

## INTERROGATING THE NEXUS BETWEEN SOCIAL MEDIA AND BOKO HARAM, BANDITS, KIDNAPPERS IN POST COVID-19-NIGERIA



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### **Abstract**

*Digital technology and emergence of social media in Nigeria no doubt brought a new dawn in social-economic and political activities in the country. Internet and mass use of mobile phones increased use of social media. However, social media have also provide tools for terrorist organizations like Boko Haram, Bandits and Kidnappers to increase their activities in the country as it provided platforms for the groups to recruit, train and interact with their members and those they target to recruit as members. Terrorists, banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria have been rising sharply over the last decade targeting civilians and security forces in their campaign of violence. The country has continued to witness horrifying acts of violence which have continued to undermine socio-economic and political activities in the country. According to Global Risk Consultancy Verisk Maplecroft by last year 2020, Nigeria is one of the top ten countries in the world in terms of terrorism risk. Outbreak of Covid-19 Pandemic in late 2019 provided another opportunity for these groups to increase their activities and influence in Nigeria. So, the paper adopted qualitative method to examine the link between the social media and activities of Boko Haram, Bandits and Kidnappers as well as how increasing use of social media to spread their activities and exploits will impact on the future of the country.*

**Keywords:** *Interrogating, Nexus, Social Media, Boko Haram, Bandits, Kidnappers, Post Covid19*

### **Introduction**

Activities of insurgents and armed groups in Nigeria have continued to rise sharply in the last decade. The civil conflict trigger by armed opposition groups in the Northeast part of Nigeria since 2009 has spilled over to many States in different geo-political zones and across borders in the whole of lake Chad Region resulting in widespread killings, displacement of individuals and facilities as well as violations of fundamental human rights and large scale humanitarian crises in this part of the world.

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According to 2020 Global Terrorism Index, Nigeria is the third country most impacted by terrorism in the world. Notberg (2007) posited that crime against persons including murder, rape and robbery has grown in scale and viscousness in Nigeria since 1999. According to available statistics, in the six States of North West Nigeria, that is Zamfara, Sokoto, Kastina, Niger, Kaduna and Kebbi banditry claimed about 1,100 lives in 2018, 2,200 lives in 2019 and over 3,000 lives in 2020, while more than 247,000 people were displaced in the area within this period leading to emergence of about 41,000 refugees.

Activities of Bandits, Boko Haram terrorists and Kidnappers which some people believe are in most cases one and the same, have increased the number orphans and widows in the affected areas and remained a serious threat to food security, national unity and development as well as national security.

According to Prabhakaran (2008) National Security is the measurable state of the capability of a nation to overcome the multi-dimensional threats to the apparent wellbeing of its people and its survival as a nation-state at any given time by balancing all instruments of state policy through government and extendable global security by variables external to it.

Today Boko Haram and Bandits activities have resulted in mass killing and kidnapping of people, raping of women and girls including minor, chasing of farmers out of their farmlands, seizing of farmlands, theft of cattle, burning and raiding of grain silos and blocking of local trade routes away others.

According to Ngige et al. (2016), media play very important role in the global fight against terrorism. However, emergence of digital technology and the new media as well as high level penetration of social media in Nigeria has provided cheap and accessible platforms for terrorist and other criminal groups to advance their operations and increase their influence across the country. Today Boko Haram, Bandits and Kidnappers use social media to propagate their agenda, escalate propaganda and fake news as well as radicalization of individuals online. The paper examines the link between Boko Haram, Bandits, Kidnappers and Social Media in the upsurge of terrorists and criminal activities in Post Covid-19 Nigeria.

### **Terrorism, Banditry, Kidnapping: Past to Present**

Terrorism is as old as the human race and implies the use of violence to pursue a cause. It is the use of violence or threat of violence to inculcate fear, intimidate government or society to achieve political goals or force government to act in a particular way desired by the terrorist.

According to Hornby (2000) terrorism is the use of violent action in order to achieve political aims. Modern terrorism according to Abbot Com (2014) could be traced to reign of terror instigated by Maxmillien Nobespierre in 1793 following the French novolution.

Terrorism has local, national and international dimensions as activities of terrorists are not limited no restricted by geographical locations.

