

# Negotiating With Boko Haram: Matters Arising

[Jude Obuseh](#) / June 10, 2014

Nigerians are among some of the most reactionary people on planet earth; impulsive sentimentalist who wait until situations get out of hand before reacting; spectators of action who wait until the head is off before crying; Ostriches who bury their heads in the sand while things are falling randomly apart around them. The latest fallouts from the ongoing saga of blood and death in Nigeria's North-East best depict the asseverating culture of lethargy in Nigeria.

This column boldly and loudly calls for a combination of both hard and soft approaches to solving the daunting security challenges the Nigerian State has had to grapple with since the commencement of its war against Islamist insurgents in the North-Eastern halve of the country; an eclectic approach that takes cognizance of both the structural/background and the immediate/exacerbating factors of the ongoing violence; an approach that utilizes both peacemaking and peacekeeping strategies; a stratagem that involves both the application of military force and peaceful negotiations. This piece continues in that light.

In the face of the increasing spate of violence across the N-E, which has left a trail of blood, destruction, fear and despair in its wake, most – local and international – observers of this macabre spectacle have been vociferous in their calls on the Nigerian government to apply maximum force in putting down the insurgency by leveraging on its supposed “monopoly” of the legitimate use of force. For these protagonists of the use of force, who have formed the penchant for shouting down anybody who broaches the idea of a negotiated settlement of the fracas, Boko Haram can only be defeated – or “crushed”, as some of them would say – by force. For this group, marching force with force seems to be the only way out of a crisis that is astronomically escalating by the day. They see negotiation as a cowardly tool of weakness that should not be considered by the authorities.

Again, the so-called refusal of BH to negotiate with the authorities – which supposedly makes it a faceless group in character and mien – justifies the raucous calls for the application of maximum force against it. To these individuals, the idea of negotiating with a phantom organization is as preposterous as it is impracticable; a move that has the likelihood of further emboldening this group to continue its uncensored acts of violence, encourage other groups to take up arms against the state and send wrong signals to the international community that the country lacks the will and capacity to put down threats to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. To further buttress these vociferous calls for the adoption of the confrontational style, examples from countries – such as the United States of America, Israel, Britain, France et al – that have supposedly fought insurgent groups to a standstill are copiously cited, despite the huge divergences in the histories, contexts' and issues' defining the conflicts these countries have had to contend with, compared to that of Nigeria.

On the part of the school of a negotiated settlement of the steaming imbroglio, violence is only a stopgap measure that should be applied in laying the foundation of a negotiated and more enduring settlement; a peacekeeping approach that is meant to restrict the further spread of violence while a negotiated arrangement that takes cognizance of the key issues at stake is worked out. To students of this school, the application of force has the tendency of escalating the already simmering conflict as the parties in the conflict become more determined to come out on top; a zero-sum game of death that has the likelihood of producing a win-lose outcome; an outcome the Bokites are not inclined to accept.

However, with a little bit of hindsight, the gradual increase in the intensity of the insurgency seems to have vindicated the position of the members of the school of a negotiated settlement. From a being a non-violent pressure group, BH has metamorphosed into a gigantic dinosaur that has run amuck, especially since the Nigerian state adopted the use of force as its conflict resolution strategy. Since 2010, when it re-emerged, the group has rapidly upped the ante in its self-declared war on the Nigerian State; a development that can be adduced to the increasing use of force by the authorities to check its activities. For instance, the maximum application of brute force, through the imposition of martial rule in the three hotbeds – Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States – of the insurgency has had the deleterious effects of increasing the resolve of this group to further increase the scale and spread of its violent activities across the North-East and beyond – all thanks to the use of force.

The adoption of the MAD – Mutual Assured Destruction – Strategy by both countervailing forces – the federal forces and the Bokites – has totally changed the dynamics and dimensions of the conflict, resulting in higher body counts, destruction of properties and infrastructures running into billions, high number of internally displaced persons and refugees, coupled with several other avoidable consequences; a sad spectacle that is as horrific as it is jarring. The cost of the application of the mosaic principle of “an eye for an eye” by the Nigerian government – just like the consequences of violence in any theater of war – in its attempts to quash BH has, indeed, being mind-blowing

