



Appraising the Buhari administration: The Middle Belt and missteps on the promise of neutrality

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1. Introduction

Muhammadu Buhari is the fourth president of the fourth Nigerian Republic.¹ Buhari assumed the office of the presidency at one of the most difficult times in Nigeria's history. One key challenge facing the Nigerian state, when General Buhari assumed the presidency in May 2015, was the violence and instability that had plagued northern Nigeria as a result of the activities of the Islamic militant group Boko Haram.² However, while the attention of the international media and western powers has been largely focused on the militancy of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria (especially in relation to the Chibok girls who were kidnapped by Boko Haram),³ the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, sandwiched between northern and southern Nigeria, has also been suffering from a devastating conflict that has a religious dimension.⁴ This paper is an attempt to address the neglect of this conflict in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria which has been overshadowed by the menace of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria.

Nigerians and the international community had high hopes when Buhari was sworn in as president.⁵ A peaceful transition of power from an incumbent president to an elected candidate from an opposition party was something unprecedented in Nigeria's history. Buhari's presidency was thus heralded as an event that could usher in a new era in Nigeria's history.⁶ The failure of President Goodluck Jonathan's administration to defeat Boko Haram in northern Nigeria and to bring an end to the violent ethnic and religious conflicts in the rest of Nigeria, in the Niger Delta and the Middle Belt, had frustrated many Nigerians. Many hoped that the military background of Muhammadu Buhari, who is a former general, would give him an advantage in leading a more successful fight against Islamic militant groups wreaking havoc in central and northern Nigeria.⁷ Muhammadu Buhari's image as a tough disciplinarian who is relatively untarnished by the pervasive corruption among the political elites of Nigeria, also reinforced this hope.⁸ On top of his military background, Buhari had served as a military head of state from 31 December 1983 to 27 August 1985 after leading a coup d'état. Some felt that this experience as a head of state

¹ See article: "Muhammadu Buhari", Encyclopedia Britannica Online, last accessed 6 March 2016: <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammadu-Buhari>.

² Welsh, Teresa, "New Nigerian President Faces Critical Challenges", 29 May 2015, US News & World Report, available at <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/05/29/new-nigerian-president-faces-boko-haram-corruption-economy>.

³ The inaction and inability of the Buhari administration to free the Chibok girls so far has been disappointing and casts a shadow on the claim of the administration that it has defeated the Boko Haram insurgency. See Nigeria Chibok girls shown alive in Boko Haram video (14 April 2016, BBC), available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36041635>.

⁴ See "Terror in the Food Basket: A look into the violence in North-Central Nigeria", October 2015, SBM Intelligence, available at http://sbmintel.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/201510_Terror-in-Nigerias-Food-Basket.pdf.

⁵ Karimi, Faith and Purefoy, Christian, "Nigeria's Muhammadu Buhari sworn in, says he belongs 'to everybody'", 30 May 2015, CNN, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/29/africa/nigeria-buhari-sworn-in/>.

⁶ Smith, David, "Historic succession complete as Buhari is sworn in as the president of Nigeria", 29 May 2015, The Guardian, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/29/historic-succession-complete-buhari-sworn-in-nigerian-president>.

⁷ Adam Nossitermay, "Former Strongman, Taking Over Presidency, Raises Hope in Nigeria", (May 26, 2015), the New York Times, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/27/world/africa/former-strongman-taking-over-presidency-raises-hope-in-nigeria.html?_r=0.

⁸ Ibid.

would also be useful when he takes up the helm as a democratically elected president.⁹ Although many were optimistic about the incoming administration of President Buhari, there were also many others who were uneasy about his rise to power. Some were apprehensive because of his autocratic past (i.e. his takeover of power in the early 1980's through a coup d'état) which led them to be suspicious as to his commitment to democratic norms and ideals.¹⁰ Others were fearful because of accusations that he holds radical Islamic views and that his administration would undermine the freedom of religion of Christians in Nigeria and attempt to islamize Nigeria.¹¹

At the time of writing, it is now almost a year since President Muhammadu Buhari was sworn into office. Therefore, it should be possible to evaluate his performance in office to date and see if his administration has lived up to the hopes and expectations of those who had optimistic views about his presidency or whether the fears of those who were apprehensive about his rule are coming true. In this paper an attempt will be made to determine:

- 1) Whether or not the administration of President Buhari has been effective in addressing the ongoing conflict in the Middle Belt region;
- 2) If and how President Buhari's administration encourages the rise of political Islam and the further islamization of Nigeria.

