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SECURITY / INTELLIGENCE / CONSULTING

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## BETWEEN THE SEAMS

### **The Role of Women in Defeating Boko Haram**

There is no doubt that the most recent attacks we have seen in Nigeria, France and Mali have continued to raise the consciousness of many and highlight the complexities of a new wave of terrorism. Further, what strikes an influx of emotion is the role of women in two of three of these attacks. In Nigeria, Boko Haram commenced its use of female suicide bombers in June 2014 and since, this gender weapon has been responsible for the death of over 500 people.

Despite the intensity and regularity of Boko Haram attacks, the approach to combating the terrorist group remains somewhat static. Formulating a counter terrorism strategy on how to combat an ideology that sees itself as a quasi state without borders or traditional rules of sovereignty will need to invoke a new thought process.

#### **Involving the “Other 50%”**

It could be argued that women have disproportionately suffered the consequences of the Boko Haram insurgency through rape, death of their spouse or bread winner, their children, loss of their home and so on. However, women have also served as enablers to the mission or a pawn used in heinous ways promote fear into the society.

Women have different power bases, networks, and lines of influence than men. Women perceive, and react differently to actions designed to impact security, culture, cyber, finance, illicit trade. And yet their perspective and influence are often under-represented in decision making circles, which can have significant opportunity costs in fulfilling the objectives of campaigns and where we are trying to have a positive impact. The “other 50%” refers to a unique intelligence analysis and gathering mechanism that gives a perspective through a different lens. The voice and perspective of the “other 50%” on our side of the equation, can have game-changing impact on policies and actions. In the case of Boko Haram, there are reports that during the early formation of the group, females in the local community gave significant support to their activities. Reports indicated that women were instrumental in converting female family members and in some cases, offered up their daughters to serve as martyrs.

In order to get a more complete picture of the Boko Haram insurgency, women and girls must not be seen solely as passive victims, but also as active participants. Back in July 2014, one month after the first incident of female suicide bombers in Nigerian, three women were arrested in Abuja for attempting to recruit females to serve as members in what the military described then as the “female wing” of the group. Despite both the passive and active involvement, women are often the last to be included within the dialogue of coming up with ways to not only combat these terrorist attacks, but to ultimately address these issues.

There is a lack of intelligence on the role of women within the community and the thought process of the women involved in the middle of the conflict. This lack of understanding has been deceptive to those developing effective Boko Haram counter strategies, as they have failed to recognize that women, like men, often provide critical support to the enemy in the form of food, shelter, and medical care and, moreover, in addition to serving as combatants. This has significant risk to those on the frontline of countering this insurgency as the intelligence provided can often be incomplete. An inability to know the enemy equates to an inability to effectively subdue and defeat the enemy.

A strategy to counter this threat should include an understanding of the complete environment, a full and concise picture of the enemy. In order to do this, the security agencies need to properly identify the role female Boko Haram members have played in instilling fear and encouraging the insurgency. In doing so, an effective strategy for the role of women in maintaining peace and stability within their communities, the region and the country as a whole, can be developed and implemented.

### **Women's Role in a Counter-Terrorism Strategy**

Rarely are women called upon during the most critical phases of military operations working with military planners to give that added perspective of the "other 50 %". Boko Haram has capitalized on the use of women in carrying out acts of terror against local communities and the country as a whole, the Nigerian security agencies and the surrounding countries involved in countering the threat need to look at creative ways and gaining a unique perspective like that of women in countering this insurgency.

August 2015, an interview with a female Nigerian Barrister who is a human rights activists with the National Human Rights Commission revealed that she had known a number of the Boko Haram members when they were children, before they became radicalized. She said "These were children that would come to my house, play around and help in watering my ugwu plant. We would cook together and they would help clean my kitchen, my room and the entire house."

But the Barrister said she started noticing a change of character in the children when they were spending an increasingly amount of time at Boko Haram founder, Muhammad Yusuf's lectures. Soon rumors began to spread that they were planning a war, and suddenly the boys disappeared for about a month. When they returned, they told her that they had gone for "war training".

An effective counter terrorist strategy involves understanding the enemy, not only their tactics but their mind set and perspective. Also identifying what resources, they can implement to gain significant advantage. Security officials had known about this group long before they began carrying out brazen attacks. If there was an effective counter-terrorism strategy in place, a team would have been able to gather information about the collective and individual mindset of the group and its members including vital early warning intelligence of this impending 'war' and taken the appropriate actions to defeat the insurgency before it escalated.

The problem however, is if a group of uniformed men had gone to ask the Barrister questions, would she have opened up to them? Probably not! These were children she cared deeply about. She would have chosen to protect them instead. Now, imagine if one or two approachable women came to talk with her, would she have been more willing to open up? It's a possibility! A unique perspective and intelligence gathering mechanism that is currently not being implemented or engaged. It is time women are present at the solution table, women need to be part of the planning within a counter terrorism strategy. Women are able to offer a different but vital perspective on the analysis of conflicts such as the Boko Haram insurgency.

The military and National Security Agency should look at implementing a program of female engagement teams who will be instrumental in gathering cultural and local intelligence primarily focused on the "other 50%" which in turn can assist in contributing to a more concise picture of the enemy.

Involving the other 50% will help strengthen local ownership of security and curb the radicalization of impressionable youth within the community. For example, during the past conflict in Liberia, many peace initiatives had failed until the introduction and involvement of women through the Inter-Faith Women's Peace Organization led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Leymah Gbowee, Child soldiers within that conflict were effectively persuaded to lay down their arms. Involving women as part of the counter terrorism strategy, can help provide adequate peace building and de-radicalization strategies that will be inclusive and sustainable. British-trained psychologist Dr Fatima Akilu was instrumental in setting up a counter-radicalization program which she designed to "create awareness of the threat of violent extremism, identify and strengthen the channels of distribution of counter-narratives, and initiate & conduct training for peace initiatives".

In most conflicts, the security of women is a vital factor within the context of providing a level of stability and ending violent conflict, the Nigerian government and those in the intelligence community need to engage women as part of the overall strategy and start implementing this different perspective.

### **About the Contributors**

*Selina Hayes is the founder and CEO of Hayes Group International and has a background in security, counter-intelligence and international development. Ms. Hayes works primarily in emerging and frontier markets focused on security, cultural intelligence, consulting and delivering comprehensive risk assessments. Taking a unique approach to challenges, Ms. Hayes has developed a solution that focuses on the other side of the equation, looking at a problem set from the "other 50%" of the population.*

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