

Public Opinion on the Root Causes of Terrorism and Objectives of Terrorists: A Boko Haram Case Study

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Abstract

Since about the year 2009, Boko Haram, a territorial terrorist organization, has wreaked havoc on communities in Northeast Nigeria and beyond. Significant debate has ensued about the reasons for the Boko Haram insurgency and their objectives. The government's response to Boko Haram has largely focused on the need to stamp out the insurgency through strong military response and heightened activities in intelligence and security agencies. Some have espoused the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) approach of mounting strategies that at least recognize the root causes of the problem and the angst amongst citizens that contribute to their decision to support terrorist organizations. In this article, we investigate public opinion about the root causes of terrorism and the objectives of terrorists. The results suggest that the majority of the public agree with the following: (1) the root causes of Boko Haram are unemployment, poverty and economic problems, dislike for government, extreme political ideology, extreme religious feelings and manipulation by some politicians; and (2) a major objective of Boko Haram is to seek revenge against security forces. However, more respondents disagreed than agreed about the following objectives of Boko Haram: fighting political inequality, fighting economic inequalities, and addressing political imbalance. Given these findings, it appears there is divergence in public opinion about Boko Haram and that some aspects of public opinion differ from perspectives held by government agencies.

Keywords: Terrorism, Perception, Root Causes, Objectives, Boko Haram, Nigeria.

Introduction

Terrorism can be defined as “the premeditated use or threat to use violence by individuals or sub-national groups in order to obtain a political or social objective through the intimidation of a large audience beyond that of their immediate victims.”[1] Although state agents can engage in terrorist acts against the people, the term “terrorists” is usually used to describe those who act outside the normal framework of society by engaging in illegal and often lethal and destruction activities that compromised state cohesion. [2] We expect their motivations and grievances to be related to the types of attacks that they perpetrate.

Terrorist attacks on people, communities, governments and infrastructure have resulted in tension and panic around the globe. Some terrorist organizations have international ambition while some do not.[3] Some, on the other hand, have territorial ambition and therefore capture territory through force and establish new government-like structures. Given the growing incidence of terrorism around the globe,[4] terrorism is now generally viewed as a leading global security threat.[5] This has spurred broader thinking about its causes, what it entails, and how it impacts on people and society. However, the complexity of terrorist behavior and the diversity of root causes and objectives make it difficult to answer these questions. Also, significant gaps remain in public understanding of terrorism and in the understanding of policymakers about public perception.

Knowledge of what constitutes the root causes and objectives of terrorist organizations continues to evolve in response to the needs of governments, international organizations and security experts to develop strategies to prevent and manage terrorist attacks. For example, regarding root causes, there is growing evidence that terrorism is largely explained by socio-economic, political and religious factors. Although extensive research has been conducted on the various underlying factors on terrorism, one key missing element in the literature is how the public perceives these factors. Especially for Boko Haram, a unique terrorist organization due to its territorial ambition and regional focus, a survey of public opinion is helpful in identifying how the public perceives it. For example, if the public perceives Boko Haram's cause as legitimate, challenges may face government agencies empowered to address the problem. If the public feels that the cause is government

ineffectiveness, it may be difficult for the government to convince the public that its solutions will be effective.

Terrorist organizations tend to recruit from within a pool of sympathizers. It is often argued that terrorists are aware of the importance of public opinion, hence, plan their attacks in order to sway opinion in an intended direction and this is evidenced by the frequency of their attacks, place location, timing and targets of their attacks.[6] This implies that terrorists manipulate public opinions and reactions to their advantage. An understanding of public opinion about terrorists can also enable policymakers to implement programs that have more popular supports and better gauge the effectiveness of government actions.

This study investigates public perceptions about Boko Haram, which has had a devastating impact on the Northeast part of Nigeria. The study focuses on the perceptions of citizens from the immediate areas of Boko Haram attacks,[7] as well as other areas in Northern Nigeria. Drawing on existing literature, we developed and implemented a survey questionnaire to obtain information on the root causes and the objectives of the Boko Haram insurgents. In reporting our results, we highlight where there exist differences between our survey results and common perceptions, as well as findings from existing literature.

We structure the rest of this paper as follows. Next, we summarize the history of Boko Haram and its activities. Next, we present a literature review on the root causes and objectives of terrorists. Then, we present our key research questions. Then, we present our methodology, data collection efforts and results. Finally, we offer some conclusions.