Banditry refers to acts of robbery and violence in a particular area. It is the use of force or threat to effect or intimidate a person or persons with the intent to rob, rape or kill.

According to Nigeria Watch (2011), banditry has been a common genre of crime as well as a cause of violence in contemporary societies. The concept of banditry has continue to change over the years from one political environment to another according circumstances.

According to Warty (1994), Bandit in 19th Century Europe and America was a freedom fighter for the less privileged while in Mexico some bandits like Chuchote were celebrated as heroes of Mexican independence. In Africa and Nigeria in particular, bandits specialized in armed robbery and other related crimes. According to Currott & Fink, (2008) the most common feature of banditry in Africa is maiming, killing and wanton destruction of life and property.

Similarly, kidnapping consists of unlawful taking and carrying away of a person by force or unlawful seizure and detention of a person against his will aimed at subjecting the victim to involuntary servitude, or exposing him or her to the commission of some further criminal act against his person or to obtain ransom for his release. Kidnapping is not actually a new development in Nigeria. In the ancient times, communities and groups engaged in kidnapping of strangers or enemies either for burial of kings or warriors or for rituals to appease the gods or still as weapon of negotiation during tribal wars.

Over the years, kidnapping has become an effective weapon adopted by terrorists, bandits and political revolutionaries for extortion and for seeking concession from government or society. Inyang and Abraham (2013) define kidnapping as a restriction of someone else's liberty which violates the provision of freedom of movement as enshrined in the constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria where other law takes its cue from. For Zannoni (2003), kidnapping in many instances is a business involving a demand for ransom which may vary according to criminal involves and the victim's status.

From the foregoing, it is clear that terrorism, banditry and kidnapping are somehow interwoven and sometimes carried out by the same or affiliate groups because as the Boko Haram insurgents are fighting to control the North-East, armed militia and herdsmen are terrorizing the North Central, Southeast, Southwest, and South-South while bandits are fighting to take over North- West. All the groups engage in killings, maiming, raping and kidnapping for ransom as a strategy to spread fear and insecurity. They have formed a syndicate of mass killings and violence that have turned most parts of Nigeria to what Umez (2000) described as a prevalent value system that encourages illegal and corrupt practices as sufficient and necessary means to survive.

### **Emergence of Boko Haram Sect and Upsurge in Terrorists Activities in Nigeria**

Insecurity is a global challenge as many countries across the world are facing one form of insecurity or another. According to Divsallar (2014), the global community is

under increasing threat of insecurity including terrorism. In his view Adejumo (2011) noted that the United States, United Kingdom and many countries face the challenges of insecurity within their borders on daily basis. Adejumo however maintained that the difference between these nations and Nigeria is how they manage the treats.

The upsurge in terrorist activities in Nigeria could be traced to emergence of Islamic Militants called Boko Haram which is an Hausa language for "Wester Education is evil". The emergence of this sect in 2002 in the Northeast of Nigeria has escalated insecurity, mass killings of civilians and security operatives, burning of houses and mobile infrastructure, increase in ethno-religious conflicts, banditry and kidnapping as well as deterioration in law and order.

Initially the sect founded by Muhammed Yusuf claimed that its intention was to eliminate corruption and injustice in Nigeria which it blamed on Western influences and to impose Shariah which is Islamic law. In 2009, the founder Muhammed Yusuf and some members of the sect were killed by security forces and the group vowed to avenge their deaths. In 2015 the sect pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and took the name. Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) known also as Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA). However in 2016 the sect split into two with one retaining the ISWAP while the other reverted back to Boko Haram.

After the death of Yusuf, his Deputy, Abubakar Shekau assumed the leadership of the group and the group began to kill individuals, security operatives and larger targets as well as expanded the territory it occupied and its influence from Northeast of Nigeria to other parts of the country. Since then more than 40,000 people have been killed and over two point three million others displaced from their homes in deadly attacks in Northeast Nigeria.

According to UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, armed banditry in the North-West Nigeria has equally claimed over 1,600 lives in the first half of 2020 while over 300,000 civilians in Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina, Sokoto, Niger and Kebbi States have be displaced.

