



CORN Insights

No.02

Reconceptualising Conflict: The Case of Boko Haram and the Nigerian State

Odein Princewill
University of Leeds
od.princewill@gmail.com

Introduction

The conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian State has been characterised as a violent conflict fuelled by two main factors; religious fanaticism in the country's Northern region, and the entrenchment of wealth within the Niger-Delta region. The existing idea regarding the ongoing conflict is that it is a case of a terrorist insurgency. The conceptualisation of the conflict existing between Boko Haram and the Nigerian State as a one-dimensional conflict created the precedent for failed mediation processes. This discussion aims to reconceptualise the conflict existing between Boko Haram and the Nigerian State as one that is multidimensional with its roots in environmental catastrophes in conjunction with religious and wealth factors. Therefore, characterising failed mediation attempts to be centred around an incorrect conceptualisation of the conflict. By acknowledging the multidimensional aspects of the conflict, Boko Haram can be distinguished as being both a quasi-revolutionary group, with the aims to secure a socio-economic emancipation for those within its operating region, and its current portrayal as a rebel group that threatens state sovereignty. The aforementioned reconceptualisation also allows for a discussion surrounding the quasi-humanitarian plights of Boko Haram which is securing an Islamic Caliphate by means of challenging the entrenchment of wealth in the Niger-Delta, and formalising a Muslim-Christian divide of Nigerians. Essentially, this discussion highlights Boko Haram as a quasi-revolutionary group that draws attention to the humanitarian crisis caused by the drying up of the Lake Chad which has increased food insecurity and exacerbated poverty in the region.

Mediation: Soft Power or Hard Power

Peace-making efforts within international mediation often characterises the interventions of mediators within conflicts, to be parties that bring resources to conflict management, enabling the transformation of the conflict from a dyadic system to a triadic system. A further look at the taxonomy of interventions within international mediation shows that mediation can be characterised as pure mediation, the use of unbiased soft power in the mediation process or power mediation, the use of hard power to force conflicting parties into compliance with one another. The ICRC based on its unbiased approach to conflict management portrayed aspects of pure mediation in conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian state, thereby applying a strategy of soft power in ensuring that the stipulations of both parties were implemented. It was the ICRC's mediation efforts with regards to the release of the kidnapped schoolgirls that prompted the Nigerian state to take on an additional quasi-mediatory role within its own conflict. This is seen with the state trading the release of kidnapped schoolgirls for the release of captured Boko Haram soldiers. It was this continuous trade off that laid the grounds for the [rehabilitation](#) measures introduced by the Nigerian state as a form of conflict management. These measures aimed to place captured Boko Haram soldiers in rehabilitation camps as opposed to prisons, so that upon their release they could be more productive members of the Nigerian society. Such rehabilitation processes although largely criticised by the Nigerian public are still present within the ongoing conflict.

The USA through its military was biased towards the Nigerian state and portrayed aspects of power mediation in the conflict by applying a [strategy of hard power](#) to move Boko Haram into an agreement with the Nigerian state. The USA's use of coercive mediation in aims of achieving conflict management failed to contain the conflict, as the conflict spread upwards from Northern Nigeria to the regions surrounding the Lake Chad basin. The conflict management strategy of the USA was founded on the conceptualisation of the conflict as an intra-state conflict. However, the [environmental catastrophe](#) associated with the Northern region of Nigeria and the greater Lake Chad region shows that the conflict should have been conceptualised as an inter-state conflict. Conceptualising the conflict as an interstate issue would have changed the military tactic of the USA and prevented the spread of Boko Haram beyond Nigeria's borders. Failure of the USA to secure conflict management by means of its power mediation, allowed for the formation of the [Multinational Joint Task Force \(MNJTF\)](#) in 2015. This marked a turning point in the shift from international mediation efforts to regional mediation efforts of the conflict.

Shifting from International Mediation to Regional Mediation

The failure of mediation efforts by the ICRC and the USA lies in the incorrect conceptualisation of the conflict, which limited such mediation efforts. The conflict was conceptualised as an intra-state conflict as opposed to being an inter-state conflict, this then led to viewing Boko Haram as solely an insurgent group without recognising its revolutionary efforts substantiated by the drying up of

the Lake Chad region. Coupled with the aforementioned failed conceptualisation of the conflict was the feminisation of the conflict. This feminisation of the conflict by the international community further divided the conflict along gender lines; in conjunction with the conflict's existing religious and class divisions. The multi-divisions of the conflict further complicated mediation efforts, as mediators were pressured to deliver superficial outcomes associated with conflict management as opposed to solving the conflict. Further limitations of the actors were their lack of knowledge regarding the terrain of Northern Nigeria, however this allowed for links to be formed with other regional third parties.

The aforementioned limitations of international actors introduced the occurrence of collaborative regional intervention. Therefore, the inability of international mediators to secure their goals of conflict management gave way to regional intervention in the form of the MNJTF. Also, these regional actors did not view the conflict as a means to an end, in the way that the ICRC viewed the conflict as a means of satisfying the international community or the USA which saw the conflict as a means to secure economic interests. The MNJTF adopted the USA's use of power mediation, the task force as an unofficial third-party mediator acted as a force to counteract Boko Haram's tactics and to force the group into an agreement with the Nigerian state and neighbouring states. While the failed mediation efforts of the ICRC and USA allowed for a gap to be filled by regional forces, the involvement of both international actors in the conflict still had positive outcomes. Firstly, the ICRC's ability to provide security to released kidnapped girls ensured the girls got home safely which positively impacted the lives of the released girls and their families. Secondly, the USA's use of force through its military resources prevented Boko Haram from physically accessing the Niger Delta region in the form of suicide bombings, which already plagued Nigeria's Northern states and the Federal Capital Territory.

Moving Forward

Mediation efforts regarding the conflict of Boko Haram and the Nigerian state, which affects neighbouring states ought to be undertaken by regional actors. The MNJTF operates as an armed actor and best encapsulates the aims of conflict management aims as such the organisation is not suitable for the goal of conflict resolution. A regional body that makes use of pure mediation efforts should carry out mediation efforts within this conflict, given the impact of the conflict on inhabitants surrounding the Lake Chad region. As such this type of mediation should include the introduction of climate policy to revitalise the Lake Chad Basin and introduce development strides to reduce the impact of the conflict and provide the needed stability for the region.

Essentially failed mediations within the conflict of Boko Haram and the Nigerian state were brought about by conceptualisation ambiguities. The conflict needs to be reconceptualised as multidimensional with its roots in environmental catastrophes in conjunction with religious and

wealth factors. Boko Haram also ought to be recognised as both a quasi-revolutionary group drawing attention to the humanitarian crisis occurring in the Lake Chad region, and an insurgency group threatening state sovereignty. Boko Haram exists, thrives and survives within a violent climate, therefore a further plight for future mediation efforts should be dampening the climate of the group's existence while achieving conflict resolution.