

# The Psychological Make-up of Mohammed Yusuf

Written by Abeebe Olufemi Salaam

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ABEEBE OLUFEMI SALAAM, NOV 4 2013

Although much has been written about the Boko Haram movement and its insurgent activities, there has been little comprehensive reporting on Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf, the founder and former leader of the group. Yusuf, an indigene of Girgir village, Jalasko, Yobe State, Nigeria, was born on 29 January 1970. He had four wives in total and twelve children. Despite his oratorical skills and charisma, the young Yusuf was reported to have dropped out of secondary school. To compensate for this, coupled with a zeal for religious education that appears common among Northern Nigerian Muslims, Yusuf enrolled for and received a Quranic education in the Chad and Niger Republic. Analysts however suggest that he imbibed radical ideology during his Quranic education in those neighbouring countries.<sup>1</sup> While this assertion cannot be scientifically verified, the exegesis of Yusuf's involvement in religious activities can be traced back to the early 1990s, when he joined the Islamic Movement of Nigeria headed by the Late Ibrahim el-Zakzakky (a Shi'ite). Perceiving the movement to be led by Shi'ite Muslims, Yusuf broke away and joined the Jamaatul Tajdid Islam (JTI) in Borno state. Still dissatisfied with the doctrines/ etiquette of this group, Yusuf crossed over to another organisation called Ahlulsunna wal'jama'ah hijra or Shabaab.

Given his growing clout and reputation within this new organisation, Yusuf emerged as the leader of the Ahlulsunna wal'jama'ah hijra, displacing elderly sect members. This occurred when the Amir (President) of the group, Mallam Abubakar Lawan, went to the University of Medina in 2002 to undertake further studies. No sooner had Yusuf taken on the mantle of leadership than the doctrine of the sect changed and he devised tenets strongly condemning Western education and civilization as taqut (evil) that should be forbidden by every Muslim. With this perspective, the group became popular under the name 'Boko Haram', and its original names (Ahlulsunna wal'jama'ah hijra had already been changed to Jama'atu Ahlus- Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad -'People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad') were hardly known among the general public.

The name 'Boko Haram' is derived from a combination of the Hausa word boko meaning 'book' and the Arabic word haram, which means something sacrilegious or sinful. Literally, it means 'the sacrilegious book', but its contextual meaning is that Western education and civilization are sinful, ungodly, and should therefore be forbidden. Yusuf benefitted immensely from the timing of this message, that coincided with the public resentment precipitated by the social uncertainty arising from excruciating poverty, and so was able to lure many vulnerable, religiously-inclined youths to embrace his new, emerging 'utopia', that promised better alternatives to their misery. Until his alleged extra-judicial murder by the Nigerian police following the riots of July 2009, Yusuf commanded a large following, with new members emerging from neighbouring states such as Yobe, Katsina, Kaduna, Bauchi, Adamawa, Gombe and Kano.

Within the context of this brief background, a psychological profile of Muhammad Yusuf, the founder and former leader of the Nigerian Boko Haram insurgent group is presented to provide a more comprehensive overview of his antecedents and the ideological and psychological characteristics that may have influenced his radical ideology. The article posits that Yusuf's resolve to preach and engage in violent/religious radicalism could have been a result of psychological deficiencies (e.g., ideological intolerance, moral absolutes, vengeance, relative deprivation, selfishness and/or delusional thinking) within his personality. To curb individuals with similar traits and/or psychological attributes before they become a security threat, this paper advocates the need for the introduction of offender profiling within the Nigerian criminal justice system.

A highly peculiar and common trait of contemporary radical elements, which Yusuf might also have possessed, is

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ideological intolerance, which describes a belief system that specifically refuses to tolerate the practices, beliefs, and/or tenets of other individuals or groups. It encompasses bigotry and the demonstration of bitterness and/or enmity towards those who dissent or disagree with one's belief systems (presumably the right doctrine), or some aspect of it. Ideological intolerance can even exist within individuals practising the same religion, but who hold different ideological tenets. Relating this to our current theme, in addition to Yusuf's strict adherence to the orthodox principles of Islam, which abhors western modernism; he manifested elements of ideological intolerance by moving from one Islamic organisation to another, before finally settling for Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad (later Boko Haram). Of particular importance to the current theme is the fact that he left the Islamic Movement of Nigeria to join Jamaatul Tajdid Islam (JTI) because Ibrahim el-Zakzakky (a Shi'ite) was the leader of the former. While it is appreciated that both Sunni and Shia Muslims share fundamental Islamic beliefs and articles of faith, the differences

between these two main sub-groups within Islam stemmed from certain religious etiquette. It therefore follows that Yusuf may have been one of the Sunnis who must not compromise the tenets of his sect at the expense of Shia doctrines. Given this clarification, and to further buttress the elements of ideological intolerance within Yusuf, other reports suggest that Yusuf once studied under the highly influential, well-known Kano-based preacher, Sheik Jafar Muhammad, who was shot dead while leading dawn prayers in 2007. Prior to Sheik Jafar's death, Yusuf was believed to have quarrelled with him over doctrinal matters,<sup>2</sup> which explains the insinuation that the Sheik was killed by elements suspected of being Yusuf's foot soldiers.

Second, and concomitant to the above, was his inordinate belief that the Muslim way of life had been systematically hijacked and exploited by 'nefarious western values'. According to Yusuf and his group, it is an abomination for true Muslims to operate or work within the system created by 'secular western civilisation', which they regard as taqut (irredeemably evil). It was within this perspective that the group sometimes withdrew to the desert (Zagi-Biriri) in 2003 to set up a separatist community run on hard line Islamic principles. Their aim was to create a more perfect society, away from the corrupt secular establishment. This, to them, could make them completely immune from what they perceived to be the products of 'western evil' and enable them effectively to dedicate themselves to a life of prayer and study of the Qur'an. Consequent upon this, Yusuf and his group chose certain negative or derisive labels, such as 'kuffar' (disbelievers; those who deny the truth) or 'fasiqun' (infidels), to demonize anyone who failed to embrace their cause.