Understanding Boko Haram and Terrorism

Boko Haram, a radical Islamist group, has heightened the state of insecurity and become a major destabilizing force in Nigeria and surrounding countries.[8] Formally known as “Jama’atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda Awati wal Jihad”, its origin can be traced back to 2002 when its members organized around its charismatic leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in Maiduguri, the Borno State capital.[9] Yusuf instilled in the group an extreme Islamic ideology and a high degree of disdain for western principles and culture. Boko Haram, simply translated from Hausa to English, means “western education is forbidden.”[10] It aims to create an Islamic state, impose sharia law in Northern Nigeria, do away with western principles and culture, and rid society of bad governance, corruption and moral depravation. These, they believe, are against the tenets of Islam.[11]

Boko Haram’s violence became palpable in July 2009 when it commenced its attacks, including the killing of police forces and the bombing of government officials, places of worship, public institutions and innocent civilians.[12] Although the movement started with a strong criticism of northern Muslims for engaging in un-Islamic practices, it remained largely non-violent until 2009 when violent crackdown by the Police led to the arrest of some key members, including, Mohammed Yusuf, who was subsequently killed by the police. [13] The killing of Yusuf and other members of the sect spawned anger amongst the group, leading to violent attacks against police forces and innocent victims.[14]

In the aftermath of violent crackdowns, Boko Haram became a highly destructive and lethal group, killing thousands and displacing millions in Northeast Nigeria.[15] Boko Haram vigorously uses brutal tactics such as suicide bombings, assassinations, roadside shooting, car hijacking, kidnapping and bomb explosions to wage war against what it considers as enemy targets.[16] Boko Haram has also wreaked havoc on public institutions, civilians, police forces and government property.[17] The Amnesty International reported that Boko Haram fighters have bombed and killed several civilians, burnt villages and abducted and assaulted teachers and students during their attacks.[18] According to the Global Terrorism Index 2015 report, Nigeria experienced the most significant increase in terrorist deaths ever recorded by any country, from 1,595 in 2013 to 6,118 in 2014. These statistics made Boko Haram, the deadliest terrorist group in the world that year.[19] It is noteworthy that Boko Haram attacks have shifted remarkably from attacks on security forces to attacks on civilians.

Boko Haram attacks have destabilized economic activities, derailed economic development, and caused the worst kind of humanitarian crisis in the Northeast ever, with millions of people displaced from their homes,

jobs and communities.[20] For example, Borno State, which was worst affected by Boko Haram attacks, has 1.3 million people, especially women and children, displaced and in need of humanitarian aid.[21] Terrorism affects a larger spectrum of society than the immediate victims. In the aftermath of Boko Haram attacks, fear and anxiety have heightened not only among the target population but the broader population of people beyond the immediate impact area of Boko Haram. These attacks have drawn large public sentiments and media headlines from around the globe. For example, Boko Haram's kidnapping of schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014 caused international outrage and affected public opinion.[22] Similar outrage surrounded their most recent abduction of schoolgirls from Dapchi in 2018.[23]

Terrorists plan their attacks to "send a message to a certain audiences in an attempt to change their attitudes and opinions." [24] Many people believe that terrorists are irrational. However, their attacks and other strategies suggest that they are highly knowledgeable and organized entities that seek to maximize destruction, based on grievances, and gain public support.[25] Terrorists seek their attacks to influence people's perception in an intended direction.[26]

Amid the growing concern about the large displacement of people from Boko Haram attacks the federal and state governments of Nigeria, as well as international humanitarian agencies, have mounted major humanitarian strategies.[27] The Nigerian government also responded to Boko Haram's threat by using military force, especially in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States where Boko Haram attacks were strongest.[28] For example, in 2015/2016, the deployment of the military troops led to the recapturing of the control of Maiduguri from Boko Haram. Boko Haram found refuge in the Sambisa forest.[29] More recently, Boko Haram continues to launch attacks in several parts of the Northeast.[30]

The effectiveness of the Nigerian government, and its military and security agencies in fighting Boko Haram has come under criticism from both local and International agencies. A report by Transparency International indicated that the Nigerian armies are unable to defeat Boko Haram due to corruption in the Defense Sector and the inadequate supply of equipment and materials to confront Boko Haram. Further, in the report, it was recounted that Nigerian soldiers sometimes fled from Boko Haram attacks due to the shortage of ammunition and fuel, which were withheld by corrupt senior officers.[31] Amnesty International also accused the Nigeria military of committing war crimes against humanity, due to the mass arrest, interrogation and detentions of suspected members and supporters of Boko Haram, specifically detainees with no connection to Boko Haram who are subjected to torture, starvation, malnutrition and thirst, resulting in thousands of deaths at army run detention facilities.[32] The Nigerian government has typically denied these allegations. A study such as this one that is focused on public perception is helpful in understanding whether or not the public is closer to foreign critics or to domestic government officials.

Root Causes of Terrorism and Objectives of Terrorists

Studies have examined the root causes of terrorism and the objectives of terrorists. Identified root causes can be classified as follows: economic, social, religious, ethnic and political. We now examine these studies in more depth.

Economic and Social Root Causes

Poverty and unemployment have been identified by some studies as common causes of terrorism.[33] However, several studies have found no link between poverty, unemployment and terrorism.[34] The general belief of the security and intelligence community is that people who are economically deprived are more likely to resort to violence as a way to express their grievances. That is poverty and unemployment create terrorism.[35] The theory of relative deprivation explains that when people feel deprived of something they are expect to have, they become discontent, hence could use violence to express their grievances.[36] Although, it is argued that poor economic conditions such as lack of employment opportunities and poverty create the condition for people to join terrorist organizations.[37] A study by Kavanagh found that poor but highly educated people were the ones likely to participate in terrorism.

