Marwa, an Islamic scholar who migrated from Marwa, Northern Cameroon to Kano in 1945, established himself as a proponent of Islamic purification predicated on the conviction that westernization and modern state structures had corrupted Islamic practice through secularization. His increasingly inflammatory teachings—particularly those challenging established institutions including the emirate system, political leadership, and societal elites—

ultimately resulted in his expulsion by Kano's then-emir, Alhaji Sanusi Lamido. Falola (1990, p.143) offers critical insight into Marwa's radical orientation:

> He (Marwa) was a Quranic teacher and preacher, forceful, persuasive and charismatic. He rebelled against many popular opinions within Kano Islamic circles, even criticizing prophet Muhammed. At one stage in his career, Marwa granted himself his most prestigious credential when he revealed himself to be an annabi, a prophet with divine power and a mission to save the world. He decried technological innovations like radios, wristwatches, automobiles, motorcycles, and even bicycles. Thus those who used these things or who read books other than the Quran were seen as hell-bound pagans.

This historical account demonstrates how Marwa strategically exploited Northern Nigeria's deteriorating economic conditions and the marginalized Almajeri system (traditional Quranic education) to recruit a substantial following among impoverished populations unable to secure basic necessities. These recruits became dedicated foot-soldiers and fervent adherents to both the movement and Marwa himself, establishing a pattern of radicalization that would later be replicated by Boko Haram.

Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram's founding leader, was a secondary school dropout whose religious education took him through Chad and Niger Republic for Quranic studies. These formative religious journeys cultivated his radical perspectives characterized by opposition to westernization, secularization, and modernization ideological positions closely mirroring Maitatsine's earlier teachings. Following these travels, Yusuf, like Maitatsine before him, returned to Nigeria and established himself in Maiduguri, where he founded a sectarian organization in 2001 that rapidly expanded to approximately 280,000 followers distributed across Northern Nigeria, Chad, and Niger Republic. Upon his return, Yusuf initiated provocative preaching campaigns against prominent Islamic scholars including Jafar Adam, Abba Aji, and Yahaya Jingir, while simultaneously challenging established political institutions (Onuoha, 2010).

The group operated under various names including the Nigerian Taliban, Yusufi Yyah Sect, and eventually Boko Haram. Its first armed confrontation with Nigerian security forces occurred on December 24, 2003, when members attacked police stations and public buildings in Geidam and Kanamma towns in Yobe state. On December 13, 2003, the group dispersed from their village base into various Northern states after inscribing "Taliban" on a captured vehicle (Periodic Review, 2009), signaling their ideological alignment with international jihadist movements. By 2004, the group had established a base nicknamed "Afghanistan" in Kanamma village in northern Yobe state along the Niger Republic border (Taiwo and Olugbode, 2009), further demonstrating their identification with global jihadist symbolism.

The movement's activities intensified from 2004 when students, particularly those enrolled in tertiary institutions across Borno and Yobe states—including the University of Maiduguri, Ramat Polytechnic (Maiduguri), Federal Polytechnic (Damaturu), and others—withdrew from formal education, destroyed their academic credentials, and joined the group for Quranic instruction and religious indoctrination (Suleiman, 2007). This rejection of Western educational certification represented a physical manifestation of the group's core ideological position against Western knowledge systems.

On September 21, 2004, Boko Haram members escalated their violent campaign by attacking Bama and Gwoza Police Stations in Borno State, killing several officers and looting weapons and ammunition before burning the Gwoza facility. In response, Nigerian police

launched counteroffensive operations against the sect weeks later, killing 24 members and recovering 22 assault rifles and substantial ammunition stockpiles (Morgan, 2009). Mohammed Yusuf continued leading the organization until his extrajudicial killing shortly after the July 2009 uprising, an event that marked a significant turning point in the group's trajectory toward increased radicalization and violence against both state institutions and civilian populations under subsequent leadership.

This historical evolution underscores how religious ideology intertwined with socioeconomic grievances, political marginalization, and resistance to Western cultural influence created the conditions for Boko Haram's emergence as a significant threat to Nigeria's national security framework, demonstrating the complex relationship between religious extremism and security challenges in northeastern Nigeria.

Boko Haram and the Manifestation of Violence in Nigeria

Boko Haram has evolved into one of Nigeria's most significant security threats, with its origins rooted in ideological extremism. The group's transformation into a violent insurgency accelerated after the extrajudicial killing of its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009. Under Abubakar Shekau's leadership, Boko Haram expanded its operations from sporadic attacks to sophisticated bombings, assassinations, and large-scale territorial conquests, culminating in the declaration of a caliphate in 2014.