⁹ See for example, Ben Simon, "Frontline Nigeria troops hope for better deal under Buhari", (May 26, 2015) Agence France-Presse, available at <http://news.yahoo.com/frontline-nigeria-troops-hope-better-deal-under-buhari-13235528.html>.

¹⁰ Katarina Hoijs "For Some Nigerians, Doubts Linger About New President", (April 08, 2015) Voice of America News, available at <http://www.voanews.com/content/for-some-nigerians-doubts-linger-about-new-president/2710982.html>.

¹¹ Cullinane, Susannah and Busari, Stephanie: "Who is Nigeria's Muhammadu Buhari?" (27 May 2015) CNN available at <http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/31/africa/nigeria-muhammadu-buhari/>; see also Nigeria Elects New President, (11 April 2015) Open Doors in Africa, available at <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/takeaction/pray/tag-prayer-updates-post/nigeria-elects-new-president/>.

2. Religious conflict and violence in the Middle Belt

As the name indicates, the Middle Belt is located in central Nigeria, sandwiched between the predominantly Muslim northern Nigeria and the predominantly Christian south. Ethnically, the region is inhabited by various minority ethnic groups that are different from the three largest Nigerian groups of Hausa-Fulani, the Igbo of south eastern Nigeria and the Yoruba of south western Nigeria. Particularly since the colonial era, ethnic groups from various parts of Nigeria, particularly the Fulani of northern Nigeria had started settling in large numbers in the Middle Belt region in search of economic opportunities.¹² Successive Nigerian constitutions have maintained a “federal character principle” which divides Nigerians on the basis of whether or not they are natives or indigenes to the locality in which they are living (as opposed to being a settler who or whose parents have come from another part of Nigeria).¹³ This principle reinforces ethno-linguistic divisions and makes one’s status as an indigene or a settler a basis of determining that person’s access to services and resources provided by the state.¹⁴ This is commonplace in many other parts of the country as well. Overlapping with this fault line are also differences in the economic activities of the various ethnic groups. The Hausa-Fulani of northern Nigeria tend to be herdsman and are mainly engaged in animal husbandry while those in the Middle Belt tend to be farmers who engage in agriculture.¹⁵ While all these factors have contributed to tensions and conflicts among the Hausa-Fulani and the minority ethnic groups in the Middle Belt, these conflicts are assuming an ever increasing religious dimension.¹⁶ With the rise of radicalized and militant versions of Islam globally as well as within the Sahel region, this aspect of the conflict has become a major problem.

For instance, the Atlantic magazine reported in 2013: “785 people have died in the past two years” as a result of religious conflict in the Middle Belt.¹⁷ As early as 2001, about 1000 people are reported to have died in a period of two weeks due to sectarian conflicts between Christians and Muslims in Jos, which is a major urban center in the Middle Belt.¹⁸ There have been similar clashes in the Middle Belt region that have resulted in the death of thousands in 2004 and 2008 as well.¹⁹ In addition to the conflicts that have been taking place in the Middle Belt region orchestrated mainly by the Hausa-Fulani Muslim herdsman, the region had also been plagued

¹² Higazi, Adam, “The Jos Crisis: A Recurrent Nigerian Tragedy” (January 2011). Working Paper (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung) (2): 3–6. Retrieved 19 October 2015, available at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/nigeria/07812.pdf>.

¹³ See Suberu, Rotimi and Diamond, Larry, “Institutional design, ethnic conflict management and democracy in Nigeria.” *The Architecture of Democracy: Constitutional Design, Conflict Management and Democracy* (2002): 400-428.

¹⁴ See Milligan, Maren, “Fighting for the right to exist: institutions, identity, and conflict in Jos, Nigeria.” *Comparative Politics* 45.3 (2013): 313-334.

¹⁵ McDougal, Topher L. et al., “The Effect of Farmer-Pastoralist Violence on Income: New Survey Evidence from Nigeria’s Middle Belt States.” *Economics of Peace and Security Journal* 10.1 (2015): 54-65.

