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# GAPS IN GLOBAL MEDIA REPORTING ON VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

Corentin Cohen  
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**Boko Haram  
islamisme  
jihadisme  
médias  
Nigeria  
violence**

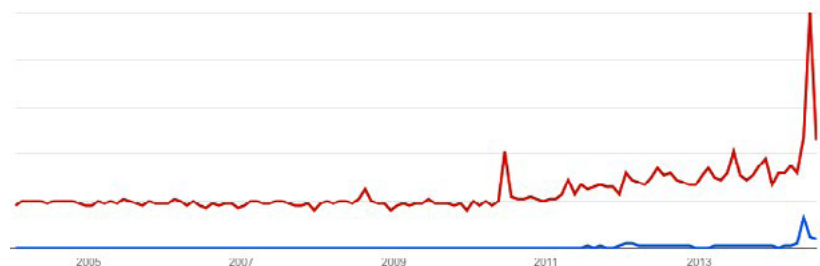
Source : Muslims, Christians and Religious Violence in Nigeria: Patterns and Mapping (2006 – 2014), by Akinola Ejodame Olojo with an annex by Corentin Cohen on media and religion

This contribution seeks to explore the global media's treatment of violence in Nigeria between June 2006 and May 2014. In the first six months of 2014, Nigeria attracted a high level of attention from the Western media. Based on the recent volume of articles inspired by increasing interest in on-going events in the country, there are a variety of reports and explanations unveiling the complexity of the phenomenon particularly in regard to the Boko Haram crisis. This section draws upon information in the Nigeria Watch database and it challenges the global media's perception of violence through two questions. First, how is the Boko Haram violence framed, how is it accounted for and what are the reasons or causes cited in media articles? Secondly, how are the conflict dynamics of Islamic group versus Islamic group framed and characterised? We analyse articles related to selected events published in three Western-based newspapers as follows: Two articles from the

'International New York Times' (hereafter referred to as INYT); five articles from the UK's '*The Guardian*'; and three articles from the French '*Le Monde*'.

The principal findings of this research is that most of the violent incidents examined were not reported at all by Western media until the abduction of schoolgirls from Chibok in Borno state on the 14th of April 2014. In other words, the Chibok incident marked a turning point and attracted record attention to the violent situation in the country. Despite this level of interest, the articles largely accounted for the violence in

religious terms with no regard accorded to the political, economic or social dimensions. Other explanations of violence were rendered following President Goodluck Jonathan's declarations which ascribed craziness and irrationality to Boko Haram's actions. Only opinion and comment articles provided alternate explanations of the violence. In addition, this limited Muslim-Christian religious framework has thus led Western media to completely ignore events that reflect opposition forces between Muslim communities or leadership.

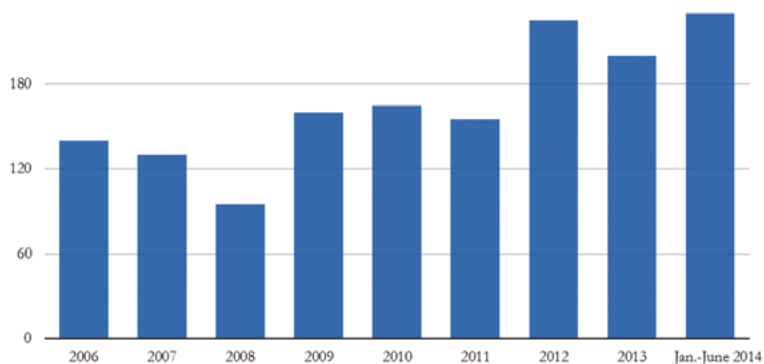


Volume of research on Google for the words 'Boko Haram' (blue) and 'Nigeria' (red) from mid-2005 to mid-2014.

© Source: Google Trends

## WESTERN MEDIA'S 'DISCOVERY' OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA IN THE WAKE OF THE CHIBOK INCIDENT IN MAY 2014

Following the first six months of 2014, Nigeria and Boko Haram have been the object of unprecedented attention in Western media. This is illustrated by the number of articles and reports in the newspapers studied, as well as by the frequency of Google requests generated online. Information obtained from the Factiva database<sup>1</sup> are presented here reflecting the trend over the past 5 years. The number of articles we selected on Nigeria excludes



Number of articles relating to Nigeria published in the International New York Times (INYT), The Guardian and Le Monde between 2006 and June 2014 according to the Factiva database

the ones falling under the 'Sport and Leisure', 'Football' and 'Art and Shows' categories. As already noted, a similar peak level interest is displayed by the number of searches carried out on the Google platform in the wake of the Chibok incident. In the diagram below, the blue line represents searches on 'Boko Haram' while the red one represents 'Nigeria'. The frequency of articles published in the first 6

<sup>1</sup> Factiva is an information and research tool which aggregates content from both licensed and free sources.

months of 2014 already matches the frequencies of articles published in 2013 and 2012.

