



# Policy Brief

Violent radicalisation in northern Nigeria:  
Economy & Society





## BACKGROUND

### Sites of pronounced levels of poverty and social marginalization such as Borno State and the northern Nigerian informal economy constitute potential flashpoints for Islamic radicalisation.

Since poverty does not automatically translate into religious extremism, understanding the dynamics of social exclusion and economic pressures on the one hand and religiosity on the other has the capacity of highlighting potential pathways of radicalisation.<sup>1</sup> What is going on within the society in general and the economy in particular can influence processes of radicalisation and counter-radicalisation. In both Borno State and the northern Nigerian informal economy, a crisis of livelihoods, poor governance, and heavy-handed security operations have been key drivers of the rise of the *Jama'atu Ahlus Sunna Lidaawati wal Jihad* (JAS). The insurgency by JAS has affected Borno State much more than other parts of Nigeria leading to the killing of thousands of people and the displacement of over 1.3 million people in the state. Why Borno? This investigation highlights the convergence of livelihood pressures, ecological degradation, poor governance, changes in family structure and demographic pressures, the rejection of western education, and the increasing marginalization of greater sections of the society as important factors in Borno. Similarly, a decade of economic resurgence in Nigeria averaging 7% annual growth rates has been accompanied by rising poverty and unemployment. Poverty, illiteracy and unemployment are markedly higher in the north than in the southern zones of the country. The informal economy, which accounts for well over half of the Nigerian non-agricultural labour force, is a key locus of northern Nigeria's unemployed and disaffected workers. Understanding social and economic dynamics in Borno on the one hand, and within the wider northern informal economy, on the other, can

highlight some of the drivers of radicalisation because the situation in Borno and the northern Nigerian informal economy are contexts of deprivation, social stress and disaffection.

The Nigerian informal economy accounts for as much as 83% of the non-agricultural labour force. It is a vital locus for a sound understanding of popular responses to economic exclusion and changing opportunities. The heart of the matter lies in the dynamics of poverty and inequality, especially in the way these have been mediated through religious and political processes. In Nigeria's large informal economy, poverty and disaffection interact with religiously-based forms of economic organization, creating tensions and opportunities that cast important light on trajectories of Islamic radicalisation. The values of piety, frugality and individualism promoted by reformist Muslim groups like *Izala* resemble a Muslim version of the Protestant Ethic. *Izala* had a strong appeal among many groups of northern Nigerian artisans, small traders and aspiring middle classes hard hit by the depredations of economic liberalization under structural adjustment. While the rationalistic ethos of groups like *Izala* has supported processes of accumulation within the informal economy, it has also weakened redistributive relations between more successful informal actors and their wider communities. This dynamic contributed to the weakening of the pre-existing systems of social cohesion and its partial replacement by more religious forms of belonging.

In summary, despite the growth of the Nigerian economy since 1999, important sections of the country such as Borno State and northern

<sup>1</sup> See Monguno, Abubakar K. & Umara, Ibrahim, 2014, 'Why Borno?: History, Geography and Society in Islamic Radicalisation', NSRP Project on Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization, & De-radicalization in northern Nigeria, NSRP, Abuja, and Meagher, Kate, 2014, 'The Informal Economy and Islamic Radicalization in Northern Nigeria', NSRP Project on Radicalization, Counter-Radicalization, & De-radicalization in northern Nigeria, NSRP, Abuja.

Nigeria face a combination of pressures which are intensifying poverty, inequality, and marginalization. Historically, the informal sector has been a refuge for those squeezed by this combined process of growth and marginalization. However, religious processes in the northern Nigerian informal economy have produced countervailing tendencies of modernist values and religious intolerance, new avenues of accumulation and declining mechanisms of redistribution, reformist engagement with the state and intensifying state pressure against poor Muslims in certain informal occupations deemed as potential repositories of the radicalized. This convergence of societal, economic and religious factors has important implications for the processes of radicalisation.

## ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PRESSURES

### 1. The Ethnic factor, desertification, Poverty & Livelihoods:

It is generally agreed that a high percentage of the members of JAS are Kanuri. This preponderance of the Kanuri, previously known to be a peace loving and proud people, in the insurgency needs to be explained. On the average, members of JAS are young (20 – 30 years), generally though not exclusively Kanuri (about 7 out of 10), and from poor economic backgrounds. A good number of them have low level of educational attainment (including Islamic education), have lived in the inner city area of Maiduguri, and were born to large sized families, mostly of a polygamous nature. Nearly half (4 out of 10) insurgents have lost their fathers during childhood, and were brought up by their mothers or subsequently by relatives. Economic deprivation and social marginalization of inner city youths in the Kanuri city of Maiduguri is therefore an important context for the initial mobilization into JAS.

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Other ethnic groups within the urban milieu also played important parts within JAS. Especially, many members of the minority ethnic groups from the Gwoza hills of the southern part of Borno State were important accomplices in the insurgency.

Outside of the urban context, desertification and the desiccation of Lake Chad was also an important economic stress factor. The phenomenon of 'cyclical and recurring' droughts has been documented in the northern and central parts of Borno state. The resulting harsh environmental conditions set in motion a southward migration of people from as far as southern Niger Republic into northern Nigeria including Maiduguri. It has been estimated that the total population of the entire Lake Chad basin area is 37 million, two-thirds of whom live in the Nigerian portion of the lake. In the 1970s the annual production of the lake ranged from 130,000 – 140,000 tonnes of fish, but this has dropped to an average of 84,030 tonnes between 1986 and 2013. The initial insurrection in Maiduguri may have been aided by poor environmental conditions and associated livelihood losses arising from the desiccation of Lake Chad. The local population engaged in fishing on the lake is the Buduma, the majority of who live in the Chadian portion of the lake, but with extensive links with their kin on the Nigerian side. Over the years, better connected and financed Hausa fishers, mostly migrants from Zamfara State, have tended to overwhelm and displace the Buduma from the fishing enterprise on Lake Chad. With the

drying up of the lake, the competition between the two groups has worsened with the Buduma becoming more economically disadvantaged. The coming of JAS to the lake settlements in pursuit of 'God's work' saw the massive enlistment of Buduma youths into its fold. Enlisted Buduma youths thereafter terrorized all other groups around them to the extent that only the Buduma have access to fishing grounds in over 20 fishing islands. 'There is money in God's work', they say. It became fairly easy to tell within each fishing island or community where JAS members could be found.

In Borno State, as elsewhere in northern Nigeria, high and persistent unemployment and poverty have put the absorptive capacity of the saturated informal economy under stress. There is the competing down of incomes, the lack of capital, and increasing employment as workers rather than entrepreneurs within the informal economy. In many instances, traditional artisanal occupants of different sectors of the informal economy are being crowded out by better educated and connected actors. Narrowing livelihood opportunities in the informal as well as the formal sector have triggered rising contestation by indigenes over access to informal activities, which have historically been the preserve of migrants. Competition for scarce livelihood in the informal economy is therefore exacerbating the social cleavage between indigenes and settlers, one major source of violent conflict across Nigeria. In general, there is a growing sense of economic desperation, disaffection, and disappointed entitlement which is feeding into the climate of radicalisation.

## 2. Resentment of Western Education:

Resentment against western education, a pronounced aspect of JAS ideology, has a complicated effect on the process of

radicalisation. Firstly, in many parts of Islamic northern Nigeria, during the colonial period, there was a profound fear of western education as a precursor for Christianization. Even though schools were opened in Maiduguri as early as 1917, attendance was very minimal due to stiff opposition by the *ulama* and the populace. An alarming 64% of the population in the core north has no Western education, while this is true of only 17% of people in the South West. The Kanuri disdain for secular education was most pronounced in northern Borno State, making the region educationally the most backward in the state. Hostility to western education persisted even into the recent times; in the 1990s some politicians openly canvassed for votes by promising not to pressurize parents to send their children to school! The combination of poor education, environmental degradation, rising poverty, and government neglect in terms of services combined to produce inequality between these individuals/communities and their relatively 'better off' peers in other parts of Maiduguri and Borno State. The message that egalitarian Sharia law will replace state injustice of neglect meted out against them at the hands of western educated elite (*yan boko*) was an intoxicating proposition for many.

