RESEARCH ARTICLE

DE-RADICALIZATION OF BOKO HARAM INSURGENTS IN THE NORTHEAST REGION OF NIGERIA: THE PLACE OF STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

ESSON ALUMBUGU [1], DAMIAN AKUT [2]

[1] Department of History and War Studies, Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna, Nigeria;
[2] Department of History, Kaduna State College of Education, Gidan Waya, Kaduna State, Nigeria. Email: foxxesson@gmail.com Telephone Number: +2347037931149 & Email: damianakut6@gmail.comPhone: 08039319110

ABSTRACT

Strategic leadership is necessary for the successful implementation of the de-radicalization programme targeted at Boko Haram insurgents in the northeast region of Nigeria. This paper uses secondary written documents to examine the radicalization of the northeast by Boko Haram and the place of strategic leadership in the de-radicalization efforts. Boko Haram is radicalizing young people because of enabling factors like poverty, unemployment and illiteracy. The military response to Boko Haram had limited success amidst criticisms of abuses. The de-radicalization programme of Nigeria introduced as non-military response is shrouded in secrecy and faced with suspicion and rejection by the local population. The work concludes that adopting strategic leadership will greatly increase the chances of success of this de-radicalization programme.

Keywords: Radicalization; de-radicalization; Boko Haram; insurgency; strategic leadership.

Corresponding Author

Damian Akut: Email Address: foxxesson@gmail.com
Telephone Number: +2347037931149

INTRODUCTION

The northeast region of Nigeria, comprising Borno, Yobe, Adamawa, Taraba, Gombe and Bauchi States, are no strangers to spates of violent conflicts leading to the loss of human lives and properties. Over the course of history, conflicts of ethno-religious nature have been recorded in parts of this region. However, none of these conflicts had the scale and duration of the Boko Haram insurgency that have been on-going in the region since 2009. This insurgency was born out of years of radical Islamic theology that has been spread in the region by radicalized preachers. These radical preachers succeeded in gaining enough followers to enable them to mount significant challenge to the status quo.

The reason behind this success is that radicalization process is not a random or haphazard event. Rather, it is a systematic and deliberate programme of indoctrination that often takes several years to complete. Thus radicalized people are so firmly entrenched in their ideological beliefs that it becomes difficult to change them. Nonetheless, de-radicalization programmes have been developed around the world for the sole purpose of changing the ideologies of these radicalized individuals. Many of these programmes had limited or poor successes owing to the many challenges that are posed by radicalization. This essay discusses the de-radicalization efforts in Nigeria aimed at the Boko Haram insurgents of the northeast region and the place of strategic leadership in ensuring success.

It will begin with a discussion of the methodology used in the study. It will then provide a conceptual clarification of radicalization and de-radicalization. The essay will then examine the role of Boko Haram in the radicalization of the northeast, response to Boko Haram radicalization, de-radicalization efforts, and the place of strategic leadership in ensuring the success of the de-radicalization programmes. Finally, the essay will be summarized and concluded with some recommendations.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Radicalization and De-radicalization

The concepts of radicalization and de-radicalization can be understood differently and so there is a need to clarify their meanings as used within the context of this essay. As expected, the two terms do indeed have various and contending definitions. Regarding the issue of radicalization there is no contesting the fact it is a process rather than a product. According to Nwafor & Nwogu (2015), radicalization "could be regarded as complete departure from age-long acceptable norms, beliefs and practices within a given system" (p. 201). They believe that promoters of radicalization often take advantage of the weaknesses and inadequacies of society to develop their extremist ideals based on grievances.

Although this definition is informative, it does not give a complete idea of this concept since it is too generalist. Thus any form of departure from the norms may then be termed radicalization. Maskaliūnaitė (2015) offers a better definition that "radicalization tends to

mean a pathway to terrorism, gradual slide into extremism, fundamentalism or, even more generally, a movement towards justifying violence and finally personally engaging in it" (p. 12). Here the process of radicalization is shown to be gradual and, in addition, the process is explicitly linked to extremism, fundamentalism and violence. This leaves no room for mistaking other forms of deviation for radicalization.