[38] Bhatia and Ghanem in their study that examined the relationship between education, unemployment and violent extremism, however, found that unemployed educated youth are more likely to be radicalized by terrorist groups due to the unemployment and lack of employment opportunities in Arab countries.[39]

Similarly, the lack of economic opportunities has been found as a root cause of terrorism. A study by Gassebner and Luechinger found a negative relationship between lack of economic opportunities and terrorism. The study further shows that countries that restrict economic freedom are susceptible to more terrorist attacks than countries that promote economic freedom.[40] For example, Mohammad argued, “the deterioration of socio-economic conditions in the Middle Eastern societies has contributed in many ways to the eruption of terrorism.”[41] In his study that examines the relationship between poverty, minority economic discrimination and domestic terrorism, Piazza revealed that countries that subject minority groups to economic discrimination are more likely to experience domestic terrorism than countries where minority groups are not affected by economic discrimination.[42] Lai also found evidence to show that states with greater economic disparities between groups are susceptible to higher terrorist attacks.[43]

Low income and economic inequality are found to be possible causes of terrorism. Pinar Derin-Gure found evidence that the greater the income inequality there is in a country, the greater the incidence of domestic terrorist attacks. [44] Krieger and Meierrieks sampled 114 countries between 1985 and 2012 and found that income inequality is correlated with terrorism.[45] In addition, Enders et al. found a robust nonlinear income-terrorism relationship, which suggests that terrorist attacks are more concentrated in middle-income countries.[46] But, other empirical studies have found no support to suggest that the income distribution of a country is related to terrorism.[47]

In northern Nigeria, there is the common perception that violent extremism is entrenched in the socio-economic problems of the country.[48] For example, Ayegba argued that poverty and unemployment are the driving forces behind the insurgency in Nigeria. Further in the study, Ayegba claimed that the high rate of youth unemployment has resulted in poverty and insecurity in the country.[49] David et al. argued, “socio-economic indices such as poverty, unemployment, inequality, economic underdevelopment, low education, inter alia, underlie the emergence and persistence of Boko Haram terrorism.”[50] These assertions suggest that the pervasive poverty and unemployment in northern Nigeria create the condition for especially young people to be manipulated and recruited by Boko Haram. Although, some studies have found no link between poverty and terrorism, however, the vicious cycle of poverty and unemployment make it easy for people to become prey for Boko Haram recruitment. A study by Botha and Abdile confirmed that, due to adverse economic conditions and unemployment in Somalia, some people viewed al-Shabaab as a potential employer.[51] A recent public opinion study on Boko Haram by Botha et al. revealed that some of the respondents interviewed perceive that people are motivated to join Boko Haram because “they are unemployed and see Boko Haram as a job.”[52]

Religious and Ethnic Causes of Terrorism

It is common belief that religious tension and religious fundamentalism cause terrorism. There is empirical evidence to support this argument.[53] With respect to Boko Haram, religion plays a vital role in their discourse.[54] The group holds extreme religious ideology, which they use as the basis to commit their heinous crimes. Akinola argued that the rise of Boko Haram is embedded in Islamic fundamentalism, which they use to justify their actions.[55] For example, the group aims to promote Sharia law and create an Islamic state in Northern Nigeria. As a result, it has waged war on any group or western idea, which they believe is against Islam. This has created the notion that terrorism is linked to religion fundamentalism.[56] In the study, why do people join Boko Haram? Onuoha found that, “ignorance of religious teaching is the leading factor influencing the adoption of extreme religious views, especially among youth” in all the northern states surveyed.[57]

In addition, religious and ethnic tensions are found to cause terrorism. Historically, Nigeria has experienced intermittent ethno-religious clashes.[58] Although, it is hard to claim that the emergence Boko Haram is related to religious or ethnic conflict, some studies have found a positive relationship between religious and ethnic tensions and terrorism.[59] This implies that

societies experiencing religious tension can become a breeding ground for terrorists to operate.

Political Causes of Terrorism

With respect to the political root causes of terrorism, several studies have indicated that the lack of civil liberties, corruption, weak political institutions, political instability, weak government, high level of repression, civil wars can foment the incidence of terrorism.[60] In addition, a study by Piazza shows that societies with large complex multiparty systems are more prone to terrorist incidence than those with few homogeneous systems.[61] Also, democratic countries, which are assumed to be in a better position to stop terrorist attacks, are more prone to terrorist attacks than autocratic countries.[62] Krieger and Meierrieks argued that democratic countries are prone to terrorist attacks due to the promotion of democratic ideals like respect for civil liberties and free press, which open doors for terrorists to operate and also hinder counter-terrorism measures.[63]