For this study we selected four events and studied how they were reported. The first finding is the global medias' generally low interest in reporting violent events occurring in Nigeria before the Chibok incident. The four events were chosen using the Nigeria Watch database (highest levels of violence in the month) combined with the Google research tools. The events selected coincide with peaks levels of attention and searches on Boko Haram. To increase chances of identifying articles, we focused on those issued in the first three days following

events/incidents. However, we only searched for articles tagged with the country 'Nigeria' ('Nigéria' in French) and no specific keywords, topics or fields were inserted to ensure that we obtain all the appropriate articles. The Chibok incident seemed to have provoked increased attention and this is clearly indicated by the soaring number of articles in April and particularly May according to the Factiva database. It is observable that the number of articles published in the sole month of May

Year	Estimated number of articles
2005	145
2006	140
2007	130
2008	95
2009	160
2010	165
2011	155
2012	225
2013	200
01/01/2014 06/30/2014	230

Number of articles relating to Nigeria published in the International New York Times (INYT), The Guardian and Le Monde between 2006 and June 2014 according to the Factiva database

2014 relating to Nigeria actually exceeds the number of articles published in the whole of 2008.

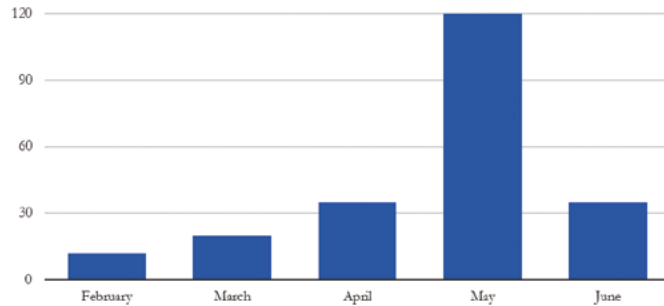
The first event selected is the 25 February Boko Haram attack on Federal Government College, Buni Yadi in Yobe state. Yobe is one of the three states placed under a state of emergency by the Nigerian government since May 2013. The group reportedly killed 43 male students after it stormed the student residential building<sup>2</sup>. The only newspaper reporting it was The Guardian in its international pages. Le Monde mentioned the event in an article about Boko Haram on the

<sup>2</sup> AFP, "43 killed in Nigeria in suspected Boko Haram school attack," *Khaleejtimes*, February 26, 2014 accessed July 28, 2014, [www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-article-display-1.asp?xfile=data/international/2014/February/international\\_February738.xml&section=international](http://www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-article-display-1.asp?xfile=data/international/2014/February/international_February738.xml&section=international)

2014/Month	Number of articles
January	25
February	12
March	20
April	35
May	120
June	35

occasion of the French President's official visit to Nigeria. The second event considered is a market bombing in the town of Bama in Borno state which transpired on 23 March killing 31 people. It was not reported at all so another set of particularly violent events that occurred on 11 April was selected. On that day as well as the subsequent day, Boko Haram attacked students due to undertake the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination in four towns of Borno state (Dikwa, Kala-Balge, Gambulga and Gwoza)<sup>3</sup>. 210 people were killed and several public buildings destroyed. This incident was also not reported. The fourth event considered in our analysis is a succession of attacks that occurred on 19 and 20 May 2014. Two villages near Chibok were hit and on the same day a market in Jos was bombed killing 118 people. The attacks in the two villages were reported with comments appearing in two Guardian articles. The Jos bombings were reported in three Guardian articles and one INYT article. Le Monde covered

<sup>3</sup> Kayode Idowu and Fidelis Soriwei, "Boko Haram kills Scores of UTME candidates in Borno," *Punch*, April 12, 2014, accessed July 28, 2014, [www.punchng.com/news/utme-students-killed-in-boko-haram-attacks/](http://www.punchng.com/news/utme-students-killed-in-boko-haram-attacks/)



Number of articles relating to Nigeria published in the International New York Times (INYT), The Guardian and Le Monde between January and June 2014 according to the Factiva database

the event with an AFP video but no article. Overall, all the articles still made reference to the Chibok incident but the peak in May rather than just after the abduction in April let us think that it is not the incident per se that brought attention but rather the « Bring Back Our Girls » campaign.

