



## Understanding Boko Haram's Hybrid Operational Methods in Northwestern Nigeria

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the hybrid operational character of Boko Haram within the contexts of methods, strategies, and organizational affiliations in the northwestern region. This is due to the continued expansion of Boko Haram into the region since the military reinvigoration in the northeast. The new military operations in the region have caused serious disorientation in the ranks of Boko haram, which necessitated a move to other regions to avoid defeat by the Nigerian military. This study uses qualitative methods to demonstrate the vast range of techniques connected with bandits and other groups in the area based on the operational nexus. The materials used were content analyzed thematically. This study is predicated on Makarenko's crime-terror nexus model for the analysis. The theory highlighted levels of alliances, convergence, and operational tools armed groups adopt to achieve their goals. The paper finds that Boko haram has developed hybrid operational strategies to expand its operational areas for a continued existence. The hybrid operational character was developed based on alliances and the adoption of operational tools. The study recommends that Nigeria first understand this development as a new hybrid threat to deal with and contain Boko Haram and other groups of similar style in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Hybrid character, operational tools, Boko Haram, alliance, kidnapping

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## Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, activities of violent armed groups have become increasingly visible globally, especially in Europe, Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Armed groups have continued to emerge for several reasons ;including states' weak response to the socioeconomic demands of people. Their activities have caused so much damage to life and properties. They have caused the death of many and plunged many into severe humanitarian conditions, especially across Sub-Saharan Africa. However, since 2001, groups with ideological alignments started to emerge in Sub-Saharan Africa, with Boko Haram becoming more prominent in Nigeria in 2009. Boko Haram has exhibited different behaviour across different areas of northern Nigeria.

However, the activities of Boko Haram in the aftermath of its clashes with the Nigerian securities in 2009 led to an increase in the strength of the group. For instance, the group regrouped in 2010 and increased its attacks on the Nigerian state, markets, worship centers, and highways (International Crisis Group, 2014). In addition, the group has expanded its attacks due to the negligence of the Nigerian government in dealing with the group. Evidence shows that the group began to migrate its activities to a crime perpetrated by organized crime organizations since then. This was due to the group's financial challenge and the need to raise funds for its continued operations (Singh, 2018). This marked the beginning of the transformation of Boko Haram from a direct attack to record death to attacks aimed at generating funds (Fanusie, 2018) while imparting fear in the mind of people. The changes in the goals, ideologies, and methods of operation of Boko Haram groups caused a striking overlap.

Researchers such as Pearson and Zenn (2021), MacEachern (2020), Amao (2020), Barnett (2021), and Kente (2021) have all investigated the Boko Haram activities in northern Nigeria. Findings revealed that the group has engaged in terror activities with a remarkable capacity in using conventional military methods that led to massive casualties across the region. However, the group's peculiar unconventional warfare was only examined within the context of soft asymmetric violence strategies such as suicide terrorism (Okoli & Lenshie, 2022). Hence the need to further explore its strategies to identify other soft strategies the group employs. Nonetheless, evidence indicates that the nature of the group's current character has not been sufficiently explored. As a result, this paper investigates



the hybrid operational character of Boko Haram within the contexts of methods, strategies, and organizational affiliations. To achieve that, the paper asks what methods and strategies both groups use to achieve their aim and objectives. In doing so, the paper reviewed relevant literature on terrorism, organized crime, Boko Haram, and the hybrid threats in the context of changing conflict.

### **Terrorism and Organized crime**

The literature has documented a lot about strategic links between terrorist groups and organized criminal organizations, which is opportunistic and coincidental (Johnson, 2019). According to Mullins and Wither (2016), terrorist organizations adopt criminal activities for their continued existence. This connection generates some debate over the quantum of relationships on the operational level (Miller, 2019). As a result, understanding terrorism and organized crime operations become necessary to identify the operational character of organizations that found expedience in adopting their strategies.