Apart from the consequence of the historical rejection of western education, a second pathway through which western education affected the process of radicalisation was through the disappointed expectations of those northerners who managed to get western education. The collapse of job opportunities in the formal sector has led to incursion of increasingly educated people into the informal economy, in both lucrative and lowly survival activities. An important feature of the contemporary northern informal economy, not immediately noticeable, is the rising level of Western education across all levels of activities. This creates a serious risk of disaffection in lowly survival activities, where over 40% had



secondary education or higher. Conversely, in lucrative informal activities, artisanally-trained informal actors are feeling crowded out by the entry of unemployed graduates who increasingly monopolize limited opportunities. In the context of diminishing opportunities in the informal economy, western education has a double effect on radicalisation: the jobless western educated youth pushed into the informal activities resent their enforced status; while the artisanally-trained operators in the informal economy who are being pushed out by the western educated new entrants also resent the *'yan boko's* incursion into their turf. In both cases, there is a strong sense of grievance against Western education. The tendency to associate Islamic radicalism in northern Nigeria with a backward Muslim dislike of Western education therefore ignores more complex social realities. Alternative paths to radicalisation may also emerge from rising education and a lack of economic opportunity. Rising, though often poor quality education, disappointed entitlement and the incursion of graduates into the livelihood spheres of those with even fewer social and economic advantages are creating mounting economic tensions in northern Nigerian society.

### 3. New Religious Movements:

Since the late 1970s, there has been the rise of Salafist movements across northern Nigeria, intent on monopolizing the religious and political spaces. The expansion of these movements and their increasing politicization within northern states has precipitated a convergence of tensions around narrowing livelihood opportunities, competition from more educated entrants, and the increasing salience of exclusionary indigeneity claims. Political

and class connections from above, combined with the more individualistic values of the Salafist ethic, are disrupting solidaristic forms of organization within the informal economy as well as narrowing opportunities for redistribution through religious and communal networks.

This is contributing to an atmosphere of resentment, economic threat and desperation among losers in this process. The losers are often poorly educated and without connections, and avenues for representing their concerns are closing down, thereby creating a potential flashpoint for radicalisation. The early history of Borno supports this importance given to the rise of new religious movements. Borno history suggests that protest against bad governance took expression in the quest for Sharia law as in the incursion of Rabeh into Borno in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

### 4. Extremist Spaces:

Radicalisation in Maiduguri is most acute in run-down and economically deprived neighbourhoods like Bulabulin Ngarannam and Bulunkutu. The latter was also the base of the *Maitatsine* religious uprising in the 1980s. JAS insurgency within Maiduguri decreased with distance away from Bulabulin Ngarannam ward. After 2013 when JAS members were forced out of Maiduguri with the help of the Civilian JTF, the insurgency became pronounced in the LGAs bordering the Lake Chad especially, Kukawa, Marte and Ngala. The twin economic pressures of urban deprivation and Lake Chad desiccation converge on the Maiduguri suburbs of Zajiri and Bulabulin Ngarannam. It was to these villages on the outskirts of Maiduguri, subsequently turned into impoverished suburbs, that the droughts of the early 1960s and 1970s pushed many people from the northern part of Borno.

## Respondents' Ranking of High Risk Residential Areas in Maiduguri

Name of Ward	Rank
Bulabulin Ngarannam	1
Kawar Maila	2
Bayan Quarters	3
Zajiri	4
Abbaganaram	5
Galadima	6
Old Maiduguri	7
Gwange	8
Kumshe	9
Lamisula	10
Custom	11
Goni Kachallari	12
Ruwan Zafi	13

Source: Field data, 2014

Since 2014, JAS insurgency has also been strong in Borno central and the northern parts of Borno south which happen to be the LGAs around Sambisa forest and the Mandara Mountains i.e. Konduga, Bama and Gwoza. The difficult terrain in these parts is a factor working in favour of the insurgents. Porous borders with Niger Republic, Cameroon, but especially Chad, is also a factor in the geographical distribution of the insurgency. The spread of JAS to Borno south has introduced a Muslim-Christian dimension to what was hitherto mostly a Muslim-Muslim conflict. Christianity is numerically significant in southern Borno especially on the Biu Plateau among the Bura and its foothills among the Kibaku in Chibok. There are also pockets of Christians on the Gwoza hills around Ngoshe, Ashigashiya, and Attagara near the border with Cameroun. Small numbers of followers of African religions are still found on the Gwoza hills. JAS insurgency is overlapping with intense competitive proselytization by both Islam and Christianity. In

these areas, there have been frequent attacks on churches.