¹⁶ See Dowd R., “Religious Diversity and Violent Conflict: Lessons from Nigeria”, Fletcher F. *World Affairs* 2014; 38:153.

¹⁷ Campbell, John and Harwood, Asch, “Why a Terrifying Religious Conflict Is Raging in Nigeria”, 10 July 2013, *The Atlantic*, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/07/why-a-terrifying-religious-conflict-is-raging-in-nigeria/277690/>.

¹⁸ “Jos: A City Torn Apart,” Human Rights Watch (December 2001), available at https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/nigeria1201_1.pdf.

¹⁹ Handley, Meg, “The Violence in Nigeria: What’s Behind the Conflict?”, 10 March 2010, *Time*, available at <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1971010,00.html>.

by a bombing campaign which Boko Haram undertook in the area in 2013 and 2014.²⁰ The attacks carried out by Boko Haram in 2014 as documented by one researcher include:

“On April 15 and May 5, Boko Haram bombed a motor park in Abuja, killing more than 100 and 20 people, respectively...;

On May 21, Boko Haram carried out car bombings in a Christian area of Jos, killing more than 100 people;

On June 2, Boko Haram bombed a bar and brothel in Mubi, Adamawa State, killing more than 60 people, including soldiers and civilians...;

On June 9, a female suicide bomber – the first in Nigeria’s history – detonated explosives at a military barracks in Gombe, killing one soldier and herself...;

On June 25, Boko Haram bombed an elite mall in Abuja, killing 20 people just as the Nigeria-Argentina World Cup match was about to start...;

On June 26, Boko Haram attempted to bomb a police station in a popular market in Mubi (Adamawa State) but missed the target...;

On June 28, Boko Haram bombed a brothel in Bauchi State, killing 11 people...;

On July 12, Nigerian police uncovered a Boko Haram plan to bomb Abuja’s transport network with suicide bombers and explosives concealed in luggage...;

On July 23, Boko Haram bombed Murtala Square in Kaduna after the Ramadan sermon by prominent Sheikh Dahiru Bauchi, killing more than 30 people. A second bomb nearly killed former military head-of-state Muhammadu Buhari...”²¹

Therefore, between April and July 2014, there have been at least ten attacks by Boko Haram in the Middle Belt.²² Some analysts have noted that the preoccupation of most observers with the violence perpetrated by Boko Haram has eclipsed the violent conflict between the Fulani herdsmen from northern Nigeria and minority indigenous groups in the Middle Belt region.²³ While there have been various socio-economic explanations for this the conflict, a religious dimension seems apparent as well. In its 2016 report “Crushed but not defeated”, Open Doors International observed: “[I]ncidents of violence in which Christians are victims in a Muslim context can be religious, political, economic, and social-cultural at the same time.”²⁴ The report

²⁰ Zenn, Jacob, “Boko Haram Opens New Fronts in Lagos and Nigeria’s Middle Belt”, *Terrorism Monitor* Volume: 12 (15 July 2014) available at http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42669#.VtonufkrKUK.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Paden, John, “Religion and Conflict in Nigeria Countdown to the 2015 Elections”, *United States Institute of Peace* (2015), available at <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR359-Religion-and-Conflict-in-Nigeria.pdf>, p.3.

²³ See Adamu, Abdulbarkindo and Ben, Alupse, “Migration and Violent Conflict in Divided Societies Non-Boko Haram violence against Christians in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria”, *Nigeria Conflict Security Analysis Network (NCSAN)*, Working Paper No. 1, Abuja, Nigeria, available at <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/research/3779807>. Research Commissioned by World Watch Research, Open Doors International, Netherlands.

