

TERRORISM AND NEGOTIATION: IS BOKO-HARAM KEY TO NIGERIA POLITICAL FUTURE?

BY GODSON AZU

The best indication the world has had that the 157 girls abducted over several months ago are still alive, though with resent intelligence reports both from within the military and the international community, there is no true or legitimate evidence to prove other-wise if actually the kidnapped girls are still alive within the conferred location or sold into child slavery far beyond the Nigerian borders. — This whole complicated and diffusing information on the subject matter is becoming a challenging cue of which the President Goodluck Jonathan's government is faced with the thorny dilemma of whether to continue with the open and close negotiation with the group which has not yielded any positive results.

The best outcome would be for government forces — now working with external intelligence assistance from the various countries — helping to find and rescue the girls. But these operations don't have a great track record of getting the prisoners back alive. In 2012, for instance, when the Nigerian military, aided by British special operations forces, attempted to rescue a Briton and Italian being held hostage by Boko Haram, both were killed by their captors before they could be rescued.

A rescue operation in this case carries the very real risk that not all of the girls will survive, in my view if any we are yet to see real attempt to clear the air about the conspiracy behind the kidnapping story. On the other hand, a French family of seven kidnapped by the group in Cameroon in 2013 was released unharmed after a \$3 million ransom was paid by unknown parties.

But negotiating with the group after a crime this dramatic sets a bad precedent and could encourage more acts like this in the future, but rather unfortunate people tend to forget historical trends, considering the case of the Niger-Delta militant group MEND, and the negotiated amnesty concession for peace in the region during president Musa Yar'dua half-term administration, though these was marginally successful, but on the other hand it has invariably empowered the silent and vocal militant leaders and their reformed followers whom through various amnesty training opportunities abroad are in all indications equipped

with various skills acquisition, that has only improved their human capacity development but not their mind-set of national orientation.

With the same scenario unfolding at the moment in view of the Boko-Haram peace resolution negotiation, of which more and more extremist recruits are being sent to places like Libya , Yemen and Saudi-Arabia for various training programs that are reforming and informing with a failed mind-set orientation, the negotiation processes taking a cynical political view, has invariably make president Jonathan's government look extremely weak at a time when it's already under intense domestic and international scrutiny for having failed to prevent the kidnapping and further escalation of so many terrorist acts by the so-called hoodlums and trans-Sahara criminals, (Wolfs in Sheep clothing's) using Islamic fundamentalist agenda to commit crimes against humanity.

Though it is still a difficult issue to agree with on whether the government in one form or the other given in to a back door negotiation processes in view of the hinging revelations made by one Australian negotiator purported to have been hired by the federal government to negotiate with the terrorist group, his confessions contradicts the official statements made public by the presidential spokesman Dr Reuben Abati at the height of the flying rumour, that negotiations are off the table. "The Federal Government would not under any circumstance negotiate with a terrorist group. "The federal government would never negotiate with a terrorist of which of Mallam Shekau is one, under whatever circumstance," says Nigerian Senate President David Mark.

"We don't negotiate with terrorists" is a line that governments constantly trot out, often when they're engaged in doing just that.

This topic has recently been in the news in Israel as well, with lawmakers advancing a bill to prevent the release of convicted murderers — a measure that could make it harder to reach future deals with the Palestinians involving prisoner swaps.

As is being noted, some experts have argued that the decision to negotiate with terrorists should be made on the basis of whether the group has rational political aims. But this is a tricky distinction to make, particularly in the case of a group like Boko Haram.

On the one hand, the group has some characteristics of a millenarian cult — its leaders want to impose Sharia law over the entire country and reject "Western" notions such as the Earth being round or rain being linked to evaporation. But while the group may not be "rational" in its aims, it has also drawn strength and membership from some very real grievances among people in the areas where it operates.

In reality, negotiations by governments with al-Qaida-linked terrorist groups likely happen far more than those governments discuss publicly. Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, the North African affiliate of the global terror network, has earned millions of dollars by kidnapping foreigners in recent years. African and Arab governments have pushed for an international ransom ban to prevent these payments, but in the short term, many governments — particularly those in Europe — have considered ransoms a price worth paying for the return of their citizens.