### **Terrorism**

Terrorism has been defined differently within the circle of security experts. However, Hoffman (2006) argues that the French Revolution popularized the concept of terrorism, and it had taken on several meanings until September 11, 2001, when Al Qaida attacked the United States. However, the inability of scholars to arrive at a consensus on the definition of terrorism has remained a crucial obstacle (Schmid et al., 2021). Nonetheless, a cursory analysis of the available definitions indicates a positive development that has given direction to terrorism policies. Many researchers identified certain aspects of it as essential to its theorization.

For example, Hoffman (2006) provides some aspects of terrorism, such as political motives and violence, designed to affect parties beyond the immediate target psychologically. It is also conspiratorial and usually organized by subnational groups or non-state actors. On the other hand, some researchers, such as Farrell (1980), who have considered psychological aspects, argued that terrorism is mindless, dumb, and unreasonable. However, none of these labels convey it better, especially when considered a means to an end rather than an end. More so, Yamamoto (2017)



suggested, perhaps, that since terrorism can differentiate between victims and targets, it is more sophisticated than most other types of political violence. The complexity does not preclude coming up with a precise definition. There are similarities and contrasts between terrorism, other forms of political violence, and regular criminality. Before developing a definition, it is necessary to analyze the complexity of terrorism and its similarities to different types of violence.

### **Organized crime**

On the other hand, the literature examined the term organized crime as it is used in several contexts. It involves illegal and criminal shady businesses. According to Nicaso and Danesi (2021), Abdunabiyevich (2022), and EONS Intelligence (2021), organized crime involves a group of people working together in a coordinated manner to carry out criminal operations. However, organized crime uses murder, violence, and corruption to achieve the group's goals. One of the traits of organized crime is that it is based on criminal organizations, operates covertly, is stable, and can easily switch from one type of illegal activity to another. Organized crime necessitates expertise or specialized knowledge to ensure continued existence within its areas of operation (Abdunabiyevich, 2022; Campana& Varese, 2022b). However, organized crime has become a topical issue for years, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. Its high prevalence has greatly affected societies (Mohammed et al., 2022). Unlike the mafias, drug cartels, trafficking organizations, and urban gangs (Campana& Varese, 2022a), countries in Sub-Saharan Africa only have criminal organizations that specialize in drug trafficking, robbery, and violent armed groups. With the development of terrorism, organized crime and terrorism are more intriguingly blending while groups exhibit a greater specialty and incorporate each other.

### **Hybrid threats in the context of changing conflict**

Asymmetries of hard and soft violence have alternated in the dynamics of conflicts in northern Nigeria. Armed groups in the region use both conventional and unconventional tactics (Okoli&Lenshie, 2022). Changes over time have turned conflicts into hybrid ones. Hybrid conflicts create opportunities for the emergence of hybrid characters. The multilevel character appears in most cases in the context of the links between terrorists and criminal organizations.



However, the links between criminals and terrorist organizations are debatable and have not been explicitly defined in the relationship's growing body of literature (Schmid, 2018a).

Furthermore, a hybrid threat is one that combines regular and irregular forces, such as terrorists and criminal elements, in order to achieve its goals. It does this by utilizing a variety of conventional and unorthodox tactics that are constantly changing in order to cause varied problems (Leach, 2022). Therefore, the hybrid nature of Boko Haram in the context of dynamic operations has been identified by this paper. This identification was achieved using a wide range of empirical evidence (Jupp&Garrod, 2022). A hybrid character in itself is a hybrid threat that has to be countered in multilevel ways by the state and other relevant actors.

### **The Boko Haram**

Boko Haram is a terrorist organization that operates predominantly in northeastern Nigeria. Its activities have seriously threatened Nigeria's security and territorial integrity (Iocchi, 2021; Subrahmanian et al., 2021; Wild, 2021). Boko Haram's evolved in three phases: Its establishment in 2002-2003, the commencement of jihad in 2009-2010, and the suicide bombing campaign in 2011-2012 (Zenn, 2018). By 1995, AbubakarLawan established Ahlis-sunnahWal-Jamaa'aHijra- popularly known as 'Shabaab,' and it took a violent dimension by December 2003 with the attack on the police station in Kananma and Geidam(Onuoha, 2014). The group acquired its capacity for retaliation against Nigerian security agencies in 2009 and 2010 (Anugwom, 2019).