²⁴ Open Doors International, “Crushed but not Defeated: The Impact of Persistent Violence on the Church in Northern Nigeria”, available at <http://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Crushed-but-not-defeated-Full-Report.pdf>.

also underlined that, even though violence against Christians in northern Nigeria has religious, political and cattle grazing/land issues, religion is a “common denominator”.²⁵

In its report on one such conflict in 2014, Reuters observed:

“The unrest is often seen as sectarian in nature since Fulanis are Muslim and the communities with which they are in conflict in central Nigeria's ‘Middle Belt’ - where the country's mostly Christian south and Muslim north meet - tend to be Christian. Gunmen, suspected to be Fulanis, killed more than 100 people in an attack on three mostly Christian villages in central Nigeria late last month.”²⁶

The Global Terrorism Index has reported that various Fulani militant groups have “killed a total of more than 1,200 people in 2014.”²⁷ In the most recent attack at the time of writing, hundreds of people were killed. These attacks were attributed by many to a group of Fulani herdsmen in the Agatu Local Government Area of Benue State.²⁸ Therefore, the persistence and the gravity of the deadly conflict in the Middle Belt region is quite obvious.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “Nigeria clashes between Fulani herdsmen and vigilantes kill 72”, 7 April 2014, Reuters, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-violence-idUSBREA360HT20140407>.

²⁷ “Nigeria's Buhari orders investigation into Benue clashes”, 29 February 2016, BBC, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35686264?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&utm_term=*Editors%20Picks.

²⁸ Duru, Peter, “300 die as herdsmen, farmers clash in Benue”, 26 February 2016, Vanguard, available at <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/02/300-die-as-herdsmen-farmers-clash-in-benue/>.

3. President Buhari and the Middle Belt conflict

In evaluating the performance of President Buhari's administration in addressing the religious conflict in the Middle Belt region, one can see that there are several reasons to be critical. The first reason is the fact that the administration of President Buhari has been very slow to recognize the severity of the problem and come up with a plan to address it. While President Buhari had made it a priority for the Nigerian armed forces to defeat Boko Haram in northern Nigeria and demanded that this be accomplished in a relatively short period of time, he has paid little attention in comparison to the situation in the Middle Belt.²⁹ It appears that, although he was sworn in to office in May 2015, his administration did not have any clear strategy or plan to address the violence and conflict in the Middle Belt region until January 2016.³⁰ That means, it took the administration of President Buhari about eight months to come up with a plan to end the onslaught of violence in the region that particularly targeted Christians in the Middle Belt. Observing the failure of President Buhari's administration to pay adequate attention to the situation in the Middle Belt region, analysts have noted: "While the attention of the Nigerian government is focused towards ending the violent Boko Haram insurgency in the country's North-East region, it has turned a blind eye to the equally devastating conflict, brewing in the North Central region."³¹ There has also been violence going on for years in states like Taraba State where the perpetrators include "youths, politicians, elders and civil servants".³² This has not been addressed sufficiently by the government.

At this point, it is important to underscore that the violence against Christians in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria has been devastating. According to data collected by the Nigeria Conflict Security Analysis Network, between January 2011 and March 2014 at least 1284 people have been killed and 1386 houses have been destroyed by Hausa-Fulani Muslim herdsmen who attacked indigenous Christian communities in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. The data, which only provides a very incomplete picture of the magnitude of the casualties, shows the gravity of the situation.³³

The Nigeria Conflict Security Analysis Network also conducted an extensive research on Taraba State alone and found Christians facing much more complicated and horrific situations. The research revealed that the total of Christians killed in Taraba State alone, in a shorter period of time, is already higher than the total mentioned above for the whole region. This research

²⁹ "Boko Haram crisis: Nigerian military chiefs given deadline", 13 August 2015, BBC, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-33913305>.

³⁰ "Buhari Reveal Plans to End Fulani Herdsmen Farmers Clash", 26 January 2016, BuzzNigeria, available at <http://buzznigeria.com/buhari-reveal-plans-to-end-fulani-herdsmen-farmers-clash/>.

³¹ Ibekwe, Nicholas, "How Nigerian govt. is fueling conflict between Nigeria's Fulani herdsmen, host communities – Report", 21 October 2015, Premium Times, available at (see page 6) <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/features-and-interviews/191838-how-nigerian-govt-is-fuelling-conflict-between-nigerias-fulani-herdsmen-host-communities-report.html>.

³² The Violent Road: Nigeria's North East, available at <https://aoav.org.uk/2013/the-violent-road-nigeria-north-east/> last accessed 30 March 2016.