The group's violence is driven by a radical interpretation of Islam that rejects Western education, democracy, and the secular Nigerian state. Boko Haram employs suicide bombings, mass killings, abductions including the infamous Chibok schoolgirls' kidnapping and forced recruitment, including child soldiers. Socioeconomic conditions, such as poverty, corruption, and poor governance, have facilitated its recruitment efforts, particularly in northeastern Nigeria.

Boko Haram's activities have led to massive humanitarian and economic crises, with over 40,000 deaths, 2.5 million displaced persons, and billions of dollars in economic losses. The Nigerian government has struggled to contain the insurgency despite military mobilization. Internal splits, particularly the emergence of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have altered the group's tactics, with ISWAP focusing more on military targets while Shekau's faction continued indiscriminate violence until his reported death in 2021.

Boko Haram's ideology aligns with global jihadist movements like ISIS, incorporating extremist Islamic doctrines that justify violence against both state forces and civilians. The group's resilience is tied to deep-seated religious and political grievances, making its eradication a complex challenge requiring both military and socio-political solutions.

Table 1: A sample of Boko-Haram's violent activities

Date	Event	Location	Actors	Casualties
26th July 2009	First clash with security agencies in Bauchi state after an all –night attack	Dutsen –Taushi Police Station	Boko Haram	39 members of Boko Haram, 2 police men and one soldier died
27th July 2009	First attacks in Yobe state	Potiskum Divisional of Police Headquarters	Boko Haram	3 police men, one fire Service Officer were killed

29th July 2009	An all-night battle with combined security operative	Railway Terminus, Marduguri, Borno States	Boko Haram	Scores numbers of the Boko Haram were killed and operational base destroyed
9th May 2011	Attack on Islamic Clerics	Mairi and Bulalum wards of Maiduguri, Borno state	Boko Haram	Sheikh Goni Tijani and Mallam Alhaji Abu were Killed
31st May 2011	Attack	Emir's Palace	Boko Haram	Shot dead Shehu of Borno's Brother, Alhaji Abbs Anas Garba El-kanemi
Jan. 6, 2012	Bomb Attack at Christ Apostolic Church	Yola & Mubi		17 people died while 20 Igbo people were also killed
December 25th, 2012	Attack	Maiduguri and Potiskum	Boko Haram	27 Christians were killed
April 16th, 2013	Attack	Baga-Borno	Boko Haram	187 people were killed
September 12–18th, 2013	An offensive by Nigerian Army	Bama-Borno-State	Nigerian Army	leaves 150 Islamists and 16 soldiers dead.
October 10th, 2013.	Clash between (Army,Boko Haram)	Damboa	Army/ Boko Haram)	least 20 killed (15 suspected militants and 5 civilians).
February 15th, 2014	Attack	Gwoza	Boko Haram	90 Christians and 9 Nigerian soldiers are killed
April 14th, 2014	Attack on Government Girls College Chibok	Chibok.	Boko Haram	276 female students were kidnapped
May 27th, 2014.	Attack on military base	Yobe State	Boko Haram	49 security personnel and 9 civilians

				were killed
June 1st 2014	Bomb blast	Mubi, Adamawa State	Boko Haram	at least 40 people were killed
3–7 January – 2015	Baga Massacre	Baga-Borno State	Boko Haram	hundreds of people killed
12 February 2015	Army Invasion	Sambisa Forest in Borno/ Mbuta/ Biu	Army/Boko Haram	The West African Allied Forces, led by Nigeria and supported by Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, invaded Sambisa Forest in Borno, killing scores of the insurgents.
20th February, 2015	Attack	Chibok	Boko Haram	killed 34 people in attacks across Borno, 21 in Chibok
21st February, 2015	Attack	Baga	Nigerian Army	The Nigerian Army retook Baga, which had fallen to Boko Haram on 3 January
28th March, 2015	Attack	Dukku in Gombe	Boko Haram	Gunmen killed at least 15 voters.
23 February 2021	Attack	Maiduguri	Boko Haram	kills 10 people in Maiduguri using rocket-propelled grenades.
20 May 2021	Attack	Borno	U.S Army	Abubakar Shekau is reported dead.

On 5 July 2022	Attack	Abuja	ISWA	the Kuje Prison in The Federal Capital Territory was bombed and attacked by gunmen and an unknown number of prisoners escaped.
January 14, 2025	Attack	Zillang village in Chibok LGA	Boko Haram	The attack led to a prolonged gun battle with the Nigerian Army and local vigilantes, resulting in property destruction. Casualty figures remain unspecified.
January 24, 2025	Attack	149 Battalion military base in Malam-Fatori, Abadam LGA, Borno State	Boko Haram	The assault resulted in the deaths of 22 soldiers, including the commanding officer and two senior officers