At this point, Jonathan is likely searching for the least considerable alternatives among some pretty terrible options, which in my critical mind would include an assertive action of total war on Terrorism with its collateral damages.

There have been going debates on the issue even here in the UK with series of meetings and deliberation both at the House of Commons, the MetP-Office, and key developmental agencies on how the Nigerian government is combating the manic of Boko-Haram, and what are the necessary support needed from external actors in helping to find a resolution to the crisis in Nigeria

The Cons and Pros of Negotiating with Terrorist.

Negotiating with terrorists may save a few lives here and there, but it encourages the terrorists to carry on with their violent behaviour, which affects everyone. Looking at it in this way shows that the cons of negotiating with terrorists far outweigh the pros.

1. Negotiation Reinforces and Legitimizes the Activities of Terrorist Groups

I feel this is the main point against negotiating with terrorists. Regardless of where you stand on this issue, I'm reasonably sure most people can agree that violent acts of terrorism

are not a desirable means of obtaining what one wants, my opponents included. However, in view of the on-going debate they seem to be suggesting that, although undesirable, once terrorists have gone ahead with malicious attempts of coercion, then one should respond by sitting down with the terrorist to discuss and negotiate their demands. In as much as I do agree that this would likely save immediate lives, but it rewards terrorists for resorting to more advanced levels of sophisticated violent acts. It then opens the window of opportunities and a clear broadcast message to others that a well-organized act or threat of destruction will get you what you want. So, while immediate lives may well be saved, such negotiations will undoubtedly lead to more terrorist acts in the future as terrorism will become a recognized method of obtaining what you want.

Which in my same critical view is going to be the resultant reaction of events if and when the presidential elections in 2015 is decided both ways, for example; if president Goodluck Jonathan wins his second term, any monetary exchange with Boko-Haram would be used to reinforce and rearm its formation for a full blown crisis, and on the other hand if and when Gen Muhammed Buhari wins the presidency the ever waiting and prepared MEND would rise again in a full blown war of inconsequential damage. There is a growing need to watch-out for this slowly but gradually building-up momentum that is most likely going to reshape the political landscape of Nigeria in 2015 onward.

2. Agreements with Terrorists are Unenforceable

Suppose we do decide to negotiate; Suppose the negotiations seem to go well and an arrangement is achieved to the satisfaction of both parties; Suppose also that the terrorist faction then fails to meet their end of the bargain. What could then be the next line of action? It may be a little too hopeful and unrealistic to expect Osama Bin Laden to respond to a request to appear in a court of law while he was still alive and at large, on many occasions he has failed to meet-up with his side of cease fire agreements. The mere fact that they are willing to use acts of terror in the first place as a means of negotiation shows that they're not concerned about anyone's well-being or security, so what incentive do they have to honour their end of the bargain once they get what they want? As well as that, a large and highly dispersed terrorist cell such as Al-Qaeda, or and Boko-Haram most likely

wouldn't even be able to guarantee the conformity of all their adherents. With most recent indications of the Factions of Boko-Haram which are not directly associated with Mallam Abubakar Shekau , may in fact be unhappy with the terms of the cease fire and deliberately refuse to honour it. Alternatively, they may not even receive the news that a negotiation has been reached, which has always been the case from many reports on the rumoured expectations of either the back-door or front-door engagements with the group, at a point couple of weeks ago there were public statements from certain government quarters that the kidnapped girls have been rescued or even released, but this ended up to be hoax either within or without the system.

3. Negotiation with Terrorists Destabilizes Honest Political Systems

As well as reinforcing and encouraging further terrorist activity, negotiating with terrorists also discourages honest political activity. Such negotiations undermine individuals and groups who seek political change via peaceful means. Peaceful protests and petitions, pressure groups lobbying will, in some cases, take a back seat to acts and threats of destruction as a result of the fundamentalist approach to change reactions in a world that has fully become globalised and socially informed. And why shouldn't they? The precedent that terror, if organized well enough, WILL get you what you want would've already been set. From the perspective of a person or party without strong moral conviction, honest political means would simply become inefficient compared with acts of terror.