## 5. Informal Economy.

The informal economy of northern Nigeria has a large section of survivalist activities where people just eke out the barest of existence. This is the zone of greatest vulnerability to radicalisation. Here, economic stress combines with resentment of competition from non-indigenes, poor returns on being educated, social proximity to rough and criminal elements, and a high preponderance of youths to generate a volatile environment conducive to radicalisation.

## PATHWAYS TO RADICALISATION:

### 1. Religious Factors:

Initially (possibly beginning from 2002) Muhammad Yusuf, the charismatic spiritual head of JAS, started by preaching a radical form of Salafi Islam, distinguishing his creed from those of other Salafis and the Sufis. He tended to identify young students who mastered the Quran from the traditional *tsangaya* schools and organized recitation competitions for them with fantastic prizes for winners, after which his radical messages against the socio-religious status quo were handed down. The religious charisma of Muhammed Yusuf was an initial factor in the process of radicalisation. Indeed Yusuf was described as a 'gifted demagogue and persuasive debater'. Many people, who knew him well, including Christians, often make reference to his charismatic style of preaching with which he attracted followers.

After 2009, the religious ideology of radicalisation changed to the preaching of hate, vengeance, and the justification for martyrdom.

## 2. Economic Pressure:

Collapsing livelihoods, desperation, and the crowding out of some people from some sectors of the informal economy are combining to push people in the direction of radicalisation. The 2009 insurgency represented a protest against the poor governance and failure to address the needs of the majority of Nigerians living in want. In the *intra*-Muslim debates that preceded JAS insurrection, even though the rival Salafist sect *Izala* had superior arguments in the debates with JAS leader Mohammed Yusuf on the justification for Muslims to participate in Nigerian governments and western education, the superior argument failed to convince many primarily due to widespread disenchantment with a government that people considered to be corrupt and insensitive.

It is noteworthy the JAS helped its members in securing meals and livelihoods – those very things neglected by many Nigerian governments. The strategy concentrated on economic benefits to JAS members in the form of start-up capital to establish petty businesses. Three main sectors were – transportation, retailing and agriculture.

Motorcycles and cabs were given to youths on hire purchase that attracted very small daily re-payments. Petty retail businesses in hawking perfumes, sale of dates and Islamic based materials including medicine were also encouraged and supported. Hundreds of JAS members also worked on the large parcels of land belonging to Mohammed Yusuf during the rainy season. The produce was used to feed indigent members that included men, women and children.

Youths numbering 300 – 500 worked voluntarily on the many parcels of land that belonged to the Brotherhood. This pathway was pronounced in the period to 2009.

## Indicators of Socio-Economic Deprivation in Nigeria by Zone

Zone	Absolute Poverty	No Schooling	Adult Literacy	Unemployment
North-East	69.0	63.7	23.0	31.9
North-West	70.0	63.8	21.6	28.8
North-Central	59.5	36.8	47.0	28.8
South-East	58.7	14.4	81.8	19.6
South-West	49.8	17.2	79.8	11.4
South-South	55.9	10.7	77.1	24.6

Source: NPC DHS Education Data Survey 2010; NBS Poverty Profile 2010; NBS Annual Socio-Economic Report 2011.