Furthermore, scholars have attributed the emergence of Boko Haram to several factors. One of the factors indicates that the group's ideology is primarily the cause of its strike (Adelaja et al., 2018; Sambe, 2016). Other factors that contributed to its emergence included economic distress, poor governance, suffocating squalor, and destitution (Barkindo, 2020; Onuoha, 2014). However, according to the International Crisis Group (2014), the ideological standpoint arises from grievances against the western democratic system, which fosters immorality, infidelity, dishonesty, and insincerity. Most significantly, local public support helps advance and shape its behavior(Boukhars, 2020).



Boko Haram membership have different backgrounds, consisting of people from different groups, sects, and sections of the country (Botha & Abdile, 2016; Hansen, 2016; Walker, 2012). Its most important characteristics consist of a harsh reputation and involvement in numerous deadly atrocities. Some members of Boko Haram received international training in Algeria and Mali (Maiangwa, 2014) and locally. According to reports, the gang built numerous local cells for member training around Baga, Bama, Alagarno, and Sambisa (Ojo, 2020). However, internal squabbles have led to the formation of the Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimin Fi Biladi Sudan (ANSARU) (Aghedo & Eke, 2013) and Islamic State West Africa Province (Amao, 2020). Nonetheless, despite the group's strength in terror-related activities, the Nigerian government has been able to cause a degradation in the group's capacity since 2015. As a result, Boko Haram expands its spheres to other regions of the country through a hybrid operational system.

### **Theoretical framework**

This paper used Makarenko's crime-terror nexus model to explain Boko Haram's hybrid character in northwestern Nigeria. This is because the model has demonstrated the obvious relationship between organized crime and terrorism and the group's capacity to develop new outlooks (Makarenko, 2004). This is against the usual explanations that armed groups strictly follow a single ideological and operational line. It is, however, possible for the groups to develop a new behaviour pattern, especially in areas that deal with finances and operations. Furthermore, the model was originally developed as a continuum to explain the global crime-terror nexus. It developed a continuum of six probable convergence locations grouped into four major categories of relationships- alliance formation, operational motives, convergence, and the black hole syndrome.

The model assumes that armed groups can develop a hybrid character through an alliance with another significant group, especially those of different ideological backgrounds. This is supported by the fact that armed groups form an alliance between groups with similar ideologies and across boundaries to contain those with opposing ideologies (Yashlavskii, 2020). According to Makarenko (2005), the alliance and partnerships are time-bound and might dissolve or cease to exist once the purpose is fulfilled. In addition, the groups equally borrow operational tools to act in ways



unassumed of them. The groups do this to establish in-house organizational capabilities (Makarenko, 2004). Some armed groups sometimes create a hybrid appearance to replenish some losses incurred in financial support through illicit actions (Makarenko, 2005).

However, according to Makarenko (2005), armed groups can converge with a view to creating a hybrid appearance for successful operations. This is done especially in a condition the groups felt threatened by more superior actors such as a state. The implication of this convergence point is that the converging groups can sometimes become engrossed in activities that may eventually lead them to abandon their original ideas. On the other hand, the 'black hole syndrome' produces political instability and uncertainty (Arias, 2010), which would foster dynamic and improved opportunities for convergent factions. Therefore, this broad continuum provides a framework within which this paper gleans through the operations of Boko Haram and finalizes its hybrid character, especially in the places it created partnerships and alliances with bandits and other groups in northwestern Nigeria.

## **Methodology**

The methodology of this paper is based on secondary sources used to generate data on Boko Haram's relationship with other groups in northern Nigeria. The study used this methodology to identify the groups' hybrid character on the basis and underlying structures and relationships, as depicted in Makarenko's crime-terrorism nexus continuum. However, all data was gathered from online sources, such as journals, books, reports, and newspapers. The analysis is done qualitatively to ensure the desired relationship is pointed out at various levels of the continuum, advancing the work's epistemological basis.