Both Boko Haram terrorists and bandits have also sustained regular kidnapping especially in North-East, North-West and North Central. The motives appear to be solely for ransom and the recent concentration on kidnapping students and travellers can be viewed as an attempt to maximize gains as school kidnappings put pressure on government to pay huge ransom to secure release of students and teachers to escape adverse public opinion and backlash from international community and investors. Similarly, kidnapping travellers on inter-state journeys and individuals from their community target to extort members of their families and community who can borrow from anywhere to secure the release of their loved ones.

According to report from Nigerian consulting firm SB Morgen, between Jun 2011 and March 2020 Nigerians paid kidnappers about 18.34 million dollars in ransom out of which about 60% was paid between January 2016 and March 2020 alone which is an indication of an increase in recent years. Again between December

2020 and March 2021, there were at least five student kidnappings in the Northern region during which about 769 students were kidnapped from their boarding school. In April 2014 276 school girls were abducted by Boko Haram in the Northeastern town of Chibok and till date more than 100 of the girls are still missing. Boko Haram also claimed to be behind the December 11 kidnapping in Kankara, but the claim later proved to be wrong as the boys were released six days later and the government denied paying ransom.

Students were kidnapping from their boarding school and educational facilities across the Northern region. Again, on May 30 this year 136 children between the ages of five and fourteen and three teachers were kidnapped from an Islamic school in Niger State by gunmen on motorcycles who later released eleven of the pupils who were too small and couldn't walk fast. Kidnap – for – ransom is becoming a daily occurrence in Nigeria as more criminal gangs and individuals are getting involved in the lucrative trade that is earning the perpetrators huge sums of money. For ordinary Nigerians to pay ransom, some of them liquidate their businesses, sell homes, farmlands, vehicles and borrow huge amounts of money. This development has prompted communities to form vigilante groups to defend themselves while some State governments are posting security operatives to secure schools which so far has not yielded much result because of the numerical strength in some cases and superior fire power of the kidnapers. Today, some states, especially in the Northern part of the country have closed down some schools to prevent students and pupils from kidnapers and bandits. According to Amnesty International, more than 600 schools have closed since 2014 over safety concerns. According to report from the Federal Ministry of Education, the number of out – of – school children increased by over 3 million to more than 10 million in the first quarter of this year. In some of the schools that are still open in there flash points, there is always atmosphere of fear and apprehension which impact negativity on effective teaching and learning. Again kidnapping has ended the education dreams of some of the students who are victims, especially girls as their harrowing experiences in captivity kill whatever learning aspirations they had because of the trauma and psychological dislocation. Recently, the Federal government attempted to legislate a solution by criminalizing ransom payment. This proposal did not so well with many Nigerians as many questioned the government moral authority to enforce such law when it has allowed kidnapers and bandits to operate with impunity. Federal government in the past launched military operations involving the bombing of the suspected hideouts to tackle banditry and rescue victims of kidnapers, but since the drastic increase in kidnap cases from December 2020, there has been little or no arrest nor prosecution of perpetrators. This obvious lack of proactive measures and failure to step up security and intelligence operations have further compounded sense of mistrust of many citizens against the government.

Again, many Nigerians have equally criticized some State governments including Katsina and Zamfara for negotiating with bandits and introducing amnesty

schemes instead of concentrating on protecting the citizens, noting that negotiation and impunity encourage more gangs and individuals to join in the criminal act knowing that they will be able to attract negotiated conditions for safety or even receive huge ransoms. This is perhaps why many have continue to criticize the Federal government's efforts towards empowering and reintegrating those it described as "repentant terrorists and bandits". Similarly many Nigerians have continued to call for the arrest and prosecution of a Muslim cleric Shiekh Ahmed Gumi who has been acting as the spokesman of the bandits. According to security experts, criminality of any form must be eliminated not mitigated as bargaining with criminals is an obvious sign of weakness.

There is no doubt that ransom is the lifeblood of the kidnapping economy as it serves as rewards that reinforce criminal activity and help secure arms and logistics for future operations and the growing link between Boko Haram terrorists, bandits and kidnappers in the Northern part of Nigeria is a confirmation that ransoms directly and indirectly fund violent extremism as the economic incentive provides a point of mutual interest to increase collaboration and opportunity for expansion.