On domestic terrorism in Northeast Nigeria, some studies blamed the emergence of Boko Haram on the country's elite politics.[64] Botha et al. argued that "Boko Haram is a political construct, sponsored by politicians." [65] According to Mbah et al., Boko Haram emerged from the struggle among northern and southern political elites to gain control of state political power, especially after the death of President Yar'Adua. [66] The re-election of Jonathan Goodluck in 2011 then led to the use of Boko Haram as an instrument of destruction by northern political elites.[67] However, these claims cannot fully explain the emergence of Boko Haram, since other political and social phenomenon could contribute to the rise of the group. For instance, some scholars have argued that emergence of the group could be linked to bad governance, corruption and economic deprivation in northern Nigeria, which has fostered the rise radical extremist groups.[68]

Objectives of Terrorists

In general, the literature suggests that terrorists operate with particular goals in mind. Studies have shown that terrorist organizations may have political, religious, social and economic objectives, which inspired their operations.[69] The objectives of a terrorist organization influence its choice of targets and modes of attacks. Like other terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State which has a core goal of establishing a caliphate in the Middle East,[70] Boko Haram has the objective of removing all western and un-Islamic influences and establishing a society built on Islamic law in northern Nigeria. With this goal in mind, Boko Haram insurgents use violence as the acceptable means to bring about the change they want. The objectives of terrorist organizations may play an important role in how they recruit and radicalize people.

Importance of Research on Public Perceptions

The literature on public perception on terrorism is sparse. Only a few studies, if any at all, have studied how the public perceives terrorism or government actions to contain terrorist activities. Krueger examined the public attitude in one country toward another country and its effect on the likelihood of terrorism.[71] His results revealed the greater likelihood of terrorist attacks on one country if another country disapproves of the leadership and policies of that country.[72] A study by the Pew Charitable Trust shows that the majority of Nigerians are concern about the rise of Islamic extremism in the country, with 82% respondents saying they have unfavorable view and 10% said favorable view of Boko Haram.[73] Probably much of the 10% with favorable Boko Haram view (about 20 million) come from areas of the North that have had similar challenges as the Northeast.

Another study by Loschky indicated that 95% of Nigerians see Boko Haram as a major threat to the country's future, whereas, only 3% said minor threat.[74] In a recent study by Poushter on how the public perceives extremism, the result shows that majority of people in Europe and North America are worried about extremism.[75] This implies that the incident of terrorist attacks has increased citizens' fear and stimulated public view about the threat of terrorism. The authors are not aware of any studies that have looked how citizens in countries facing terrorism feel about the perpetrators and the actions of government.

It is important that the efforts of government in tackling terrorism are grounded on four foundations: (1) they are effective in addressing terrorism, (2) they are effective in addressing its root causes, (3) they are efficient and cost

effective, (4) they are supported by a significant segment of the public or enjoy broad-based support. The last has proven important in many countries. Terrorists rely on a pool of sympathizers from within which they recruit. Understanding how the general public perceives terrorism is important because this helps to understand the perspectives of the public concerning the root causes and objectives of terrorists. It also helps to understand how the public feels about the issue and the segment of the public that are sympathizers of terrorist acts. In addition, estimating the relationship between public opinion and terrorism can help government, military, humanitarian agencies and security agencies provide the appropriate services and support to victims of terrorist acts.

Methods & Data

Research Questions

In light of the above, in this study, we explore the following research questions in order to examine consistency between existing literature, general beliefs and public opinion about Boko Haram. Based on our assessment of the key areas of possible divergence, we honed in on the following critical questions related to root causes and objectives of terrorists:

1. What are the primary objectives of terrorists?
2. What are the root causes of terrorism?
3. What existing conditions enable and encourage terrorism?

Survey

We implemented a survey of respondents from eleven (11) states in Northern Nigeria in August 2013, two years into the active phase of the Boko Haram insurgency and a period where some of the most deadly attacks were recorded. Rather than focus only on the states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (BAY states), where the bulk of the Boko Haram attacks occurred, we expanded the survey for several reasons: (1) uncertainty about the ability to collect adequate data from some states during the height of the insurgency, (2) to see if opinions varied between northerners and other northerners and (3) Boko Haram activities have impacted directly or indirectly on residents of most of these states. All selected states have very high Muslim population and it is often claimed that Muslims in the North generally support Boko Haram. In addition to the BAY states, other states surveyed include the other three Northeast states of Bauchi, Gombe and Taraba (BGT); the states of Kaduna, Kano, Kebbi and Sokoto in the Northwest; and the state of Niger in the North-Central Zone. The inclusion of states beyond the primary impact states allowed us to gauge broader public opinion in the Northern regions, vis-à-vis the immediate impact area.

In each state, we organized fieldwork to gauge the perceptions of individuals on terrorism. Our survey targets included the youths, workers, traders, traditional rulers, serving/ex-security personnel, women, etc. We utilized availability sampling in selecting the required number of respondents due to the nature of the insurgency, the associated risks to the lives of enumerators, the scepticism of many potential survey respondent, and the sensitive nature of the surveys. However, we made efforts to ensure a balanced representation and gave opportunities to all groups to be represented in the study.