### **IN SPITE OF STRONG INTEREST IN NIGERIA, BOKO HARAM VIOLENCE IS NOT ACCOUNTED FOR WITH CONTEXTUALISATION AND THE REPORTING OF EVENTS ONLY REFERS TO RELIGION**

How were the events involving Boko Haram reported during this time of increasing global attention? How is violence accounted for? What are the explanations advanced in regard to the current upheaval? To understand how violence is framed, this study examined the descriptions ascribed to the group and its organisation. We also went further to understand how the situation in northern Nigeria was described, as well as what historical or contextual elements the readers of articles were provided with. Despite the international focus, most of the

articles examined in reference to Boko Haram attacks fall short of providing any explanation of violence even though they implicitly define the group's actions with an 'Islamic' identity. Indeed, most articles only offer a context of interpretation which recalls the violent actions of Boko Haram in the past and still in reference to the term 'Islamism'. The articles insist on the details of violence and on the modus operandi of the group. It is mostly in opinion articles or more analytic individual comments that alternate explanations and contextualisation of violence is provided, namely the shortcomings of the state, lack of regional cooperation, violent repression of protests and army brutality. The socioeconomic conditions of the affected states or northern region is also not mentioned at all.

In the three newspapers the events examined are mostly described in religious terms. In the article reporting the attack on the Federal Government College of Buni Yadi, Yobe State, the only adjective used to describe Boko Haram is 'Islamist' and in fact, it is repeated twice. The article details 'the Islamists' (...) want an Islamic state in Northern Nigeria'. In all the Guardian's articles reporting the Jos bombings, Boko

### Le Nigeria annonce un accord avec Boko Haram sur la libération des lycéennes enlevées



Capture d'écran du 17 octobre 2014

Le 15 avril, des hommes armés avaient pris d'assaut l'internat du lycée public pour filles de Chibok, et enlevé 276 jeunes filles âgées de 12 à 17 ans.

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Haram is referred to as 'Islamic militant' or as a sect. Le Monde uses 'groupe islamiste' ('Islamic group') or 'secte sunnite' ('sunnite sect'). The only rationale proposed to readers trying to understand the violence is one that describes a group desiring to 'carve out a caliphate in northern Nigeria'. The INYT article reporting the same event refers to Boko Haram with the tautology of 'Islamist extremist group' that emphasises the religious aspect of the violence. One other article of The Guardian also employs the term 'Islamist sect Boko Haram'. This religious dimension can be found in one of Le Monde's description of the conflict that further situates the Islamic group in opposition to President Jonathan (a Christian from the southern part of Nigeria).

Violence is not comprehensively accounted for and no historical context is given. In majority of the articles, the 'presentation' of the group or its contextualisation is depicted by reference to past bombings and once again the Chibok incident. The only other description of the group that serves as an explanation for its violence stem from the official declarations of President Goodluck Jonathan stating that the government should not be 'cowed by the atrocities of enemies of human

progress'<sup>4</sup>. In relation to the Buni Yadi event, the claim that Boko Haram members are 'deranged terrorist and fanatics who have clearly lost all human morality and descended to bestiality' constitutes the only other additional information the reader is given. Le Monde reports the official communiqué regarding the same attack mentioning 'des terroristes fous et des fanatiques'<sup>5</sup> ('crazy terrorists and fanatics'<sup>5</sup>) as the only element offering understanding. After the Chibok incident the renewed interest in Nigeria paved way for longer articles with more analytic frames. Some exceptions to the pattern we found can be observed even though they do not directly concern the reporting of the events we had chosen to study.

One Guardian opinion article carried the title 'Coups and terror are the fruit of NATO's war in Libya: The dire consequences of the West's intervention are being felt today in Tripoli and across Africa, from Mali to Nigeria'<sup>6</sup>. It expresses the Boko Haram and Nigerian situation in a few words but also considers that the group's violence can be accounted for by 'deprivation, drought and brutal state repression in the

<sup>4</sup> Presidential statement released by Reuben Abati "We will not be cowed by the enemy" - President Jonathan condemns Jos Bomb Blast," *Talk of Naija*, May 20, 2014, accessed July 28, 2014 [www.talk-ofnaija.com/politics/we-will-not-be-cowed-by-the-enemy-president-jonathan-condemns-jos-bomb-blast-read-statement](http://www.talk-ofnaija.com/politics/we-will-not-be-cowed-by-the-enemy-president-jonathan-condemns-jos-bomb-blast-read-statement)

<sup>5</sup> AFP, "43 killed in Nigeria in suspected Boko Haram school attack," *Standard Digital*, February 26, 2014, accessed July 28, 2014, [www.standardmedia.co.ke/mobile/?articleID=2000105562&story\\_title=43-killed-in-nigeria-in-suspected-boko-haram-school-attack](http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/mobile/?articleID=2000105562&story_title=43-killed-in-nigeria-in-suspected-boko-haram-school-attack)