 The issue of de-radicalization exists mainly because of the existence of radicalization. There is also no agreement as to what the concept of de-radicalization means and so other concepts such as counter-radicalization and rehabilitation are sometimes used interchangeably with it (Turkington & Christien, 2018, p. 2). Depending on the context, these terms are simply components of de-radicalization without which the process will be incomplete. Clubb & Tapley (2018) view de-radicalization in two ways; narrow de-radicalization involves the abandonment of radical ideologies while broad de-radicalization involves "gradual moderation of beliefs, public renunciation and de-legitimisation of violence" (p. 7).

In a perspective, de-radicalization process is a continuum that ranges from a simple act of abandoning radical ideologies to a formalized process of renouncing violence. However, as noted by Onapajo & Ozden (2020) de-radicalization does not end with the changing of belief system, rejecting extremist ideologies, and embracing mainstream values. The process must include creating an environment not conducive to radicalization and also evolving strategies for rehabilitating and reintegrating radicalized individuals into the society.

De-radicalization therefore involves the process of counter-radicalization which focuses on societal issues that encourage radicalization as well as the process to disengagement, rehabilitation, and reintegration of former extremists into mainstream society. Consequently, complete de-radicalization must address the root cause of radicalization from the community level thereby preventing radicalization in the first place, and not just focusing exclusively on changing already radicalized individuals.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using a wholly qualitative research approach. The data used for this study was collected from written documents consisting of published books, published academic journal articles, and reports of public and private organisations. These documents were mainly secondary sources and were selected purposefully for their relevance to the themes of the essay which include radicalization, de-radicalization, Boko Haram insurgency and strategic leadership. The data were collected and analysed using the textual analysis technique. The reliability of the data was upheld by ensuring that only documents with verifiable and reputable publication information were used

DISCOURSES

Boko Haram and the Radicalization of Northeast

The remote origin of Boko Haram as a significant insurgent group in the northeast region of Nigeria is traced, by some commentators, as far back as the Maitatsine uprisings of the 1980s. However, the direct origin of the group is traced to an Islamic organisation called Shabaab that was formed by Lewan Abubakar in Maiduguri in 1995. The leadership of this organisation fell into the hands of Mohammed Yusuf when the founder went away to Saudi Arabia for studies. Mohammed Yusuf drew attention to himself around 2002 when he began preaching the group's fundamentalist ideology which went against conventional Islam. The result was that he was banned from preaching at the Indimi mosque of Maiduguri. Yusuf continued his preaching elsewhere and was able to attract a significant following of mainly the youth. The central ideology of the Islamic sect is that Western education is unlawful and so must be discarded along with everything associated with it (Ngwa, 2020, pp. 13-14).

While the group had been under the tutelage of Mohammed Yusuf since 2002, the events that precipitated the full blown insurgency of Boko Haram happened in 2009. Some commentators hold the view that Boko Haram was a non-violent group until the violent crackdown by the Nigerian government through its security agencies. Accounts of the confrontation that triggered the insurgency are not very clear. However, members of the sect are said to have gotten into some argument with security agents while travelling and the confrontation led to shots being fired. What followed was a violent crackdown on members of the group which led to the killing of about 1000 of them. Some properties of the members of the group were also confiscated and their leader, Mohammed Yusuf, was killed extra-judicially while in the custody of police. This event forced the remaining members of the group to go underground while vowing to retaliate against the Nigerian state. The result is the insurgency that has been going on for over a decade (Akintayo, 2018).

The view that Boko Haram started as a non-violent group has not taken radicalization into consideration. The process of radicalization takes years to complete and, in the case of Boko Haram, it can at least be traced to as far back as 2002 when the extreme ideology being preached by Mohammed Yusuf resulted to his ban from preaching in the Indimi mosque of Maiduguri. The speed with which the group was able to organise itself to launch insurgent attacks on Nigeria is a pointer to the fact that it already had scores of already radicalized people waiting to unleash violence. However, the killing of Mohammed Yusuf and many other members of the group provided the potent material for radicalization. This was the perfect grievance needed to justify violent attacks on individuals and groups in the name of retaliation. It is pertinent, therefore, to take a look at the radicalization in the context of the Boko Haram.

