

The Network for
Religious and
Traditional
Peacemakers



SUMMARY

Getting behind the profiles of Boko Haram members and factors contributing to radicalisation versus working towards peace

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Intro

After conducting the study on radicalisation into al-Shabaab in Somalia in 2014ⁱ one of the main questions researchers were left with was: Is it possible to get a better understanding of the profiles of the ones radicalised and the reasons behind radicalisation when radicalised individuals are compared to the individuals, who have chosen a different path? In other words, what makes one person decide on a path of peace, while another, confronted with the same external circumstances choose on a path of violence and conflict? As a result of the growing prominence of Boko Haram in Nigeria the two authors decided to focus their attention on this organisation. It is important to note that the objective of this paper is not to discuss Boko Haram as an organisation, its operations within the region or its tactics, but rather a snapshot into its members, the recruitment process and their motivations.

This study has been conducted by Dr. Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile, and was commissioned by the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, the International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID) and Finn Church Aid with the support of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. The views set out herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position(s) of the partnering institutions.

SUMMARY

The primary objectives of this study are twofold; first to understand why individuals joined Boko Haram, and secondly to compare the profiles and experiences of Boko Haram fighters with that of ordinary Nigerian nationals as well as individuals representing institutions working towards peace. Such individuals are hereafter referred to as peace builders. The researchers conducted qualitative and quantitative interviews with former Boko Haram fighters and Nigerian peace builders seeking to understand why peace builders choose to take a path of peace in contrast to Boko Haram members

who were radicalised. This paper unpacks the differences and possible similarities between the two sides of the same conflict.

In addition to its initial objective, the study produced a larger than usual sample of former female Boko Haram respondents. This sample provided further insights into the distinct and uniform features of the profiles of male and female members of Boko Haram. The study is based on the interviews of a total of 119 former Boko Haram members and 60 peace builders representing civil society organizations. The interviews were conducted in December 2015 and January 2016. To add to this, the findings are compared and contrasted with a citizen survey conducted in October 2015.

Key findings

1. Venues of recruitment: While the typical assumption among the citizens of Nigeria is that the primary source of introduction to Boko Haram is through Madrassas, the reality is somewhat different. Boko Haram ex-fighters reported overwhelmingly (60%) that their first introduction was through people close to them – friends, immediate family and family. Very little evidence of individual ‘firebrand’ Imams preaching on the side of Boko Haram was found.

2. Circumstances Surrounding Interviewed Boko Haram Members: Citizens, including, former Boko Haram members, supported military action in the fight against Boko Haram. This result was most likely influenced by the fact that (1) the fighters interviewed were in constant fear of revenge from Boko Haram, (2) of the women interviewed many had possibly been abducted and claims of being forced to join were evident even amongst the men, (3) life in the Boko Haram camps was described as fraught with fear and danger, and (4) those who had voluntarily joined claimed to have been disillusioned. Former Boko Haram members also expressed fear of being victimized by communities.

3. Role of women: The former Boko Haram members estimated that a total of 500 to 1000 women are part of Boko Haram. Even though common perceptions assume that women are mostly engaged in domestic work, the research found that the women worked as inter alia foot soldiers, recruiters, as well as in handling explosives.

4. Trust in the Government: 72% of peace builders and 48% of former members of Boko Haram voted in the last election. The study showed that the level of participation in the political process was allied to the level of trust invested in President Buhari. Trust in the state seemed to be embodied in the President as a figure rather than an organ of the state. 58% of peace builders and 38% of former Boko Haram fighters trusted religious leaders.

METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out with the use of a structured questionnaire with multiple choice and open-ended questions enabling the statistical and qualitative analysis of data. The survey consisted of 119 interviews with former Boko Haram members representing the lower echelon or foot soldiers within the organization, and 60 respondents representing peace builders included representatives from civil society organisations working in community outreach and dialogue, human rights, humanitarian assistance, skills development, women and youth outreach, and religious and research institutions. Out of the Boko Haram sample 63 were women and the remaining 56 male. Amongst the 60 peace builder respondents, 36 respondents were male and 24 female. A citizen survey including

1607 respondents from five cities was included in the study. The interviews of former Boko Haram members were conducted in IDP camps in North Eastern Nigeria. The peace builders represented civil society organizations based in areas affected by Boko Haram.

The study was conducted in partnership with Finn Church Aid, Network for Religious Peacemakers, Vibrand Research and KAICIID Dialogue Centre.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Being victims of violence themselves, Boko Haram respondents recalled high levels of trauma as a result of ongoing insecurity, displacement and dissolution of families, and grievous personal losses. When speaking of their experiences in Boko Haram, most respondents expressed that they suffered high levels of fear and deprivation. Many expressed that the feeling of constant fear of their lives – either from Boko Haram or from the military had continued even after leaving the organisation.

Gender roles

45% of former Boko Haram fighters estimated that Boko Haram has between 500 and 1000 female members. According to Boko Haram respondents the organisation consists approximately 5 000 to 10 000 members. The research showed that Boko Haram includes women as leaders, explosive experts, intelligence and recruiters. This knowledge is exceptional in comparison to other extremist groups.

The majority of both male (44.64%) and female (39.68%) Boko Haram respondents said that they served as foot soldiers while in the organisation. Male respondents surpassed their female counterparts as leaders (10.71% to 3.17%) and trainers (10.71% to 1.59%), whereas more women served as recruiters (19.05% to 12.05%), providing intelligence (12.7% to 10.71%) and as explosive experts (4.76% to 3.57%). Within the sample, women surpassed their male counterparts as recruiters (twelve female versus seven male respondents) and intelligence operatives (eight female versus six male respondents).

Family status

58.99% of ordinary citizens and 38% of peace builders indicated that membership or vulnerability to radicalisation to Boko Haram had nothing to do with a person's family status and history. However, only 1.68% of Boko Haram respondents supported this opinion. Altogether 47.06% of the Boko Haram respondent's grew up with one parent or without parents. 70.59% of the former Boko Haram members were single at the time of the interviews.

MOTIVES FOR JOINING

Religion motives

Peace builders in particular considered religion to be the most prominent reason (82%) in explaining why individuals were attracted to the ideology Boko Haram presents. In contrast to these perceptions, only 9.24% of Boko Haram respondents identified religion as a reason for joining the group. The same

perception was echoed by the citizen survey, as 54.14% of the respondents stated that religion had little or no influence on the decision on joining Boko Haram.

Christians were more likely than Muslims to cite religion as a motive for joining. The peace builders interviewed felt that the incorrect interpretation of Islam was a key factor.

When comparing the relationship between religion and Boko Haram in the light of different gender groups, the study found that male Boko Haram respondents regarded religion to have a strong influence (50%). In comparison, 36.51% of former female Boko Haram respondents held similar views. 7.14% of male and 17.46% of female Boko Haram respondents regarded religion as the only influence.

The fact that recruiters managed to sell Boko Haram as an organization representing Islam and the killing of fellow Nigerians as justified, provides reason for concern. At the same time, this should be viewed in the context of decades of inter-communal conflict based on religious and ethnic affiliation.

Economic motives

The research noted that poverty, the lack of employment opportunities added with the lack of education were key factors creating frustration. The combination of reasons contributed to people's decision to join Boko Haram.

Especially peace builders referred to a combination of economic reasons – after religion and political reasons – in explaining why Boko Haram attracts recruits. According to the answers given by the peace builders, poverty is the third largest (26%) contributor for the interest to seek the membership of Boko Haram. Poverty was followed by the lack of education (20%) and employment offered (16%).