<sup>6</sup> Seumas Milne, "Coups and terror are the fruit of Nato's war in Libya, The dire consequences of the west's intervention are being felt today in Tripoli and across Africa, from Mali to Nigeria," *The Guardian*, May 22, 2014, accessed July 28, 2014 [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/22/coups-terror-nato-war-in-libya-west-intervention-boko-haram-nigeria](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/22/coups-terror-nato-war-in-libya-west-intervention-boko-haram-nigeria)

Muslim North'. Another article in the INYT focuses on Abubakar Shekau's life and religious radicalisation. It barely mentions the history of the northern region or its socioeconomic conditions. An additional article discusses the Nigerian state's action and explains violence through the state's failure and inefficiency, while finishing with an interview with a vigilante group's representative. A much broader article that was examined deals with the conference organised in Paris in May 2014 in relation to the Boko Haram crisis. It explains that the porous frontiers and the little cooperation among the countries of the West African sub-region allowed the attacks and the development of the group. Finally, one Le Monde article, though capitalising on a religious frame, gives voice to different individuals who underscore the absence of trust in the government or the lack of resources to fight the group, as well as the army's failure.

## ABSENCE OF REPORTING ON ISLAMIC VERSUS ISLAMIC GROUP CLASHES

Although we acknowledge that religion as well as other issues bordering on socioeconomics are central factors accounting for violence, we also want to briefly shed some light on how the attacks by Boko Haram against Muslim groups or communities has been reported. In regard to this, in the articles studied the religious explanation of violence is often not nuanced with the dimension that deals with intra-group violence within religion itself. We searched within three the newspapers with a view to identifying articles

related to Nigeria and a focus on violent incidents involving different Muslim communities. The following three incidents were thus identified in the Nigeria Watch database: The first relates to the assassination of Sheikh Muhammad Auwal Albani, a major Salafi leader in Nigeria who had openly criticised Boko Haram. He was ambushed with his family on 1 February 2014 in Zaria, Kaduna State<sup>7</sup>. The second incident involves a violent encounter reported as a clash between the Izala and the Tijaniyya Sufi brotherhood in Bauchi state in March 2014<sup>8</sup>. A third and final violent event transpired on 30 May 2014 involving the assassination of Idrisa Timta, Emir of Gwoza who was arguably a representative of religious and political power in the community<sup>9</sup>. Using the Factiva database and confirming data with the websites of the selected newspapers, this study set out to inquire exactly how these aforementioned incidents were reported and to compare the frames used. In the end, the findings were unequivocal: there was indeed no report of these three events in any of the selected newspapers.

## CONCLUSION

Three trends that are to be explored and questioned come out of this study. The first one regards the means given to reporting. To which extent have global

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah Benjamin, Midat Joseph, "How Sheikh Albani, Wife, Son Were Killed – Eyewitnesses," *Leadership*, February 3, 2014, accessed July 28, 2014 [leadership.ng/news/342760/how-sheikh-albani-wife-son-were-killed-eyewitnesses](http://leadership.ng/news/342760/how-sheikh-albani-wife-son-were-killed-eyewitnesses)

<sup>8</sup> Ahmed Mohammed, "Nigeria: Bauchi - Man Killed in Clash Between Darika, Izala Sects," *Daily Trust*, March 29, 2014, accessed July 28, 2014 [allafrica.com/stories/201403311789.html](http://allafrica.com/stories/201403311789.html)

<sup>9</sup> Ola' Audu, "Emir of Gwoza killed after abduction by Boko Haram," *Premium Times*, May 30, 2014, accessed July 28, 2014 [www.premiumtimesng.com/?p=161738](http://www.premiumtimesng.com/?p=161738)



Logo de Boko Haram

newspapers deployed their own means of reporting on the issue. Do they exploit local newspapers and use their informations, do they rely only on press agencies with official sources and declaration or did they sent reporting team in the country, i.e. do they more report than investigate ? The second finding that should be accounted for is the global disinterest for Nigeria and Boko Haram violences before the Chibok abduction. The event was a turning point and led to a security oriented coverage of the country. But what were the global peaks of attention to Nigeria before the BH crisis ? Was it elections violences, the Niger Delta insurgency, political life or other issues...? Can we consider that the mediatization of african political life grounds itself on security or violence oriented event ? Thirdly and to further this question, do religious interpretations of the conflict reflect the field reality and understanding of the conflict or international medias way of thinking about Africa and ethno religious conflict ? In this case the terrorist or islamism explanation of the conflict should bring more and more attention to it. It is

also likely that the local conflict is going to be more and more integrated in the narrative of global jihadism and international fight against terrorism.

## L'AUTEUR

Corentin Cohen est doctorant en Science politique et relations internationales à Sciences Po et au CERI. Sa thèse porte sur les iconographies des conflits armés en Afrique, particulièrement sur Boko Haram au Nigéria, au Tchad et au Cameroun, et sur les violences urbaines au Brésil.

## IFRA-Nigeria

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