However, whether the protagonists of the school of force want to accept it or not, the hard fact facing all observers of the raging violence in the N-E is that Nigeria has been bargaining with BH since the onset of the group’s campaigns. From the initial attempt by Ex-President Obasango to broker a palaver, both overt and moves by Jonathan’s administration to broker a peace parley through the setting up of an Amnesty committee, recent granting of conditional amnesty to the insurgents by the same Jonathan-led government, in tandem with other overt and covert strategies to restore some form of normalcy to the N-E, the Nigerian Government has been negotiating with BH, despite the forceful stance it has publicly maintained. The ongoing saga involving the kidnapped Chibok girls has exposed the hollowness in the stance of the members of the school of

force. Despite government's continued public refusal to bargain for the release of the girls, it has been forced to eat its vomit by doing exactly that.

But come to think of it, why should the Nigerian government shy away from what remains the most effective, long term solution to this impasse? Why can't those in authority face the truth and nothing but the truth in the face of the undeniable realities facing all observers of this international embarrassment – that truth being that the country must negotiate with this group if unfettered peace is to return to this troubled part of the country? If the U.S, the world's global policeman – and chief proponent of non-negotiation with terrorists – could turn around, due to pressing exigencies, to negotiate a prisoner exchange arrangement with the Taliban – an organization it accuses of being a terrorist group – for the release of a captured marine in exchange for five Taliban arrowheads being detained at the Guantanamo Bay detention center, one wonders what some people are still yapping about as to the need to negotiate terms of peace with BH? If the Afghan Government and the Taliban can agree to negotiate terms of a peaceful end to the raging violence between them, why can't Nigeria do the same with BH? If the Jewish State of Israel, despite its several years of warring against Islamic fundamentalist who do not recognize its status as an independent state, can negotiate terms of peace with the Palestinian authorities on a way out of the age-long logjam between both parties, what are the opponents of the adoption of a peaceful approach to the blazing inferno in the

N-E blabbing about? If the British Government, after several years of fighting the Irish republican Army (IRA) – a group whose techniques most contemporary extremist organizations seem to have borrowed – could stoop to enter into negotiations with an organization it had vowed to annihilate, the Nigerian government has no excuse for not towing the same rational line.

The truth remains that the continued use of force by the Nigerian authorities to douse the fiery face of the volcanic situation in the N-E is only a makeshift approach. The use of force should be nothing more than a temporal strategy; a peacekeeping strategy that should continue while more concrete and long-lasting peacemaking attempts to address the key issues defining the conflict are being sought. More efforts must be put into attempts to truly broker talks with the BH. All the major powers fighting insurgencies – or terror groups – in the several theaters of war they are involved in have learnt the hard way that terrorism is a phenomenon that cannot be completely defeated – nor “crushed” as Nigerians have become accustomed to hearing from their leaders these days. If you kill a terrorist, today, another one spring's up immediately to take his place. Al-Qaeda in the post-Bin laden years testifies to this fact.

Some uninformed proponents of the use of force have continually claimed that BH has refused to negotiate with the government, despite several attempts by the latter to broker talks. But the question is whether any concrete moves has been made since the onset of this imbroglio to engage this group in any constructive and objective discursion of the issues raised by them? What were the terms of the so-called olive branch extended to this group? Apart from the lethargic Amnesty

Committee – which is a creation of politics – What other third party groups have been involved in the so-called negotiations with this group? Who are the chief negotiators and what proofs have we that they actually came in contact with this group? A lot of pertinent questions beg for answers.

Successive administrations – from former president Obasanjo, under whose watch the current crisis commenced, to the current stewardship of Jonathan, who inherited it – are guilty of the faulty manner this matter has so far being handled. The escalating orgy of violence could have been avoided if constructive steps had been taken by all stakeholders to seek out this group and quietly address their grievances, especially at the latent stage when it would have being easier to engage in peaceful talks.

A diplomatic, non-violent approach towards resolving the burgeoning state of violence in the North-East remains the only plausible way out of the damning quagmire. The rising casualty rates, destruction of crucial infrastructures, and the general state of insecurity in the North-East, coupled with the possible spillover of this war into other parts of the country, consequent to the changing dynamics and dimensions of this conflict, calls for an urgent review of current strategies – a new and more effective approach. Peace cannot be obtained and kept by force – it never has been, and never will be – but achieved by patience and understanding. Jaw-jawing is much better than war-warring. God save Nigeria!