Despite these perceptions, 15.13% of Boko Haram respondents indicated that they joined the organization as a result of poverty, whereas 5.88% of former members referred to the employment opportunities the group presented. A further 5.88% of Boko Haram respondents referred to the feeling of being frustrated with life as contributing to their vulnerability to the organization.

Even though a clear connection between economic motives was not found, the statistics revealed that the employment and education status of respondents did affect the motives to join the organization. Before joining the organisation the majority (51%) of Boko Haram respondents were employed. The majority (56%) of the respondents had not finished secondary school, and 10% had not received any form of education. In comparison to their male counterparts, the majority of female respondents were better educated.

To highlight the comparison between peace builders and Boko Haram members, it is interesting to note that the majority of peace builders were employed (88%) at the time they decided to become peace builders.

The need to belong

According to respondents of the citizen survey, 23.02% felt the need to be respected, and 16.43% felt that the need to belong were the key reasons behind individuals joining Boko Haram. According to the peace builders, religious and political reasons surpassed the need to belong, which was equal to poverty and monetary benefits.

However, according to the Boko Haram respondents 23.52% joined Boko Haram to be respected, while a further 16.81% joined due to a need to belong. Belonging as a factor influencing a person's decision to join a violent extremist organization was also assessed in asking Boko Haram respondents if family and peer pressure played a role in their decision to join the organization. Although only 0.84% of Boko Haram respondents identified pressure from the family or peers as a reason for joining Boko Haram, especially peace builders regarded it having a more prominent role (22%).

Revenge

When researching the role government's response to the threat presented by violent extremist organizations might have played in the radicalisation process, a clear difference between geographical locations was noted. Respondents in the Northern cities, where Boko Haram is known to be more active, were more likely to believe that military action has increased the likelihood of someone joining Boko Haram (36.91%) than respondents in Abuja and Lagos (20%).

Additionally, 40.32% of Muslim respondents versus 30.15% of Christian respondents believed that military actions had no influence on people's decision to join Boko Haram. Only 12% of peace builders identified a linkage between military action and joining Boko Haram.

57% of former Boko Haram fighters identified revenge as having a strong or being the only influence for joining. In an open ended question, former Boko Haram fighters indicated that the military is brutal, 'merciless', and 'pitiless'.

Revenge directed at the state, and particularly the security forces had a strong influence, as 50% of male Boko Haram respondents referred to revenge as having a strong influence on joining the organisation. A further 12.5% referred to revenge as the only factor influencing a person's decision to join the organization. Female Boko Haram respondents provided the most reserved answer with 38.1% being of the opinion that revenge had a strong influence. An additional 14.29% referred to revenge as the only influence facilitating radicalisation. Placing revenge in context of the role military action can play in the radicalisation process, 42.86% of male Boko Haram respondents and 30.16% of female Boko Haram respondents considered that military action can make recruitment 'more likely'.

Political motives

Political reasons were identified as the fifth most prominent reason why individuals might decide to join Boko Haram. Although only 2.52% of Boko Haram respondents recalled political reasons motivating their decision to join Boko Haram, 6.72% of the same sample identified political reasons as contributing to the radicalisation process.

One of the more surprising results was the degree to which Boko Haram respondents participated in the political process, namely voting. Although peace builders were the most politically active, with 72% participating in the political process, followed by 70.63% of individuals participating in the citizen survey, 47.9% of Boko Haram respondents participated in elections.

The largest percentage (45.16%) of the Boko Haram sample said that the reason for not voting was that they did not have time to register. The Boko Haram respondents also presented the largest

sample expressing a lack of trust towards politicians. In spite of this, the sample's overall trust in the political process was beyond the norm when compared to the opinions of ordinary citizens.

Recruitment

Religious institutions, especially madrassas or religious schools are perceived to be the venue where the most individuals are being radicalized and recruited. These perceptions could be noted in particular with the respondents participating in the citizen survey (21.84%) followed by Boko Haram members themselves (19.33%). Despite of this perception only 12.61% of Boko Haram members (12.5% of male and 2.7% of female) were in reality recruited at madrassa. However, mosques were identified by Boko Haram respondents as the venue where most of them were recruited (14.29%). It is important to note that more men (16.07%) than women (12.7%) were recruited at a mosque.