Alumbugu & Akut (2025). De-Radicalization of Boko Haram Insurgents in the Northeast

Region of Nigeria: The Place of Strategic Leadership. Pp. 480 – 490.

484

Although models of radicalization have been attempted, there is hardly a standard process. According to Salihu (2021);

> "*there exists no standard or procedural approach to radicalization. In the case of BH, evidence abounds to suggest that the sect deploys several strategies which can be broadly grouped under coercion and indoctrination as the key avenues employed by the sect. The existential reality of high poverty rates, soaring numbers of out-of-school children, widespread violence and youth restiveness, and also predisposition to carrying out religious obligations judiciously seems to also play a role in driving the radicalization of poorly educated youths in the Northeast*" (Salihu, 2021:26-27).

The sect clearly took advantage of the high poverty, low level of education, high rate of violence, and repressive governance in Nigeria to sow their seed of radicalization. The combination of religious themed indoctrination and coercion is being used to ensure the steady recruitment and retention of the youth. Several factors are said to be the drivers of the radicalization but these are categorized into three, namely push, pull and personal factors. Push factors, known as the root causes, are the structural failures in the society which pushes people to radicalization. These include bad governance, poverty, unemployment, marginalization, political exclusion, economic and social inequality, lack of education, and repressive governance.

Pull factors are the things in radical groups which attract people to join. These include sense of belonging, group ideology, protection, reputation, wealth, glory, and fame. Personal factors are individual characteristics or experiences that make them prone to radicalization. These include traumatic experiences, psychological problems, and troubled childhood (Onapajo & Ozden, 2020, p. 5). In the case of Boko Haram these three factors are applicable indeed. In a study which surveyed former members of the insurgent group, they identified the need to be respected and feared, the need to belong, and poverty and economic needs as the main factors behind their joining Boko Haram (Botha & Abdile, 2017, p. 3). While some willingly joined the group, others were abducted, conscripted forcefully and compelled to remain with the group by threat of harm to themselves or their family members. Others joined for fear of attack by the group on themselves or their families (Nwafor & Nwogu, 2015, p. 204).

There is little doubt that the economic, social and political situation in Nigeria is what created the enabling environment for the radicalization of the northeast region by Boko Haram. The region has a relatively higher rate of poverty and lower level of literacy when compared to other regions in the country. The region also has many settlements in often isolated and difficult to access terrains which have little or no government presence, thereby exposing them to the influence of radicalization. In the absence of government presence the vacuum is being filled by Boko Haram which happens to provide many of the youths with the economic and social benefits that the government cannot.

Alumbugu & Akut (2025). De-Radicalization of Boko Haram Insurgents in the Northeast

Region of Nigeria: The Place of Strategic Leadership. Pp. 480 – 490.

Military Response to Boko Haram

The response to the Boko haram insurgency involves military and non-military, local and international efforts. Thus the military response to Boko Haram insurgency has local, national and international dimensions. The Joint Task Force (JTF) which is a combination of military, police and other paramilitary organisations make up the national dimension. The Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) is the local dimension and it involves the use of local vigilante groups to provide local support and intelligence to the military. The Multi-National Joint Task Force is made up of military forces from Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon which is the international military response. The Nigerian military launched a number of Operations aimed at countering Boko Haram including Operation Restore Order, Operation Lafiya Dole, and Operation Hadin Kai. The operations involved the active participation of all branches of the armed forces – army, navy, and air force. In addition, members of the Nigerian Police Force, Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps, Nigerian Immigration Service, Nigerian Prisons Service and Nigerian Customs Service have also been involved in the military response against Boko Haram in various capacities.