Another conspicuous trait that was common among the contemporary radical elements (including Yusuf himself) was the bitterness and vengeance necessitated by what they termed 'evil, scheming western interests' in Muslim countries. Following the American-led invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan in 2001, there emerged several vocal and radical religious leaders in many Muslim areas, including Northern Nigeria (predominantly a Muslim region, where Yusuf and his group operated). These vocal, radical religious leaders seemed to radicalise religiously-inclined, vulnerable youths into believing that Americans and indeed the West as a whole were pursuing an anti-Islam, anti-Muslim World agenda. Their message was strengthened by: broadcast images and rumours of the mistreatment of prisoners in American and British-run detention facilities (especially water boarding, physical torture, and the stress positioning of suspects); the cycles of chronic violence between Israelites and Palestinians and the perception that the US and the West unfairly favour Israel; and broadcast images of civilian casualties and other collateral damage that occurred during military operations in Muslim countries. Against this backdrop, there emerged fleets of radical, vocal religious leaders, including Yusuf, who centred their preaching on the need for a devout Muslim to create a ditch defence against an aggressive, belligerent West that had never abandoned the idea of the crusades and the invasion of Islamic lands.

The relative deprivation necessitated by the seeming collapse of the state structure due to the government's inability to manage corruption, the rising inequality between rich and poor, the gross violation of human rights, and inaccessible education, could also facilitate radicalisation. [3] Due to ineptitude and corrupt practices, the political leadership of Nigeria failed judiciously to utilize the naturally endowed resources (crude oil) to address the many social problems facing the country. The poor became poorer, while a small fraction of the political elite became wealthier, which generated many social problems, including religious bigotry, mass illiteracy, poorly-funded administrative institutions, the unavailability of basic health care for most, and fraudulent elections. Given this myriad

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of problems (e.g., excruciating poverty, unemployment, and mass illiteracy), especially among the religiously-inclined vulnerable youths in Northern Nigeria, individuals like Muhammad Yusuf were able to seize the opportunity to seek relevance by preaching an alternative platform for disenchanted, vulnerable youths and consequently radicalize them to attack the system which, they believe, is largely responsible for their situation.

Additionally, due to what some critics perceived as the inconsistency between Yusuf's preaching and his own material circumstances, [4] it can be deduced that there was an element of selfishness within him. While Yusuf condemned Western civilisation and encouraged his foot soldiers (i.e., followers) to stay clear of its trappings, he did not reject or refuse to use technological products himself, such as motor bikes, cars, mobile phones and AK-47 guns. It should however be noted that individuals with a selfish personality tend to control everything within their domain and are ready to emit inconsistent information and/or misrepresentations for selfish ends. Yusuf may have fallen within this category. As noted earlier, despite his supposed espousal of anti-modern, ultra-fundamentalist ideas, he was reported to have obtained a passport and visa, and even travelled on airplanes – all creations of western civilisation. In addition to using ultra-modern facilities, other reports confirm that 'the food items found in Yusuf's house when he was arrested contrasted sharply with his beliefs, as many were imported, canned foods compared to the dates and fruits eaten by his followers'. [5] While his followers have attempted to debunk these inconsistencies following Yusuf's death, by arguing that modern technology (in contrast to Western education and civilisation) was completely acceptable under Islam, the inescapable truth is that western technology is an offshoot of civilisation and the two concepts are inseparable.

Prior to the Boko Haram riots of July 2009, few Nigerians had heard of Muhammad Yusuf. The available reports however indicate that this individual had been arrested, detained, charged and released on several occasions prior to the incident that led to the group's insurgency. What is unclear however is why the security agencies were unable to tame his activities and those of the group before they became a security threat that threatened the corporate existence of Nigeria. The reason for this may be the lack of a criminal database, criminal records and offender profiling within the Nigerian criminal justice system. While this position may need to be subjected to empirical research, the current article has created a possible psychological profile of Muhammad Yusuf, the founder and former leader of Boko Haram. We believe that creating such a profile could play an important role in furthering our understanding of the individual attributes and/or behavioural characteristics that may contribute to radicalisation. We further hope that the Nigerian security/intelligence agencies may use this information to monitor individuals with similar attributes and/or antecedents and consequently track down potential insurgents before they turn into a real threat and cause havoc in the country.

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## Endnotes

1 Freedom Onuoha, "The Islamist challenge: Nigeria's Boko Haram crisis explained," *African Security Review*, 19: 2 (2010), 54-67. See also, Sehu Sanni, "Boko Haram: History, Ideas and Revolt (1)," Nigerian Guardian Newspaper Report, July 6, 2011.

2 Sehu Sanni, "Boko Haram: History, Ideas and Revolt (1)," Nigerian Guardian Newspaper Report, July 6, 2011. See also, Hakeem Onapajo and Ufo Okeke Uzodike, "Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria: Man, the state, and the international system," *African Security Review*, 21: 3 (2012), 24-39.

3 Abeebe Olufemi Salaam, "Boko Haram: beyond religious fanaticism," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 7: 2 (2012), 147-162.

4 Freedom Onuoha, "The Islamist challenge: Nigeria's Boko Haram crisis explained," *African Security Review*, 19: 2

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(2010), 54-67.

5 Ibid.

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