Source: National Counterterrorism Center, Global Conflict Tracker, 2025

Ideological Beliefs of Boko Haram

The ideological beliefs of Boko Haram are rooted in their interpretation of traditional Islam. Their strict orthodoxy rejects Western education and employment in the civil service, leading to their popular designation as "Boko Haram," which translates to "Western education is a sin" (Boyle, 2009). However, in August 2009, the sect's acting leader, Mallam Sanni Umaru, refuted this name. In pamphlets distributed near the Bauchi prison and across major streets in Bauchi, the group reiterated that their official name is *Jama'atu Ahlissunnah Lidda'awati Wal Jihad*, meaning "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad" (Abdullahi, 2010). Their primary objective is to overthrow the Nigerian state and impose strict Islamic Sharia law nationwide. Their ideology opposes various aspects of Western life, including democracy, alcohol consumption, and rights for women and LGBTQ+ individuals. Boko Haram

leaders emphasize that their opposition extends beyond Western education to encompass Western civilization as a whole (Anti-Defamation League, 2011).

To fully grasp their ideological stance, it is essential to examine the meaning of the words *Boko* and *Haram*. In Hausa, *Boko* is a broad term referring to anything Western or foreign, while *Haram* is an Arabic word meaning "forbidden." Thus, *Boko Haram* signifies the rejection of everything Western, particularly Western education. Oloyede (2009, p. 34) encapsulates Boko Haram's ideology by highlighting its aim to establish an Islamic state governed by their interpretation of Orthodox Islam. According to Mohammed Yusuf, the sect's founding leader, all institutions representing the government including security agencies such as the police and military—must be dismantled for this goal to be realized. The sect views Western civilization as the root of societal corruption and, therefore, believes that destroying modern state institutions is necessary for establishing an Islamic society governed by Sharia law.

Since the onset of their violent campaign, the group has engaged in indiscriminate bloodshed and suicide missions. While security forces have sought to contain the insurgency, reports indicate that some responses have included overzealous and extrajudicial measures (Oloyede, 2009). The understanding the Boko Haram insurgency requires an emphasis on the literal interpretation of their name, "Western Education is Sin." The group's members genuinely believe they are engaged in a jihad (Holy War). Unlike other militant organizations that seek financial rewards or political concessions, Boko Haram operates purely on religious ideology. Their ultimate goal is the establishment of an Islamic state in Nigeria.

The discussion above underscores the relevance of the Islamic theocratic state theory in analyzing Boko Haram's attacks, history, and ideology. Their violent actions stem from their pursuit of an Islamic state, driven by ideological motivations rather than economic grievances. This reflects a broader structural imbalance, where religious extremism is placed above the established state order, fueling the ongoing insurgency.

The call for prayers and jihad (*Allahu Akbar* – "God is Great") is frequently heard in Boko Haram's videos and operational documentaries in Northeast Nigeria. This highlights the sect's ideological stance and its self-declared war against the Nigerian government. Rudolph (1979) echoes General Mahmut Shit Khattah's assertion that human conviction remains the most decisive factor in warfare. He emphasizes that a man without a creed is like "the foam of a torrent," and thus, a return to Islam necessitates the proclamation of jihad. Radical Islamists leverage this belief to justify total war against perceived enemies, including civilians, under the pretext of jihad (Gawrych, n.d.).

While many Muslim scholars and adherents dissociate Islam from violence—stating that all religions condemn the killing of innocent people the ambiguity within Islamic jurisprudence regarding jihad as a means of forcefully spreading Sharia law remains a significant concern. Jihad is broadly interpreted as a struggle, encompassing spiritual, personal, political, and military efforts (Hegghammer, 2006; Siddiqi, 2001). However, extremist factions emphasize the military dimension, believing that those who die fighting for Allah are guaranteed a place in paradise, as captured in *Surah* 101:6-9.

Salafist ideologues present an extreme, puritanical interpretation of Sunni Islam, aiming to replicate the perceived ideal conditions of the *Salaf* (the pious forefathers who succeeded Prophet Muhammad). This explains their hostility toward other sects and religions, their rejection of democracy, and their strict enforcement of social norms, including dress codes and public morality (Neumann, 2014). Consequently, jihadism, as a modern revolutionary ideology, employs violence to promote its vision of a Sunni Islamic state.

Gabriel (2002) further emphasizes that *Surah* 8, titled "Spoils of War," explicitly sanctions jihad as a tool for expanding Islam by force. Historically, Prophet Muhammad's leadership in Medina posed a direct challenge to the pagan traditions of Mecca, resulting in military conflicts. Between 622 and 632, Muhammad personally participated in 27 military campaigns, fought in nine battles, and sustained injuries in one (Gabriel, 2002). His successors, the Caliphs continued Islam's expansion through conquests, erasing the distinction between religion and the state. Gabriel (2002) argues that this foundational link between Islam and military expansion fuels modern jihadist movements, including Boko Haram.