The initial military response involved mainly the use of the force of arms in order to clear the insurgents and recover territories under their control. Apart from direct engagement and armed battles with the insurgents, the military established check points where vehicles and people were stopped and searched for suspicious individuals and goods. These check points often resulted in the interception of insurgents but it also created much inconvenience for the local population. The military also carried out cordon and search operations on suspected hideouts of Boko Haram insurgents which sometimes resulted in the arrest of members and recovery of arms and improvised explosive devices; but these also caused serious inconvenience to the local population. Raids were also carried out on known Boko Haram locations which often resulted in casualties on both sides. Military patrols were also regularly conducted along major roads and this helped in limiting the movement of the insurgents. The sustained attack on critical infrastructure by Boko Haram also necessitated the guarding of key points by the military (Umar, 2013, pp. 41-43).

These approaches have recorded some successes as the insurgents have been largely pushed out of the major towns to remote areas and their capacity to attack relatively reduced. However, these also resulted in criticisms from both locally and internationally sources. The military have been accused of extra-judicial killings of innocent civilians in their activities in the northeast region. Entire villages are said to have been attacked and scores killed and houses burnt down for suspected association with Boko Haram. Many were also put in detention and tortured without being charged to court. The CJTF are also accused of not only passing fake intelligence to the military in order to continue being paid, but also falsely accusing anyone they have grievance against as a member of Boko Haram.

The military, police and CJTF are all accused of all kinds of abuses against the local population as well as on the internally displaced people (Felbab-Brown, 2018, pp. 13-14). These criticisms have been accompanied by the realisation that military operations alone cannot solve the problem of insurgency. Thus, the issue of de-radicalization began to be given closer attention as part of the necessary response to Boko Haram.

De-radicalization Efforts in the Northeast

The roots of de-radicalization efforts in Nigeria can be traced to the year 2013 when mounting criticism from both local and international sources compelled the government to establish a Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) agency under the Office of the National Security Adviser. This was named National Security Corridor to counter recruitment and mobilization into Boko Haram and rehabilitate defectors, which was placed under the leadership of Fatima Akilu. The agency was involved in disengaging, rehabilitating and reintegrating low-risk former insurgents. The extent of the success of this de-radicalization process is not clear but the leader claimed that over 300 former terrorists were rehabilitated (Onapajo & Ozden, 2020). In 2017, the Nigerian government established a new de-radicalization programme called Operation Safe Corridor as an improvement upon the former

Operation Safe Corridor was designed as a four-stage programme which involves documentation and profiling, buy-in, de-radicalization, and reintegration. Documentation and profiling involves screening of those insurgents who surrender, by the army to assess their level of risk and then the collection of their personal information including DNA. Buy-in involves assuring the former insurgents of confidentiality, assuring them that no legal action will be taken against them, explaining to them the aim of the programme, and lecturing them on atonement and redemption. The purpose is to build trust between the staff and the clients. De-radicalization stage involves a process of changing the clients from extremism to mainstream ideology. Three areas are targeted at this stage, namely, religious ideology, structural or political grievances, and post-exit trauma.

Imams are responsible for changing the religious ideology of Boko Haram to that of mainstream Islam. Vocational skills are taught to address the structural and political grievances of poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and others. Psychotherapy and counselling are given to address cases of trauma and other psychological problems. Reintegration involves the process of reinserting these former insurgent back into their communities and follow up monitoring to ensure they do not revert to back to radicalization (Bukarti & Bryson, 2019, pp.14-21). Operation Safe Corridor deals exclusively with male insurgent and as such there is no provision for the de-radicalization of females and children within the programme. Although an attempt towards this is being carried out by the NEEM Foundation, a non-governmental organisation, which established and runs the Yellow Ribbon Initiative. This programme is aimed at de-radicalizing females and children once captured by Boko Haram (Salihu, 2021, p. 33).

Alumbugu & Akut (2025). De-Radicalization of Boko Haram Insurgents in the Northeast

Region of Nigeria: The Place of Strategic Leadership. Pp. 480 – 490.