³³ Abdulbarkindo Adamu, Abdulbarkindo and Alupse Ben, "Migration and Violent Conflict in Divided Societies | Non-Boko Haram violence against Christians in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria", Nigeria Conflict Security Analysis Network (NCSAN), Working Paper No. 1, Abuja, Nigeria, pp.30-35, available at <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/research/3779807>. Report commissioned by World Watch Research, Open Doors International, Netherlands.

(compiling data from December 2013 to July 2015) found out that “1,484 Christians were killed out of which 532 were men, 507 women and 445 children. The statistics also show that 2,388 Christians were injured out of which 1,069 were men, 817 women and 502 children.”³⁴ It was also found that in the reporting period, “171 churches, 314 houses, 39 shops and businesses of Christians have been destroyed, as well as many fields, goods and other possessions, and 15 complete family compounds with many houses and other properties were destroyed.”³⁵ Furthermore, the research found out that tens of thousands of Christians were displaced, their farmlands and villages being taken over by the Hausa-Fulani Muslim herdsmen.³⁶ It is important to realize that no claim is made that this data is complete. The researchers estimate that the information gathered on violence could be 50% of the total violence committed. This means the situation is in all probability far worse than the data suggests. The incompleteness of the data is caused by two factors: the researchers were not able to enter certain areas for security reasons; and not everyone they met was able to answer questions in detail, also for security reasons. As far as violence against Muslims is concerned, the researchers diligently searched for data, but no one was willing to share documented information.³⁷

In an extensive report by SBM Intelligence on the violence in the Middle Belt region, one can clearly see both the gravity of the situation and the government’s lack of interest. This report indicates that the extent of the violence against the indigenous Christian ethnic communities by the Fulani herdsmen is genocidal and that it is being exacerbated by the government’s neglect of the situation. Given that the report was based on field research and interviews with victims, these observations are not to be taken lightly and some passages from the report are worth quoting here at some length. The report notes:

“From late 2012, the killings by herdsmen in the Middle Belt began to take on a systematic and methodical pattern that increasingly looks like a deliberate plan to wipe out native ethnic groups, either by killing or displacing them, in order to take control of lands and fields in the region.”³⁸

“[W]hile the violence in the Middle Belt has been almost as deadly as the violence by Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, it has been ignored both by the media and the government.”³⁹

Further, the report asserts:

“Unlike the more high profile and internationally recognized Boko Haram insurgency, the conflict in the Middle Belt is under-reported in both the domestic and international media, and the government’s response to it has been *a sort of denial that this conflict*

³⁴ See <http://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Violent-Conflict-in-Taraba-State-2013-2015.pdf>, pp.20-30. Last accessed on 23 March 2016.

³⁵ Ibid., pp.33-47.

³⁶ Ibid., pp.30-33.

³⁷ Ibid., p.16.

³⁸ “Terror in the Food Basket: A look into the violence in North-Central Nigeria”, October 2015, SBM Intelligence, available at http://sbmintel.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/201510_Terror-in-Nigerias-Food-Basket.pdf, p.7. Last assessed 11 April 2016.

³⁹ Ibid.

exists, with senior government officials preferring to focus on either Boko Haram, or the issue of cattle rustling in the North-West.”⁴⁰ (Emphasis added)

Therefore, it could be said that the failure of President Buhari’s administration (and of the preceding administration under President Goodluck Jonathan) to recognize the severity of the problem and pay sufficient attention to it has made the situation worse. One cannot overstate the monumental failure of the Nigerian government in this regard. The SBM report notes:

“In many hamlets and villages, houses are burnt or torn down, and where the houses still stand they have been overtaken by weeds as the inhabitants have long fled. Schools and markets have been destroyed or shut down. Farms have been deserted and whole communities have been emptied. It is a story shocking in both its effect on the region and *in the near total government silence.*”⁴¹ (Emphasis added)

A government cannot solve a problem that it has not recognized and is not paying attention to. The neglect of the situation has meant that the attacks by the Fulani militia are becoming more deadly and sophisticated. There are reports indicating that the Fulani herdsmen who are carrying out the attacks are not simply “herdsmen” but are using motorcycles, are heavily armed and organized, making them more and more dangerous. This phenomenon betrays the failure of the government at many levels and in different aspects. To begin with, there seems to be little intelligence and information gathered by the government to understand the source of the problem and how it has evolved and if there is more to the conflict than meets the eye.⁴² More importantly, the persistent failure of the government to secure its borders, to control the flow of weapons and its failure to provide protection to the communities that are being systematically wiped out is a colossal failure that is having very tragic consequences. There also seems to be a lack of urgency in the government’s response to the situation.

