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On Christmas Day of last year, a bomb was detonated at a church on the outskirts of Abuja, the Nigerian capital, reportedly killing 40 people. Elsewhere, two other bombs exploded at Christmas ceremonies across Nigeria, killing 5 more. Last week, gun and bomb attacks were carried out in the northern Nigerian city of Kano, killing at least 178 people (at the time of writing). Boko Haram, a radical Islamist group based in northern Nigeria, has claimed responsibility for these attacks.

Over the last year Boko Haram has killed at least 935 people in bomb and other attacks. Such episodes have led to a worldwide anxiety that Africa's most populous country could soon become a hotbed of terrorist activity and sectarian violence.

Boko Haram was founded in 2002 by self-proclaimed Nigerian spiritual leader Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, a north-eastern Nigerian city. Yusuf established a religious complex that included a mosque and school where many poor families from across Nigeria and from neighbouring countries enrolled their children in the hope that they would get the education which the government of Nigeria had failed to provide. It has also been suggested that Boko Haram attracted school drop-outs and university graduates who were not gainfully employed.

The ideology and philosophy of the movement can best be understood via the two words- "Boko" and "Haram". In Hausa language, the word "boko" is an equivocal term which means either "Western" or "foreign"; while the word "haram" is an Arabic derivative meaning "forbidden". Piecing the two words together 'boko haram' means to forbid everything Western, including Western education.

The declared intent of the group is to replace the modern Nigerian state with a traditional Islamic state, because, in the group's view, Western values run contrary to Islamic values. Umma Mahammadiya (Muslim faithful) and Dar-ul-Islam (Islamic community) cannot be compromised in the face of Western influence. Evil in society is as a result of the embrace of Western civilization, and in order to curb such evil an Islamic society must be entrenched by destroying modern state institutions.

In spite of fundamentalist and radical ideas which animate Boko Haram, the group conducted its operations more or less peacefully during its first seven years. But that changed in 2009 when the Nigerian government launched an investigation into the group's activities following reports that its members were beginning an armament programme.

For years the Nigerian security forces responded to potential threats of extremism by rounding up anyone who they thought might be connected, however loose their connection. The habitual consequence was that tens or hundreds of innocents would be jailed for the crimes of the few.

When Boko Haram first struck in 2009, the police reacted by raiding their compound and summarily executing the group's leaders. The group's founder and then leader Mohammed Yusuf was also killed during this time while still in police custody.

Since the deaths of their main leaders, Boko Haram has waged a retaliatory war against the Nigeria Police Force. In the middle of last year they took their battle to the Nigerian state and anyone associated with it. In what appears to be a decisive response to the threat of Boko Haram, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan has recently declared a wide reaching state of emergency. This move appears to have one objective underlying it: to defeat Boko Haram through a heavy-handed approach.

However, the Nigerian government's response to Boko Haram has been counter-productive. Whilst sending tanks and troops to the streets and declaring a state of emergency may appease the angry and frightened public, it is not an effective counterterrorism policy. The hard-handed crackdown has only pushed more and more sympathisers into Boko Haram's camp.

The rise in sympathy may also be reflective of a broader zeitgeist of discontent in Nigeria at present. Nigerians across the country have taken part in demonstrations recently following the government's decision to end a popular gas subsidy programme that had kept gas prices cheap for more than two decades. Tens of thousands have protested across the country since a national strike started in early January. Groups like Boko Haram thrive in times of discontent and instability.

When responding to the group, the Nigerian government may be wise to move beyond the use of lethal force by improving intelligence-gathering and building healthier civil-military relations. More importantly, the Nigerian government must address the political, economic, and religious insecurities that amplify and give resonance to Boko Haram's ideology. The Nigerian government may also wish to empower and work with moderate Islamic leaders in the north that have stood up against Boko Haram even while facing assassination threats. Ultimately, the real solutions to Boko Haram are local rather than national.