### **Boko Haram, Bandits, Kidnappers and Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory which was formulated by social psychologists Henri Tajtel and John Turner in the 1970s describes the conditions under which social identity becomes more important than one's identity as an individual. The theory also specifies the ways in which social identity can influence intergroup behaviour.

Ikelegbe (2005) describes identity as a subsisting sense of belonging and attachment to a group or institution or such other social, cultural and political entities while Agbibo and Okem (2011) see identity as platform for the articulation of common interests or the pursuits of shared beliefs and culture.

In a multi-ethno-religious country like Nigeria, Social Identity Theory provides insight into understanding the mind set of members of Boko Haram sect, bandits and kidnappers and their internally constructed social identity as well as the context in which their consciousness is inculcated in the minds and hearts of the members. From inception, Boko Haram members have continued to pursue collective professed objectives of entrench Islamist movement and rid Nigeria of corrupt and abusive government and institute what is described as religious purity.

They present themselves as Jihadists and employ the techniques of terrorism to champion their cause and win converts. This close connection with religious identity to some extent created dangerous alliance between the Muslim religions, terrorism and political violence in the Northern part of the country. This is often reflected in the activities of the sect when it targets mostly churches and areas occupied by non-Muslim in its suicide bombings and when they target non-Muslims in their kidnapping activities.

According to Arena and Arrigo (2006), appeal to religion and religious identity has repeatedly served as mobilizing factor for acts of terrorism and political violence.

Hottman (2006) argues that this new type of terrorism produces radically different value systems, mechanisms of legitimation and justification, concepts of morality and worldview as well as very different and possibly far more lethal threat than that posed by more familiar, traditional terrorist adversaries while Matthew Morgan (2004) notes that “today’s terrorists don’t want a seat at the table, they want to destroy the table and everyone sitting at it”.

So Boko Haram sect by wearing the toga of religion, terrorist has made itself enemy of the large society and maintained hostile social identity.

### **X-raying Root Causes of Insecurity in Nigeria**

Nigeria with a population of over 200 million and over 250 distinct ethnic groups as well as over 500 different languages is a very complex society. The country is equally endowed with rich natural and other resources and over the years, managing this fast growth population, unity in diversity and abundant human and material resources has created a lot of social-economic and political challenges including insecurity. Some recent studies have revealed that upsurge in terrorism, banditry and kidnapping are not unconnected with some inherent factors including:

#### **Religious Extremism**

According to recent studies, religious extremism account to reasonable extent the increase in violent crimes in Nigeria. Drake (1998) link religious motives in particular to more indiscriminate violence against civilians. Since the 1990s, numerous studies have found evidence linking Islamist terrorist groups in particular to violent attacks against civilians and security operatives. According to Benjamin and Simon (2002), “with religious motivated terrorism, killing becomes an end in itself”.

Boko Haram since 2009 has killed tens of thousands of civilians and security agents in the name of extremism.

#### **Poverty**

According to World Bank report, almost half of the Nigerian population is living below the international poverty line of two dollars per day. Similarly the global multidimensional poverty index produced by the United Nation Development Programme and the Oxford Bank Poverty and Human Development Initiative revealed that as many as 47.3 percent of Nigerians representing about 98 million people live in multidimensional poverty and Nigeria is the largest contributor to multidimensional poverty in Sub-Saharan African. Multidimensional poverty goes beyond monetary poverty to include lack of food, security, housing, health and education among others.

So with this staggering number of the populace struggling daily to survive, many of them are easily attracted to crime and criminality because they view it as a means

of exit from the track of poverty. Umez (2000) noted that when kidnappers secure a ransom the suddenly turn rich compared to their former miserable poverty State.

### **Unemployment**

Related to poverty is unemployment. A study published in March 2021 by a non-governmental organization estimated that Nigeria's unemployment rate at 35.5 percent and projected it to increase by 2022. Unfortunately the bulk of the unemployed Nigerians are the working population especially youths. With nothing to do with their youthful energy, then young Nigerians fall easy prey to criminal gangs, terrorists, bandits and kidnappers because most of them are poverty afflicted and usually find comfort in heinous crimes.