The primary data collection instrument used in this study is a structured questionnaire. This is available upon request. This instrument was intended to generate answers to our key questions. Due to challenges associated with data collection of this nature, only one hundred (100) questionnaires were administered in each of the eleven states, bringing the total to 1,100. However, only 1,079 were found to be properly completed and usable in further analysis. To supplement our survey results, in each state, we conducted in-depth interviews with three persons; (1) a traditional or religious leader, (2) security personnel (serving or retired), and (3) a prominent citizen in the area. Please note that only the survey results relating to the focus of this particular paper are reported here. That is, there were more survey questions than what we analyse in this paper.

Results and Discussions

In this section, we present survey results from all eleven Northern states. The views and perceptions about terrorism while root causes and terrorists’ objectives were relatively consistent across states, with a few exceptions. In our reporting, we focus on the aggregate views of the 1079 respondents from the eleven Northern States, we also highlight areas where the results from specific state deviate from overall findings.

Causes of Terrorism

The root causes of terrorism suggested by the literature appeared in section B. Survey respondents essentially confirm many of these causes, with only a few surprises. The general perceptions of the public about the causes of terrorism for the entire region are summarized in table 1. The strongest opinion centres on the notions that terrorists are typically unemployed people who are easily recruited by sponsors. Survey results also show that respondents believe that terrorists are motivated by poverty and economic problems. Results also suggest that the public feels that terrorists dislike government, harbour extreme political ideology and have extreme religious feelings. Also, strong is the perception that terrorists are manipulated by politicians as a ploy to stay in power and democracy provides greater latitude for terrorists to operate. These last two findings can be considered as somewhat unique about Nigeria. Less than 50% of those surveyed felt that terrorists were driven by the following factors: religious marginalization (42%), dislike for democracy (30%) or ethnicity (27%).

Table 1. Public perceptions on the causes on terrorism

Statements	Strongly agree or Agree	Disagree or Strongly disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree
Terrorists are unemployed people and easily recruited by sponsors	80%	20%	0%
Terrorists are driven by poverty and economic problems	72%	18%	10%
Terrorists are driven by dislike for the government of the day	66%	18%	16%
Terrorists are driven by extreme political ideology	63%	19%	18%
Terrorism is a grand design by politicians to stay in power	62%	20%	18%
Democracy has given room for terrorists to operate	61%	39%	0%
Terrorists are influenced by extreme religious feelings	58%	42%	0%
Terrorists are driven by feelings of regional marginalization	42%	41%	17%
Terrorists are driven by dislike for democracy	30%	46%	24%
Terrorists are driven by ethnicity	27%	50%	23%

Overall, the findings of the survey, particularly the result that suggest that terrorists are motivated by poverty and economic problems, confirm the common perception that the rise of violent extremism in Northern Nigeria is entrenched in socio-economic problems.[76] These findings imply that the prevalence of poverty and unemployment in Northeastern Nigeria create the conditions for people to join Boko Haram. These results, however, contradict the finding by Pizza, and Krueger and Maleckova that poverty and economic conditions do not necessarily cause terrorism.[77] Generally, this study seems to suggest that socio-economic factors are among the drivers of terrorism.[78]

Regarding the political causes of terrorism, the general perception in Nigeria is that Boko Haram dislikes the Nigerian government and unequivocally rejects Nigeria’s political system, which they deemed as corrupt and un-Islamic.[79] In addition, since Boko Haram’s aims to create an Islamic State in Northern Nigeria, it is not surprising that respondents strongly believe that extreme religion feeling has a role in influencing terrorists. This is corroborated by empirical studies of a link between terrorism and religious fundamentalism.[80] However, a recent opinion survey by Botha et al. showed that the majority of respondents think religion has little or no influence on people’s decision to join Boko Haram,

hence the study did not consider religion to be a major reason for people to join Boko Haram.[81]

There is also claim that Boko Haram is supported and financed by some politicians in Nigeria to promote their political agenda.[82] Wole Soyinka, Nigeria's Nobel Laureate, indicated that there are some Nigeria politicians who actually support the activities of Boko Haram "because in their lust for power and pursuit for power, they were ready to sacrifice anything or ally with anything." [83] Interestingly, from the survey, the majority of respondents believe terrorists are manipulated by politicians in order to remain in power.

State-Level Observations

Across all eleven states, there was not much variation in citizens responses about the root causes of terrorism. A significant majority of respondents from all the surveyed states clearly recognize that terrorism is rooted in the socio-economic, political and religious problems of the region. Since a major part of Northern Nigeria is engulfed in poverty, limited economic opportunities and unemployment, it was not surprising that the majority of respondents conflated terrorism to the socio-economic and political challenges facing the region. In particular, respondents from Borno, Adamawa and Yobe, where Boko Haram's attacks have been mostly concentrated were of the strong opinion that (1) unemployment (Yobe, 83%, Borno, 82% and Adamawa, 70%), (2) poverty and economic hardship (Yobe, 73%, Borno, 71% and Adamawa, 70%), (3) extreme political ideology (Borno, 70%, Yobe, 64% and Adamawa, 62%), and dislike for government of the day (Borno, 74%, Yobe, 58% and Adamawa, 57%), (4) extreme religious feelings (Borno, 77%, Adamawa 53% and Yobe, 40%), and (5) hatred for others (Borno, 70%, Yobe, 51% and Adamawa, 51%) were the cause of terrorism in their respective states.