The major challenge of Operation Safe Corridor is the focus on the symptoms rather than the root cause of radicalization. Without addressing the conditions, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and political marginalization, which make radicalization easy at the community level, rehabilitating former insurgents will not prevent Boko Haram from radicalizing more youths to replace them. The programme itself is shrouded in secrecy and so there is little or no information about its success as no independent evaluation of the programme has been carried out so far. However, the reintegration of those successfully de-radicalized is proving to be problematic. As noted by Bukarti & Bryson (2019) "Reintegration of OPSC's clients faces tumultuous challenges, mainly because communities are unprepared to receive de-radicalised fighters.

The members of batches A and B, who completed their courses in 2017, were kept in so-called transit camps after leaving OPSC because of pushback from communities" (p. 22). The public is suspicious of the de-radicalization programme and so are unwilling to accept that the former insurgents are truly converted. In addition, the atrocities committed by Boko Haram on the people of the northeast region are not completely forgotten. Consequently, many of these people are not willing to forgive the former insurgents. This clearly shows that, although the programme was well-intentioned, there is still something left to be done to ensure its success. This missing component is strategic leadership and it will be discussed in the next section.

The Place of Strategic Leadership in the De-radicalization Efforts

Strategic leadership is borne out of strategy which is defined as "the means and how for accomplishing long term objectives" (Onu, Akinlabi, & Egbuta, 2018, p. 77). This means that, in the context of de-radicalization of Boko Haram, the long term objective of tackling radicalization before it occurs at the community level will be given equal priority with the short term process of changing former insurgents. This view is aptly captured by Ngwa, (2020) as follows;

> At a fundamental level, there is a high need to establish a framework of political solution that addresses the underlying root causes of the violent extremism and radicalization that leads to terrorism in local communities. If fully created, community-oriented framework to countering terrorism will build strong public confidence, strengthen public support and police actions. It will fortify the legitimacy of state actions and state actors in areas caught in a vicious cycle of violent extremism and radicalization in Nigeria. Community security approaches to counterterrorism in northern Nigeria should involve both local men and women in communities or ethnic groups prone to conflict. Building and maintaining trust is essential for a successful de-radicalization from terrorist groups. Confronted by relative deprivation, structural and cultural violence in northern parts of the country, the Nigerian government must now realize that political solution to address these underlying causes in local communities is essential for long term solutions.

The need for strategic leadership does not require the establishment of new leadership but rather the refocusing of the priorities of the present leadership to addresses the issue of de-radicalization strategically. An important quality of strategic leadership is the ability to look at the long term as well as the larger picture when confronting an issue. This calls for visionary leadership which considers the future rather than only the immediate in addressing the challenges (Palladan, Abdulkadir, & Chong, 2016, p. 257). Doing this will amount to addressing the root cause of radicalization rather than simply attempting to cure only its symptoms. Since radicalization is a long term process that takes years to occur, de-radicalization needs to also be long term in order to be effective. In addition, counter radicalization targeted at societies vulnerable to radicalization in the northeast region is the only sure way of nipping off radicalization before it occurs. This way Boko Haram will eventually become weak when they are unable to attract radicalized youths into their ranks.

Strategic leadership involves respect, appreciation, and care for the followership while genuinely acknowledging them as important source of knowledge, innovation and performance all of which are necessary for success (Oladele & Akeke, 2017, p. 549). Thus the local population of the northeast region ought to be involved in the design and implementation of de-radicalization programmes. This is because local knowledge will ensure that it is conducted within the context of the northeast region. In addition, it will ensure their buy-in and ownership of the programme which will, in turn, brings about trust. Trusting the de-radicalization programme will minimise, if not entirely, the cases of rejecting de-radicalized individuals that are being reintegrated into their communities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This paper examined radicalization of the northeast region by Boko Haram and place of strategic leadership in the de-radicalization efforts. It began by explaining the methodology used which was qualitative and involved the analysis of secondary documents. The work continued by examining the concepts of radicalization and de-radicalization. The radicalization of the northeast region by Boko Haram was discussed. This was followed by a look at the military response to Boko Haram insurgency. The work then focuses on the de-radicalization programme of Nigeria aimed at repentant Boko Haram insurgents named Operation Safe Corridor. Finally, the place of strategic leadership in addressing the current challenges of the de-radicalization programme is discussed. It is the conclusion of this paper that when strategic leadership is adopted by those managing the de-radicalization programme in the northeast region it will address most of the challenges being faced by the programme today.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the finding of this paper, the following recommendations are suggested for those responsible for the de-radicalization programme in the northeast region of Nigeria:

1. De-radicalization programmes should target the root causes of root causes of radicalization at the community level.

2. De-radicalization programmes focus on long term impact rather than only on short term engagements with former insurgents.

3. De-radicalization programmes should be designed with the involvement of the local population.

4. Local knowledge and expertise should be utilised in the implementation of de-radicalization programmes.

Competing Interest

The authors declare that no conflicting interest exist in this manuscript.

REFERENCES

Akintayo, A. E. (2018). Vipers are offsprings of dragons: A Fanonian analysis of violent conflicts in Africa with specific reference to the Boko Harma insurgency in Nigeria. In J.-M. Iyi, & H. Strydom (Eds.), *Boko Haram and international law*. Springer.

Botha, A., & Abdile, M. (2017). *Understanding Boko Haram in Nigeria - reality and perceptions.* The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers.

Bukarti, A. B., & Bryson, R. (2019). *Dealing with Boko Haram defectors in the Lake Chad Basin: Lessons from Nigeria.* Tony Bliar Institute for Global Change https://institute.global/insight/coexistence/dealing-boko-haram-defectors-lake-chad-basin-lessons-nigeria.

Clubb, G., & Tapley, M. (2018). Conceptualising de-radicalisation and former combatant re-integration in Nigeria. *Third World Quarterly, 39*(11), 1 – 28.

Felbab-Brown, V. (2018). *The limits of justice: Transitional justice and violent extremism: Nigeria case study.* United Nations University.

490

Maskaliūnaitė, A. (2015). Exploring the theories of radicalization. *Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal, 17*(1), 9 – 26.

Ngwa, N. R. (2020). Drivers of political radicalization and de-radicalization of terrorism in northern Nigeria. *International Journal of Politics and Security, 2*(3), 1 – 33.

Nwafor, N. H., & Nwogu, G. A. (2015). Implication of radicalisation for Nigerian education: A philosophical analysis. *Journal of Education and Practice, 6*(21), 201 – 207.

Oladele, P. O., & Akeke, N. I. (2017). Strategic leadership factor in small and medium scale enterprises in southwest Nigeria. *International Journal of Economics, Commerce and Management, 5*(10), 546 – 560.

Onapajo, H., & Ozden, K. (2020). Non-military approach against terrorism in Nigeria: deradicalization strategies and challenges in countering Boko Haram. *Security Journal*, 1 – 17.

Onu, C. A., Akinlabi, B. H., & Egbuta, O. (2018). Strategic leadership and organizational performance in Nigeria: An empirical investigation. *European Journal of Business and Management, 10*(25), 76 – 85.

Palladan, A. A., Abdulkadir, K. B., & Chong, Y. W. (2016). Strategic leadership: A sine qua non toward revitalizing Nigeian public tertiary institutions. *International Journal of Commerce and Management, 4*(9), 253 – 264.

Salihu, M. (2021). An analysis of youth deradicalization programs in northeast Nigeria: A study on Boko Haram. *European Scientific Journal, 17*(13), 21 – 40.

Turkington, R., & Christien, A. (2018). *Women, deradicalization and rehabilitation: Lessons from an expert workshop.* Policy Brief, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security.

Umar, A. M. (2013). "Nigeria and the Boko Haram sect: Adopting a better for resolving the crisis." Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, California. http://hdl.handle.net/10945/34755.

Alumbugu & Akut (2025). De-Radicalization of Boko Haram Insurgents in the Northeast

Region of Nigeria: The Place of Strategic Leadership. Pp. 480 – 490.