### **Emerging Value System of Get-Rich Quick Syndrome**

The growing norm and subculture of glorifying illegal and corrupt wealth is fast reshaping the moral tone of Nigerian society as many youth are imbibing this unbridled quest for wealth which is undermining hard work and integrity. Dodo (2010) confirms that "one of the causes of kidnapping in Nigeria is the rich-quick-syndrome," while Odey (2000) stated that "a society that is keen on condemning its youths for being dishonest and lazy, and for instituting a menace to the rest of the people such as kidnapping, armed robbery and materialism should equally be keen on providing better economic, social and moral alternative".

### **Proliferation of Small Arms and Illicit Weapons:**

Proliferation of arms and illicit weapons has over the years increased rate of violence in Nigeria and constitute serious threat to national security as criminal gangs and extremist groups Boko Haram, Bandits and Kidnappers alike continued to use these arms and weapons to destroy lives and impede the socio-economic development of the country.

### **Social Media and National Security**

The emergence of social media has revolutionized the system of communication in Nigeria and has become active technological tool in sharing information across the country. Social media is an offshoot of the internet which is the electronic network that links people and information through computers and other digital devices that allow person-to-person communication and information retrieval. Social media platforms are facilitating mass interaction, conversation and sharing among members of a network. Social media has no doubt widen the scope of communication and created new windows of opportunity in various sectors including the ever changing world of national and international security which has become a source of concern to many countries and global organizations.

National security includes all issues relating to protection of lives and property. According to Maier (1990), national security refers to the capacity of a nation to fully

control foreign and domestic situations that may compromise the security of lives and property. In many countries of the world, social media play critical role in promoting national security. However, negative use of the social media on the other hand will pose serious threat to lives and property and could compromise the entire security infrastructure of a country. Security agencies are using social media to prevent and fight crime and criminality as various platforms could be deployed to monitor security threats, create awareness on emerging security challenges, alert the public on security challenges within their areas and investigate crimes.

In Nigeria, social media platforms have remarkably contributed in the fight against Boko Haram terrorist, bandits and kidnapers as security agencies often use the social media platforms to track them from one part of the country to another. Again social media platforms provide security agents with the necessary data to study and analyze data in the course of investigating crimes, monitoring suspects or trying to establish link between a known criminal and other suspects. Supporting this view, Popoola (2015) demonstrated how facebook platform help in combating human trafficking. The study revealed that a content posted on the social media by users helped in tracking human traffickers in Nigeria.

Again social media platforms are used by security agencies to create disseminate all consume information on security issues. Which often include warning people of danger or giving signal to colleagues in another allocation of security breeches or fleeing criminals.

Inspite of all these commendable contributions to security of lives and property social media, the platforms have equally provided affordable all accessible channels for Boko—Haram terrorists, bandits and kidnapers to commit and advance the course of heinous crimes by expanding their online presence on Youtube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other social media outlets. They also use social media to spread fake news, misinformation and threats to instill fear and helplessness and sometimes use the platforms to disseminate gory and horrific killings, torture and brutal rape of victims.

Over the years, Boko-Haram terrorists, bandits and kidnapers have continued to use social media to claim responsibility of criminal activities, celebrate success and issue treat of further attacks. They also use the platforms to recruit and radicalize new members as well as interact with members in various locations and organize attacks. Social media have equally given the terrorists international exposure which enable them to continue to receive support from international terrorist groups.

### **Social Media and Imperative of Tackling Insecurity in Post COVID – 19 Nigeria**

This is no doubt that social media has contributed to escalating of insecurity in Nigeria. This is perhaps because social media is very difficult to control because of absence of strong legal framework to regulate the cyberspace. So there is need for security agencies to forge closer collaboration with telecommunication companies to enhance prompt and efficient monitoring and tracking the negative use of social

media for terrorism, banditry and kidnapping. Similarly the National Communication Commission – NCC should ensure strict enforcement of proper registration of Sim cards with complete bio-data that would facilitate easy tracking of owners when used for criminal activities.

Again, owners and managers of social media platforms should not hesitate to delete accounts of those who use the platforms to perpetrate or celebrate crime of any form.

### **Conclusion**

Social media platforms play very important role in tracking insecurity and promoting national security. To achieve this there should be sustained efforts in eliminating negative use of the platforms by criminal elements. There should be increased capacity programmes for security operatives on social media use to master the various platforms and equip them adequately with the right gadget and technology to tackle emergence security challenges.

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