## **The operational Relationships between Boko haram and Organized Crime**

Armed groups globally are shifting from their original combat style to the adoption of hybrid characters, which stands at the heart of current global security concerns (Briscoe, 2013). The hybrid character allows them to adopt terrorist and organized crime's operational tools concurrently. The hybrid character of armed groups usually breeds different threats that are difficult to contain by



conventional methods. However, experience shows that Boko Haram has formed a hybrid character like most armed groups globally. This has coincided with the present reality of the international security system, where states have shifted from conventional warfare systems to a more sophisticated yet hybrid system (Leach, 2022). The group adopted kidnapping for ransom as the new operational method (Onuoha & Okolie-Osemene, 2019; Verjee & Kwaja, 2021) and drug-related businesses (Teiner, 2020), forcing individuals to pay protection fees (Zahid, 2018), which obviously indicates a change of tactics and development of hybrid character or approach that guarantees its continued existence.

Furthermore, Boko Haram's present strategy in northern Nigeria has demonstrated that the group's operational system depicts a development of a new way of dealing with its adversaries. That is, it is warfare, but not as a war and a situation of a struggle between two entities (Vadell et al., 2023). However, the disaggregation of the group into various groups in 2016, with each moving to capture a particular area of operation, has no doubt weakened the Boko Haram struggles in the post-split period (Warner & Lizzo, 2023). As a result, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Jama'at Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladi Sudan (Ansaru) made serious inroads into northwestern Nigeria, leaving Boko Haram with a sole operating location in the northeast. In order to revive its lost strength and power, the group equally resorted to expanding its operations to the northwestern region where its splinter groups have captured, in addition to the bandits.

Therefore, Boko Haram's expansion to the northwestern region requires the group to designate its areas and friends to avoid clashes with its former splinter groups. It adopted strategies that consisted of the different styles, personnel, and operational tools to achieve its regional goals. Although this might not be new, it has evolved over time to become the dominant style of armed groups in today's highly interconnected and reliant globe, where other global actors have changed the balance of power (Vadell et al., 2023). Therefore, the group's new strategies hinged on its alliance with other armed groups.





## **Alliance formation and convergence**

A close examination of Boko Haram's activities has revealed that the group created a symbolic relationship with other groups, such as bandits, especially in Kaduna, Niger, and Sokoto state (Okoli & Ogayi, 2018). This has resulted in creating a formidable character by adopting certain styles and operational tools originally not meant for its activities. However, this is simply due to the spread of globalization, which has simplified many processes and improved the profitability of illegal activities, creating new opportunities and the rise of new actors. This has created strong opportunities that show Boko Haram's expansion while becoming more sophisticated across international borders (Rollins & Wyler, 2011). Obviously, relationships of this nature create more opportunities for entities that contribute to an abundant source of revenue, partnerships, and alliances with other criminal organizations (Dupuy et al., 2016).

Furthermore, Boko Haram's relationship with other groups in the northwest was first created in the form of alliances. The groups formed alliances that signified its initial stage of modification and transformation that fundamentally widened its areas of operation to cover other regions. However, according to Makarenko (2004), alliances are formed at the first level of the relationship to generate one-off, short-term, or long-term partnerships, depending on the needs and circumstances. This is in total contradistinction to those that argued on the permanent movement of Boko Haram to other regions. However, the alliances between Boko Haram and other bandits groups in the North West were meant to generate more money and extract or influence government policy (Desgrais et al., 2018). Thus, records have shown that the alliance allows diverse groups to share and improve their skills, information, support, and operational capabilities to achieve operational objectives.

Boko Haram moved further to consolidate its alliance because the responses from the Nigerian government and troops of the multinational joint task forces have caused serious disorientation in its camps, especially in the northeast. That has caused a massive migration of some members of the group to other regions, especially to the northwest (Abdulaziz, 2021). On the other hand, these multidimensional threats forced the group's members to look for adaptability and flexibility to meet all challenges and to be able to carry out their missions in the context of the existence of more and



more hybrid threats. However, because they lacked knowledge of the environment, they contacted the existing bandits groups, through which an alliance was created, resulting in easy access to certain areas and personalities. According to Wijnja (2022), this allows them to know the confrontational environment and identify the threats while maintaining operational capability.