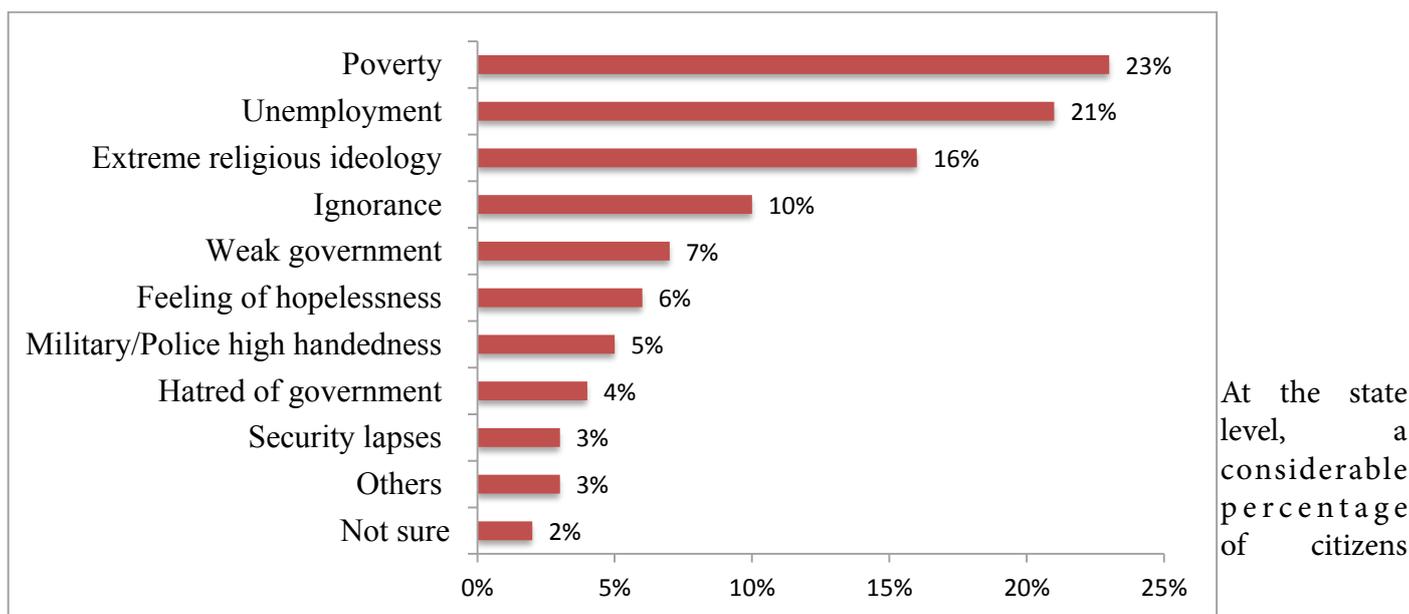
Conversely, while respondents from Yobe, Adamawa, Bauchi and Gombe strongly opposed the statements that terrorism is driven by ethnicity, regional marginalization and dislike for democracy, respondents from Borno in particular, were of the strong opinion that regional marginalization (51%), ethnicity (42%) and dislike for democracy (56%) cause terrorism. Similarly, more respondents from Kano and Kaduna also indicated that dislike for democracy is to be blamed for the rise of Boko Haram in Northern, Nigeria. Finally, a significant majority of respondents from Sokoto state indicated that regional marginalization is a cause of terrorism.

Conditions that Best Explain why People Engage in Terrorism

We further explore the individual level causes of terrorism by asking respondents to identify specific statements that best explain the reason why people engage in terrorism. Noted that respondents were asked to choose the leading one of several alternative statements. Hence the percentages reported in figure 1 are generally low, as the first choices varied. However, the figure presents an ordinal ranking of the personal/micro causes of terrorism.

In popular press, it was often claimed that weak governance, high handedness of security agents and hatred of the Jonathan government were major causes of Boko Haram. As shown in figure 1, from the perspective of the public, the leading personal causes are poverty, unemployment, extreme religious ideology and ignorance. While weak government, feeling of hopelessness, military/police high handedness, hatred of the government and security lapses made the list of causes, they occurred less frequently as the best reasons cited by respondents, suggesting that the public believes that they are only marginal contributing factors, perhaps through the recruitment pool of terrorists. The relative values of these responses are helpful in informing policymakers about the roots of terrorism and the necessary preventative strategies, at least from the perspective of the public bystander.

