



# The Islamic State and Boko Haram: *Fifth Wave* Jihadist Terror Groups

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*Abstract: This article contends that takfiri jihadist groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Islamic State exhibit tendencies consistent with Jeffrey Kaplan's fifth wave of terror theory. Beyond placing these groups within Kaplan's framework, this essay also discusses them within the context of takfiri precursors, like the Armed Islamic Group (GLA), Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Contrary to Kaplan's argument that Islamist groups are not part of the fifth wave, this article concludes that his theory does pertain to takfiri jihadist groups and underscores why this is an important distinction.*

The rise of Boko Haram (BH) in northern Nigeria and the Islamic State's (IS) dramatic conquest over a third of Iraq and Syria is remarkable. Directed by messianic leaders, these groups have unleashed an ultra-violent campaign to construct transnational empires. With its proclamation of a "caliphate" in Sunni areas of Iraq and northern Syria, IS hopes to erase national borders. Boko Haram's insurgency threatens to destabilize northeastern Nigeria. Since 2011, terrorist violence has sharply escalated as BH begins to establish its rule over the northern part of Nigeria's Borno state.



Boko Haram's "brand."

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(Map of Nigeria courtesy of U.S. Dept. of State.)

Driven by hostility toward secular authority and impelled by ethno-religious hatred, both groups have inspired revulsion and fear. Governments seem incapable of stopping them. BH and IS's capacity to wage terror has grown rapidly. Thousands have perished in these organizations' relentless pursuit of creating a pure Islamic state. IS and BH have made impressive territorial gains with Islamic State forces encircling Baghdad and Boko Haram's wave of violence sharply escalating across Nigeria.

Both networks are characterized by cultish practices and a millenarian, or utopian, ideology associated with smaller organizations. The proposition that terrorism is rational is widely accepted.<sup>1</sup> Yet this explanation appears poorly suited to account for theologically-driven terror organizations. Recently, theories that all terror networks are rational have come under vigorous attack.<sup>2</sup> The Islamist *takfiri* terrorism, and the millenarian violence it inspires, seems particularly resistant to rational explanation.<sup>3</sup> Past millenarian terror cults like Aum Shinriko, the Shi'ite Assassins, and the Zealots are viewed as anomalies.<sup>4</sup> Much of this analysis relies on psychological effects of intense social bonding. Such cults stretch across religions. Jessica Stern has documented well these small-scale groups.<sup>5</sup> The building of large

<sup>1</sup> Jack Gibbs, "Conceptualization of Terrorism," Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism" and Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," in John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, eds., *Terrorism Studies: A Reader* (Routledge: New York, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Nalbandov, "Irrational Rationality of Terrorism," *Journal of Strategic Security* 6:5, 2013, pp. 92-102.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York, NY: Columbia University, 2006); David Rappaport, "Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in the Three Religious Traditions" in John Horgan and Kurt Braddock, eds., *Terrorism Studies*.

<sup>4</sup> Rappaport, "Fear and Trembling," pp. 118-127.

<sup>5</sup> Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2003)

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