

Fighting Terrorism in Nigeria: Evolving a Homegrown Strategy

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Since the onset of the ongoing insurgency in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria, spearheaded by the fundamentalist Islamist sect, Boko Haram (Western Education is Sin), against the Nigerian State, the Nigerian Government, through the instrumentality of its security establishment, in tandem with contributions from other local and international stakeholders, have applied plethora of strategies in efforts aimed at whittling down the activities of this group.

Some of the measures so far taking to curb terrorism in Nigeria include: signing into law on June 3rd, 2011, the Terrorism Prevention Act (TPA) 2011, and the Money Laundering Prohibition Act, 2011; forwarding a bill seeking amendment to the Terrorism Prevention Act, in order to strengthen the legal framework for fighting terrorism; creation of the position of a Counter-Terrorism Coordinator in the National Security Adviser's Office, to coordinate efforts of the counter-terrorism units in all security agencies; setting up a Fusion Center to serve as processing point for all-source intelligence and deployment of appropriate technology; coupled with other steps that have been taken outside public domain for security reasons.

However, despite all the efforts, time and resources that have been expended by the authorities in fighting terrorism, the phenomenon continues waxing stronger. The major reason that can be adduced for the escalation of this crisis is the slow response and poor strategic thinking on the part of government and other stakeholder organizations towards addressing this conflict at its embryonic stage. With the exception of the recent, and rather belated, attempt by the Nigerian government to engage this group in dialogue, through the setting up of an "Amnesty Committee", all initial peace initiatives have tended to be confrontational. The present scenario could have been avoided had dialogue been adopted as the chief conflict handling strategy to address all the pertinent issues raised by the Bokites at both the latent and manifest stages of the insurgency.

Government's confrontational approach to the resolution of the insurgency – which is a conflict handling style borrowed from the West – has revenge as its driving force. The state of Israel, United States of America, Britain, and Russia adopt the Confrontational method in their war on terrorism. Apart from the ability to punish perpetrators of terrorist acts, the confrontational approach is also a very proactive style of countering terrorism, as countries adopting this method leverage on their "First Strike" capabilities to sniff out and annihilate would-be terrorists and their backers. It involves taking the fight to the turf of terrorist groups, and not waiting to be struck before reacting. Using mostly clandestine methods, which involve massive intelligence gathering and the use of advanced technology, terrorist activities are closely monitored and appropriate action expedited to stop them from executing their missions.

Had they critically examined the effectiveness of this strategy in the countries adopting it, those at the helm of Nigeria's security establishment would have seen a not too encouraging picture. The U.S and Israel, for instance, have been fighting both covert and overt wars against several

apocalyptic groups across the globe for decades, spending billions of dollars in the process, with no seeming end in sight to these conflicts, despite the snatches of success they have recorded overtime. But rather than abate, these conflicts have tended to escalate as these groups, rather than surrender to force, have become more emboldened and determined to further spread terror.

However, one basic fact about the confrontational conflict handling style which the eggheads of Nigeria's security establishment are obviously oblivious of is that it has the disadvantage of causing collateral damage in the event of a terrorist act as the perpetrators of most terrorist acts usually die in such attacks, leaving no one for the victim country to physically punish, as has been the case in the North-East since the Boko Haram commenced their attacks. Thus, in their war against the insurgents, the Nigerian security forces have on some occasions unwittingly cut down innocent bystanders – including women and children. So, in the quest to punish terrorist offenders, innocent lives are sometimes lost. Separating the actual perpetrators of terrorist acts from casual onlookers continues to pose the greatest challenge to our security operatives.

The questions at this stage are: Does Nigeria have the resources to engage in a long-drawn guerrilla warfare with a terrorist group that continues to exhibit its mastery of the use of violence in the same manner the U.S, Israel and other rich Western countries have done? Does Nigeria have a huge chest of funds to prosecute a capital intensive anti-terrorism campaign like these countries? Does it have the patience to wait out on the siege currently being laid on its citizens and institutions in the same manner these countries have been able to do? The blanket answer to these questions is a resounding “NO”!

With a bit of hindsight, the adoption of the confrontational model by the authorities in dealing with the issues in the North-East obviously stems from poor assessment and understanding of the true issues at stake – the lack of proper analysis' of the history, dynamics, and dimensions of the conflict. Questions such as: What is the genesis of the conflict? Who are the real stakeholders? What are the real concerns raised by these stakeholders? What are the true positions, interests and needs of these stakeholders? Who are the shadow parties? Had proper care been taken by the authorities to understand the core nuances of this conflict from the onset, before deciding on the intervention strategy to be adopted in addressing it, the worst case scenarios we are witnessing today would have been averted.

Boko Haram is one of the contemporary questions surrounding the sanctity of the Nigerian state system as currently constituted; a question about the authenticity of Nigeria by a group of persons who feel estranged from the system by the current political arrangement; an attempt by some Nigerians to gain recognition in the present political configuration by force. They are the same questions millions of Nigerians ask every day: What is the Nigerian State system all about? What is our stake in this system? How well are our interests being represented in the scheme of things? How can these interests be improved? What is our future in this system? That is why any approach to finding solutions to the insidious effects of the activities of this group to the health of the Nigerian State must be located within the realities of its politics. No solution can be found outside the purview of the practical realities of the country's politics.

In all, dialogue remains the only way out of the bloody spectacle currently facing Nigerians. The use of force to confront force has obviously failed, thus, necessitating a new approach. The setting

up of a Presidential Committee on Dialogue and Peaceful Resolution on Security Challenges in the North (Amnesty Committee) to negotiate a peace agreement with the insurgents is a welcome development. My only advice to government is to be transparent in its dealings with this group – it must desist from any attempt to turn the peace process into another comical affair as has been the case in the past. Care must be taken to painstakingly address all the issues that will be raised in the course of negotiations to ensure that any agreement reached at the end of the day is comprehensive enough to snuff out the monster of violence currently gnawing at the very soul of this country.

There is need for the authorities to immediately engage the services of seasoned peace practitioners to help drive the peace process. Political expediencies, as has become the tradition in this country, must be completely jettisoned in choosing those to animate the processes of transforming this conflict. A multi-track approach will suffice in this wise; an approach that will draw individuals from different spectrums of the society. The present committee overseeing negotiations with the insurgents has to be reconstituted to pave way for more professional hands to contribute their quota to the peacemaking process.

The use of force is only but a short-term solution to the insurgency in the North. A negotiated settlement is the light that can ride this country of the dark cloud of death that currently enshrouds it and its citizens. If things are done right, the phantom of violence currently hunting Nigeria will be summarily sent back to the abyss where it belongs, and Nigerians can continue the nation-building process that has been stunted by the sad events of the past couple of years.

God save Nigeria!