## 3. Social Pressure:

Social pressures as pathways to radicalisation can be divided into 'push' and 'pull' factors. Push factors include disaffection and humiliation felt because of the inability to meet social obligations such as getting married and setting up a home. This also included the sense of disappointed entitlement felt by many who failed to secure a 'respectable' social standing despite their educational or other endeavours. Their social lack of respectability was made more glaring by the conspicuous consumption of narrow political elite that has characterized Nigerian society since the return to democratic rule in 1999. Pull factors include the provision of alternative sources of respectability for members within JAS. Not only did JAS provide members with a viable economic welfare net, it also promoted their dignity through the arrangement of marriages and the provision of dwellings, Islamic education, and a general sense of 'well-being'. Friends, relations, spouses, and parents, once enlisted within JAS, played instrumental roles in the radicalisation



process by propagating the ‘virtues’ of the group and normalizing membership within it. This pathway was used by JAS particularly in the period between 2011 and 2013.

#### 4. Conscription:

The relocation of JAS to the rural areas since June 2013 saw the increased use of conscription as a strategy for enlistment of members. In addition, there is the use of money to attract poor youths from the villages across the state. In both cases, radicalisation is consequent on conscription or inducement, rather than preceding it. Conscription and inducements, both primarily non-ideological in nature at the beginning, have become important means for maintaining a reasonable number of followers to carry on ‘God’s work’.

#### 5. Security Services Excesses

Security forces’ heavy-handed and indiscriminate responses to JAS atrocities have alienated many members of the public and radicalized some. The military sometimes misread the lack of open support from the

civilian population as support for JAS. In some cases, poorly provisioned troops have to rely on extractions from the civilian population for their upkeep. The climate of disquiet within the civil population caused by corrupt exactions, disruption of the livelihood of informal sector operators, excessive violence, and unjust arrests, has become part of the problem, instead of being part of the solution. JAS members in Maiduguri tended to stoke this disquiet by provocative attacks on the military in heavily populated places, leading to the excessive use of retaliatory force by the military. The resulting poor civil/military relation tends to alienate the military from the civil population and creates a fertile ground for JAS propaganda. Heavy-handedness and indiscipline have made security interventions part of the problem, owing to the predatory behaviour, and humiliating and often violent tactics against people struggling to earn basic livelihoods. Significantly, in the informal economy, levels of personal harm suffered at the hands of the security forces were found to be similar to levels suffered as a result of extremist violence, breeding desperation and resentment that feed into processes of radicalisation.

### Losses Resulting from Extremism and Security Forces by Activity Type (% of Firm Heads)

Activity Type	No Personal Harm from Extremist Attacks	No Personal Harm from Security Forces	Property Loss from Extremist Attacks	Property Loss from Security Forces	Physical Harm from Extremist Attacks	Physical Harm from Security Forces	Unjust Arrest by Security Forces
<b>Modern</b>	65.2	59.1	6.1	3.0	13.6	12.1	25.8
<b>Traditional</b>	70.0	88.3	15.0	0.0	8.3	0.0	11.7
<b>Survival</b>	68.3	54.1	8.3	4.9	11.7	6.6	31.1
<b>Average</b>	67.7	66.8	9.7	2.7	11.3	6.4	23.0

Source: Fieldwork in Kano & Kaduna, 2014.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Greater support for rural as well as urban informal livelihoods where many Nigerians earn their livelihoods and where economic stress is most felt;
- Greater access to education and other forms of skills formation for informal sector operatives to upgrade the existing informal sector and improve quality and productivity;
- A shift of focus away from policies targeting unemployment and the provision of micro-credits which funnels unemployed graduates into the informal sector, towards the upgrading of promising sectors within the existing informal economy;
- More restrained and collaborative forms of civil-military engagements in the counter-insurgency, with increased emphasis on adequate provisioning of frontline troops, proper human rights training, and clamping down on abuses and impunity;
- Greater federal and international support for re-building the deprived and conflict-ravaged areas of states and cities;
- Concerted effort to alleviate the hardships of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs);
- In the hope of promoting some healing and reconciliation, there should be the payment of some nominal compensation to victims of the insurgency as a mark of social recognition of their travails;
- Increased social provisioning through public works programmes, targeted cash transfers, and free social services for the poor;
- There is a need for a regional 'developmental track' to address the long-term structural and environmental problems in the north-east;
- Active state engagement in creating and supporting platforms for moderate religious engagement and religious debate;
- Active state monitoring of religious preachers and the enactment of laws against hate speech in the wider context of freedom of religious worship and freedom of speech.



## FIND OUT MORE

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