The study emphasised the importance of personal interactions in the recruitment process. To start with, the study found that neighbours served as the second most important avenue of recruitment, especially amongst female Boko Haram members. 22% of female Boko Haram members were introduced to the organisation by neighbours, compared to 13% of their male counterparts. Neighbours were followed by the family, which was found to introduce 11.76% (12.5% male and 11.11% female) of respondents to the organization.

22% of peace builders identified online activities as playing the most important role in the recruitment process. None of the Boko Haram respondents interviewed were recruited online. 8.96% of ordinary citizens and 5.88% of Boko Haram members were convinced that radicalisation occur online.

In addition to *where* recruitment took place, it is equally important to stand still with *how* Boko Haram respondents were recruited. Female Boko Haram members were far more likely to be introduced by force (17%) than males (5%). Furthermore, male Boko Haram members were more likely to report it as a personal decision (11%) than females (2%).

Consequently, the personal journey of peace builders into peacebuilding appeared to have been strongly influenced by personal exposure to violence, mediation or outreach in the examples set by former religious and community leaders. The difference between these two opposing sides was that most peace builders were approached by a figure of authority (mostly an Imam or other religious leader), and asked to help pass on a message of peace to their peers and the broader community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Engage and recognise the potential contribution and added-value of religious actors. Religious institutions are trusted entities in Nigeria and hence have the potential to positively contribute to peace and security in Nigeria. Religious and community leaders should be engaged to help address and prevent the radicalisation.

2. Provide assistance in the reintegration of former Boko Haram members. Building on the fear former fighters had of Boko Haram itself, successful reintegration of Boko Haram fighters could act as a bulwark against Boko Haram. Thus reintegration should be a priority. For reintegration to be successful at the local community level, it is vital to consider the involvement of strong local communities and institutions as the involvement of local communities also increases the community's resilience and identity. Proper protection and care for ex-Boko Haram who are already in custody is critical for future reintegration program.

3. Strengthen and establish trust in local governance. Despite the long held perception that Boko Haram is anti-establishment, the evidence from this study shows that some Boko Haram members might be persuaded to change course and participate in the political dialogue. Good local governance and action at the local government level is crucial. Similarly given the high number of ex-Boko Haram member's participation in the political process, it's advisable for the Nigerian government to consider entering some sort of political dialogue with Boko Haram.

4. Reach out to former Boko Haram fighters. Former Boko Haram members that even joined out of their free will are disillusioned. Being said, many were taken by force living in very difficult circumstances. Alongside (or in place of) messages that focus on fear – messages that emphasise that Boko Haram fighters are to be seen as victims, pitied as much as feared should be emphasised.

5. Take note of the changing recruitment and radicalisation trends. This study shows that most Boko Haram members were recruited in small intimate groups of friends and family members. This highlights the constantly changing recruitment and radicalisation trends, the fact that recruiters are adaptive to the tightening security environment. Women and young girls are increasingly being targeted by recruitments.

6. Military action requires careful consideration with very clear rules of engagement with especially non-combatants. Too many former Boko Haram members interviewed referred to a 'pitiless' military action and the need to take revenge that helped tip them over the edge. Although ordinary and even former Boko Haram members welcomed military engagement, its rules of engagement and overall conduct will determine the long term success of Nigeria's counter terrorism strategy. Although the immediate strategy might be to re-establish security and stability threatened by Boko Haram, these initiatives should not be counterproductive in prevent and countering future radicalisation and recruitment.

ⁱ Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile. Radicalisation and al-Shabaab recruitment in Somalia. Institute for Security Studies, ISS Paper 266, September 2014, <https://www.issafrica.org/uploads/Paper266.pdf>