Furthermore, Boko Haram's alliance with bandit groups was visible in the northwest. Records show that contacts, lobbying, and operational collaborations were established during the relationship. For instance, in 2020, Shekau ordered Auwalun Daudawa to kidnap the Kankara schoolboys in Katsina state. The children were, however, kidnapped by two prominent bandit leaders in the region- Idi Minorti and Dankarami (France 24, 2020). In addition, this became even more clear when Boko Haram finally took responsibility and declared that its members were behind the kidnapping in Katsina (France 24, 2020).

However, in some instances, the alliance has generated fear of overlap and convergence. This is because, in the northeast, for example, Boko Haram had previously formed partnerships with AQIM and Alshabaab in Somalia. Still, there was no evidence of full convergence (Zenn et al., 2013), except for the allegiance the group swore to the Islamic State West Africa Province (Mahmood & Ani, 2018). More so, there is little information about the convergence between Boko Haram and bandit groups. Available information indicates that Dogo Gide has collaborated and worked with Boko Haram and Ansaru in their formations in the Birnin Gwari Forest since 2012. As a result, the activities and styles show that Boko Haram is moving in a more clandestine approach while developing a hybrid character by adopting recruits originally from other groups. This has created new networks with deeper relationships and capacity development (Schmid, 2018b).

### **Adoption of operational tools**

Boko Haram is notorious for openly embracing the working practices of other organized crime groups to achieve success. Even though organized crime does not thrive in northeastern Nigeria, the group has managed to master its operational procedures. The group has conducted serial kidnappings for ransom, smuggling, narcotics, robbery, extortion, and murder. However, it kidnaped victims across Lake Chad, particularly in Niger and Cameroon, especially women and young girls (Pearson



&Zenn, 2021).The group has severally adopted a mass kidnapping strategy to push the government to comply with its demands.However, evidence has shown some kind of prisoner swap with the government after certain mass kidnapping incidents. On the other hand, according toBacon (2017), Chibok girls were released in return for several top Boko Haram members who had been imprisoned in 2017.

Furthermore, Boko Haram has obviously grasped the potential usefulness of deploying such operational methods to compel political concessions from the state. It replicated this method in the region at different points, and bandits have equally learned to deploy it (Anka, 2022). Therefore, this has been one of the major implications of Boko Haram in the region, especially its clandestine activities that inflict more harm than direct attacks on people and properties. The adoption of these operational styles was indeed supported by the government’s inaction toward blocking all available chances.

In addition, Boko Haram has been linked to the trafficking of illicit narcotics to generate revenue. The group was involved in both arms trafficking and the smuggling of hard drugs while assisting in the transportation of heroin and cocaine. According to a 2017 UNODC report, members of the group were tried in Chad after discovering that they were involved in the trafficking of psychoactive substances (UNODC, 2017). With strong financial support, Boko Haram’s thought was to enhance its operational strength and become northern Nigeria’s most substantial armed group. However, recent discoveries have shown that the dynamics of the conflict in northern Nigeria have put together different criminal groups and terrorist organizations on the front, threatening to weaken the state and, by extension, making it lose its capacity to adapt to the operational tactics of the groups. On the other hand, a more sustained fight and tactics change has allowed the state to deal with the group.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper believes Boko Haram has established alliances with other groups, especially in northwestern Nigeria. Although it has tried bringing some members of the bandits' groups to accept its ideology, especially in the BirninGwari area of Kaduna state, such a



convergence moves did not really materialize. However, in its attempt to benefit from the alliances, the group adopted operational tools capable of bringing the various groups together. The operational tools consist of kidnapping for ransom, drug business and facilitation, and other soft strategies. The hybrid operational character developed by Boko Haram through its alliances with other groups has equally discovered the logic of long-term revenue sources for the group. Boko Haram has learned new strategies, especially in the northwestern region with different climatic and demographic indices. It has also acquired more critical capabilities, particularly intelligence gathering and network use, and has expanded its fighting intensity against the Nigerian state. Therefore, this paper recommends that the Nigerian government-examines the Boko Haram hybrid operational strategies to adopt new hybrid mitigating strategies. This is due to the fact that the new strategies have obviously developed a new form of threat to the Nigerian state.

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