Figure 1: Conditions that Best Explain why Some People Engage in Terrorism

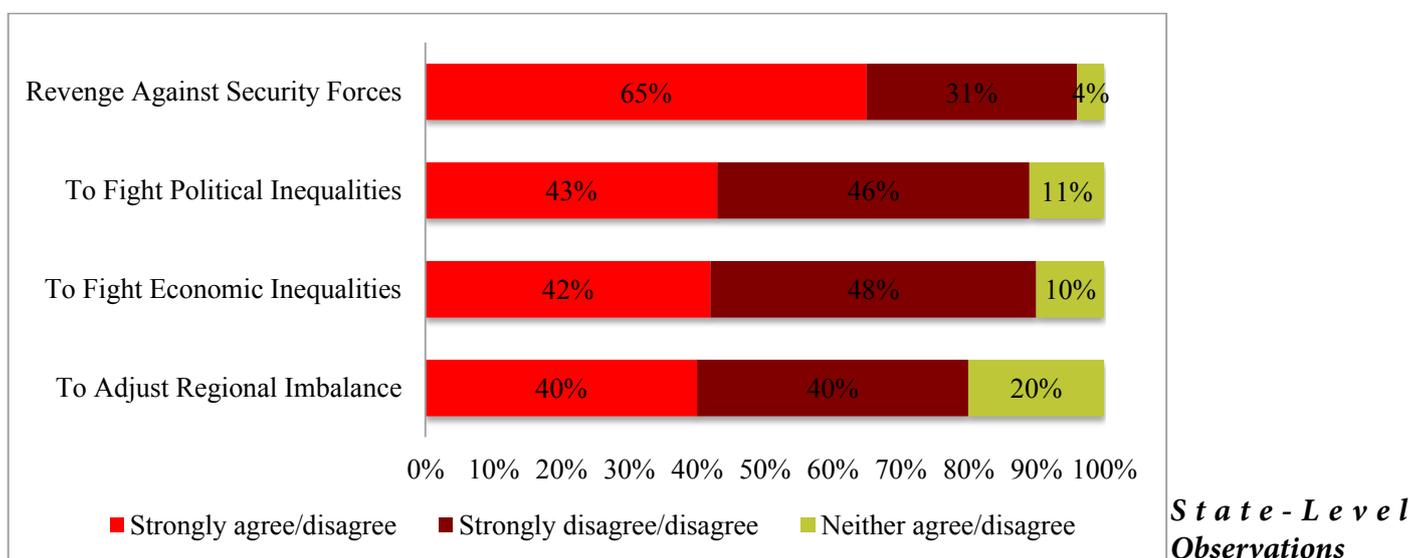


see unemployment as the main cause of terrorism (Taraba = 34%), Yobe = 26%, Kaduna = 22% and Gombe = 20%). Similarly, a considerable percentage of citizens see poverty as the main cause of terrorism (Sokoto = 33%, Kebbi = 28%, Niger = 21%). Only citizens from Borno (46%) indicated that extreme religious ideology is the prime condition that compels people to engage in terrorism in their state.

Objectives of Terrorists

We provided respondents with a list of potential terrorist objective to choose from. Each respondent had the option of choosing as many as possible. Based on the results, the top four responses are as follows: (a) revenge against security forces (65% strongly agree or agree and 31% strongly disagree or disagree); (b) fight economic inequalities (42% strongly agree or agree and 48% strongly disagree or disagree); (c) fight political inequalities (43% strongly agree or agree and 46% strongly disagree or disagree); and (d) adjust the regional imbalances (40% strongly agree or agree and 40% strongly disagree or disagree) (see Figure 2). Respondents felt more strongly about revenge against security forces as their main objective as terrorists than they did about fighting political and economic inequalities. These results may indeed be unique to Boko Haram, given the perception that violent government actions helped spur Boko Haram.⁸⁴

Figure 2: Objectives of Terrorists



A significant number of respondents from Borno, Yobe, Gombe, Bauchi, Niger, Kebbi and Sokoto states indicated that the objective of Boko Haram are to destroy the North and revenge against security forces. To the contrary, some respondents from Kebbi (47%) opposed the idea that Boko Haram’s objective is to destroy the north, however, the majority of respondents (74%) believed Boko Haram’s aim to revenge against the security forces.

While respondents from Borno (46%) and Bauchi (49%) believe Boko Haram has no objectives, some from Gombe (47%), Bauchi (49%), Kebbi (48%) and Sokoto (63%) strongly disagree or disagree that they have no objectives. However, respondents from Yobe (strongly agree [40%] and strongly disagree [40%] and Niger (strongly agree [39%] and strongly disagree [40%] are divided in their opinion about Boko Haram’s objectives.