Considering the trends of activities unfolding in Nigeria presently, every good critics observing things from outside the box and through a double sided mirror would be seeing two sides of a socially and politically discontent Nigeria seeking for a realistic answer.

Democracies must never give in to violence, including Nigeria and terrorists must never be rewarded for using it. In other words, negotiations give legitimacy to terrorists and their methods and undermine actors who have pursued political change through peaceful means.

Discussion can destabilize the negotiating governments' political systems legitimacy, undercut the international community efforts to outlaw terrorism anywhere globally, and

set a dangerous precedent, in which money continue to exchange hands at greater expense of citizens lives.

Few key pros and cons of negotiating with terrorists.

- a. Negotiation is the simplest form of keeping an open dialogue with terrorist groups, understanding them and encouraging them to take part in the political process without arms. The opposite side to that, however, is that by opening the dialogue gives them the political legitimacy which they do not deserve; hence it is better to have no relationship whatsoever until they renounce violence. This shows they voluntarily opted out the democratic process.
- b. Historical accounts show that negotiations have led ceasefires (i.e. Bill Clinton's negotiation with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, PLO and John Major's secret talks with the Irish Republican Army, IRA) both of which aimed at advancing peace in respective regions. The counterargument would be that terrorists want all or nothing (only with few exceptions, of course) and fragile peace in the Northern Ireland took time whereas the Middle East has never seen meaningful peace.

Going back to the question as to whether 'democracies' do dirty deals with terrorists; well it is obvious that in practice they do often negotiate with terrorists. It is public knowledge for instance; that the British government maintained a secret back channel to the IRA even after it had launched a mortar attack on 10 Downing Street that nearly eliminated the entire British cabinet in 1991. Other countries such as Spain (i.e. sat down with the separatist group Basque known by its acronym ETA in 1988) only six months after the group had killed 21 shoppers in a supermarket bombing, and Israel that is known for being tough on terrorism (i.e. secretly negotiated the Oslo accords in 1993) even though the PLO continued its terrorist activities and refused to recognize the state of Israel. What is clear here is the disconnect between what governments publicly say and

what they actually do, and the problem with the 'no negotiations' rigid stance has consequently prevented any systematic and meaningful research on how best to conduct such negotiations.

Is it politics, or religious criminality these may sound stupid to many people, but I guess sometimes, the answer is simply yes! Some would argue that the region is suffering from an underdevelopment crisis, but others would rather say, it is a political one. Simple arithmetic would have made us believe that leaders in the region share views on how to combat various religious up-rising both unarmed and armed groups in the region, but some of us are probably naive and should stick with the idea that truth only belongs to God. Which is why most realist view the world from a different angle, and in their thinking have an optimistic believe that one cannot change the world or its varying actors; but can only make the world a better place at every particular time in history.

With the case of Nigerian regional insecurity and the raging political structural challenges, the main concern for all Nigerians would be how to unite together without any religious or political sentiments and aliment in the face of adversity confront the evil hand plotting the fulfilment of the predicted disintegration of the country come 2015, though I see these as a fallacy, but if not well managed would likely come to fruition.

It leaves the following questions open: How can a 'democratic' country talk to terrorists without jeopardizing the integrity of its political system? What kind of terrorists is susceptible to negotiations? When should negotiations be opened?

In my brief conclusion I would want to make it clear here that the military has not been very helpful in its role as the social guiding of the common-man, likewise Mr president has not being firm enough in using his Red-Butting power to order a total war of stamp-out Boko-Haram terrorist, as was done by the Algerian and the Mailian government on the war against the Islamic Mghreb, couple of years ago. The president and the opposition needed to do more in the face emerging reality as the political tension remains unpredictable, the truth is that there plans for an absolute disorder from both sides of the divide and we know them all, but the act of self-denial is an act for self-destruction.