The promise of paradise serves as a powerful motivator for jihadists, particularly suicide bombers. *Surah* 4:74 explicitly states that those who die fighting for Allah are guaranteed immediate entry into paradise:

> Let those (believers) who sell the life of this world for the hereafter fight in the cause of Allah, and whoever fights in the cause of Allah and is killed or victorious. We shall bestow on him a great reward.

Gabriel (2002) further notes that jihadists are honored differently in death. Unlike regular Muslim burials, where bodies are washed and clothed, a jihadist's body remains unwashed, with their blood serving as a testament before Allah. Scholars such as Neumann (2014), Hegghammer (2006), Safa (1996), and Gabriel (2006) associate jihadism primarily with Sunni fundamentalism, though Islam comprises multiple sects with varying interpretations of jihad. Gabriel (2002) categorizes Muslims into three groups: secular, traditional, and fundamentalist.
a. Secular Muslims adhere to cultural Islamic traditions but reject violent jihad.
b. Traditional Muslims are divided into two subgroups: Those who view jihad as a personal spiritual struggle, similar to Sufism and those who recognize jihad as military combat but refrain from participating due to personal or familial concerns.
c. Fundamentalist Muslims strictly emulate Prophet Muhammad's practices and engage in militant jihad, often labeled as radicals or extremists.

Jenkins (2004) classifies Islam into four main groups: Sunni, Shia, Sufi, and Baha'is. Sunni Islam, which constitutes 84-90% of Muslims, strictly adheres to *Sharia* law and has been the source of various Islamic reform movements, including extremist factions like Al-Qaeda. The Shia sect, constituting 10-16% of Muslims, traces its legitimacy to Prophet Muhammad's lineage. Sufism, a mystical Islamic tradition, emphasizes personal spiritual experiences and is often viewed as a deviation by conservative Sunnis. The Baha'is, a 19th-century offshoot of Islam, remain contested and are frequently labeled as heretical.

These internal divisions fuel competition among Nigerian Muslim movements, leading to ideological conflicts over leadership and the correct interpretation of Islam (Loimeier, 2012). This ideological fragmentation continues to influence Boko Haram's activities, as the group seeks to enforce its radical interpretation of Islam through violence, thereby posing an enduring threat to national security in Northern Nigeria.

Conclusion

The prevailing lawlessness and insecurity in Northeast Nigeria, largely fueled by religious extremism, particularly ethno-religious and religio-political crises, suggest that religion plays a central role in the conflict. Ideally, religion should complement government efforts in ensuring security and promoting social harmony based on the principle of love and mutual

respect. However, in the case of Northeast Nigeria, certain interpretations and practices of Islam have been frequently linked to the ongoing instability in the region.

The issue is not inherently with religion itself but with its misinterpretation and exploitation. Religion, in its purest form, is not a source of evil; rather, the manner in which it is practiced determines its impact. When religion is misused whether out of ignorance or for personal gain, it becomes a tool for violence, oppression, and destruction. History has shown that conflicts, wars, bloodshed, destruction of property, and other social vices are often the result of the misapplication of religious principles.

While poverty is a significant issue in Northeast Nigeria, it is not the root cause of terrorism in the region. Boko Haram's actions go beyond demands for economic development; instead, the group aims to establish an Islamic caliphate, enforcing its extremist interpretation of Islam. The sect's allegiance to ISIS and Al-Qaeda underscores its ideological foundation, reinforcing the notion that religious ideology, not socio-economic grievances is the primary driver of its insurgency. As Peter and Ocheni (2015) argue, combating Boko Haram is particularly challenging due to the ideological framework that underpins its operations.

Religion, when properly practiced, remains a force for good rather than a source of conflict. However, the current state of insecurity in Northeast Nigeria has been exacerbated by the exploitation of religious sentiment for ethnic and political gains. This manipulation has led to calls for jihad and the establishment of an Islamic state in Nigeria, where strict religious doctrines would be enforced. The solution to this crisis lies in eliminating religious fanaticism and promoting a balanced, tolerant approach to faith, ensuring that religion serves as a foundation for lasting peace and security in Nigeria.

Recommendations

i. Believers of all religious faiths should abide by the true teachings and practices to avoid extremism and fanatics
ii. The reversion to orthodox Islam as canvassed by the Boko Haram sect should be done through preaching and conviction rather than resort to violence.
iii. The Almajiris, who are believed to vulnerable docile to be recruited as foot-soldiers for religious violence in the north should be made to engage in compulsory vocational and technical education so that there will be useful to themselves and the society.
iv. Successive government should tackle the challenge of youth unemployment with all seriousness.
v. There is the need for regular religious dialogue between and among religious bodies to stem the tides of religious fanatism.

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