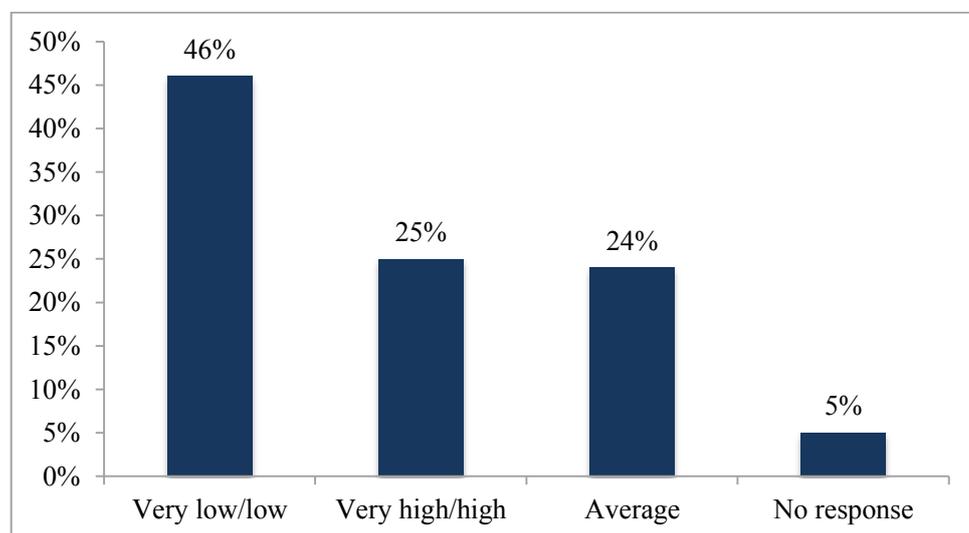
Conversely, while Borno citizens perceive the objectives of Boko Haram are to destroy their opponents (66%), overthrow the government (62%), want to become rich (49%), settle personal scores (48%) and are just common criminals (50%), respondents from Yobe completely opposed these statements. The respondents from Yobe strongly disagree that terrorist group like Boko Haram want to destroy their opponents (50%), overthrow the government (52%), want to become rich (55%), settle personal scores (60%) and are just common criminals (52%).

In addition, a significant number of respondents from Borno, Yobe, Gombe and Bauchi, strongly disagree that Boko Haram aims to fight economic inequalities, fight political inequalities and adjust regional imbalances. However, the majority of citizens from Sokoto and Bauchi strongly validate the statements that Boko Haram aims to fight economic and political inequalities and also adjust the imbalances in the region.

Level of Sympathy for Boko Haram

Many in Nigeria believe in the conspiracy theory that Northerners invented Boko Haram as a mechanism for heightening their political voice and therefore support Boko Haram. If this is true, one should see strong support for Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria. Our survey results suggest that some 46% indicated that they have very low or low sympathy for the Boko Haram. Some 25% of the respondents indicated that they have very high or high sympathy for Boko Haram. Considering that the population of Northern Nigeria approached 100 million, this could mean 25 million people. Additionally, some 24% indicated average sympathy for Boko Haram (see Figure 3 below). Adding the very high and average, one gets 49%. In essence, Northern Nigeria is 50/50 split in the level of sympathy for Boko Haram. That may be as much as 50 million people. Assuming that Christians in the North do not support Boko Haram, it would be the case that the majority of northern Nigerians support Boko Haram.

Figure 3: Level of sympathy for Boko Haram



Summary and Conclusion

To understand public opinion, vis-à-vis the existing knowledge base, we utilize evidence from the

literature and generally available information to develop a survey of public opinion about Boko Haram and their activities in the eleven Northern states of Nigeria, including the six states that have been ravaged more aggressively by Boko Haram. This article covers responses to questions related to terrorism root causes and the objectives of terrorists.

Our results confirm the following about what the public believes are the root causes of terrorism: unemployment, poverty and economic problems, dislike for government, extreme political ideology and religious feelings, and manipulation by politicians. Our results, however, do not confirm that the public feels that dislike for democracy or ethnicity play a role as root causes. Our survey also revealed that the public strongly believes that revenge against security forces is an objective of Boko Haram, as 65 percent of respondents expressed this feeling. However, less than the majority of respondents believe that objectives of terrorists include the goals of fighting political inequalities, fight economic inequalities or adjust regional imbalances.

Some of these findings are consistent with conventional thinking, but some are not. For example, the goals of fighting political inequality, fighting economic inequalities and adjusting regional imbalances are generally believed to be objectives of Boko Haram, but less than a majority of respondents agreed. Our results suggest the importance of considering the views of the general public in the fight against domestic terrorism. The government's response to Boko Haram has largely focused on the need to stamp out the insurgency through strong military response and heightened activities of intelligence and security agencies. Others have espoused the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) approach of mounting strategies that at least recognize the root causes of the problem and the angst amongst citizens that contribute to their decision to support terrorist organizations. Our results at least suggest that the public recognizes the concept of grievances, and may therefore expect greater socioeconomic intervention strategies as a tool for fighting insurgency.

One of the revelations from our survey is that the majority of the respondents (62%) believe Boko Haram was a "grand design" by politicians to stay in power. This perspective is unique in that it suggests that some politicians use terrorism to achieve a political score. The notion that some politicians can create a terrorist group to destabilize the security of the country to their advantage is an intriguing one that needs to be further investigated.

The significant sympathy in the North for Boko Haram obviously is a problem for the government in fighting terrorism. Much more work is required to convert a divided public into one that can support greater resolve in the fight against terrorism. This information uncovered by this study is particularly useful to agencies of government with responsibility for strategic communication and mindset change, especially the National Orientation Agency (NOA).

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Notes

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