All in all, one can say that the administration of President Buhari has clearly failed to respond to the conflict in the Middle Belt region with the urgency and commitment that the severity of the situation requires. This neglect is making matters worse and, if it continues, could result in a situation where the perpetrators of the violence create a *fait accompli* by wiping out the Christian communities and the indigenous population from the area. The attacks against the indigenous communities in the Middle Belt have been almost as deadly and as indiscriminate as attacks by Boko Haram. The perpetrators claim that they engage in these attacks out of revenge for incidents in which they claim their cattle was stolen or killed by the farmers in the area.⁴³ Obviously, the scale and nature of the violence that the “herdsmen” engage in shows that these are not mere instances of cattle herders trying to settle scores with farmers who they allege have stolen or killed their cattle. The level and brutality of the violence shows that there could be more sinister motives at play and the religious dimension of the conflict simply cannot be ignored. Therefore, the government of Nigeria must recognize that the insecurity and violence

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.4.

⁴¹ Ibid, p.4.

⁴² Osayande, Augustine, “Senate Urges Security Agencies to Check Proliferation of Arms among Herdsmen”, Nigerian newspaper Today, 3 March 2016, available at <http://www.nigeriannewspapers.today/2016/03/03/senate-urges-security-agencies-to-check-proliferation-of-arms-among-herdsmen/>.

⁴³ Duru, Peter, “Breaking: Why we attacked Agatu – Fulani herdsmen”, (March 4, 2016) Vanguard, available at <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/03/breaking-why-we-attacked-agatu-fulani-herdsmen/>.

in the Middle Belt is as serious as the situation in northeastern Nigeria and that it must act in all urgency to address the problem. The problem is complicated and the conflict has many dimensions. Therefore, the government's plan of action should address all facets of the problem including the brutal and extremely violent religious persecution that is part of the tragedy.

4. Abandoning the promise of neutrality?

One of the accusations that dogged President Buhari during the campaign leading up to the presidential election was the allegation that he would “islamize” Nigeria if elected president. This accusation created fear for some Nigerians in the predominantly Christian southern part of Nigeria. As a presidential candidate, Buhari had tried to allay such fears among Christian Nigerians by making pronouncements about his intention to be impartial in religious matters and by picking as his running mate a law professor and a pastor of a local Christian church.⁴⁴ As a candidate, General Buhari also met with various Christian leaders to assure them that if elected president, he would not show any favoritism to a particular religion and that he would serve both Christian and Muslim Nigerians equally.⁴⁵ Given that President Buhari has now been in office for over a year, it is possible to evaluate whether he has kept the promise that his presidency would not be used to advance the agenda of any particular religious group.

The track record of President Buhari’s administration reveals a complicated picture. There have been some minor controversies that have flared up and fed the fears that President Buhari has an agenda or a plan to subtly and slowly islamize Nigeria. While the president could be given the benefit of the doubt and some of the controversies could be explained away, other controversies seem to justify the unease of observers. For instance, a recent trip by President Buhari to Saudi Arabia has led a prominent politician in the opposition political party and a governor of Ekiti, one of the southern states of Nigeria, to claim: “They have started subtle moves to make Nigeria an Islamic nation.”⁴⁶ However, the governor in question did not point to anything in particular to substantiate his claim. The mere fact that President Buhari had gone to Saudi Arabia does not seem to warrant the allegations made by the governor of Ekiti.

Another controversy that has arisen concerns the directive President Buhari issued to the Ministry of Education concerning the inclusion of two books for Islamic Studies in the secondary school curriculum for all Federal Government Colleges. These books were written by a former Sharia court judge.⁴⁷ While some have taken this incident as an indication of a hidden agenda to propagate Islam in Nigeria, others have pointed to an already existing curriculum that had been in place prior to the Buhari presidency, including courses on “Islamic Studies and Christian Religious Studies”.⁴⁸ Therefore, the directive from the president could be seen just as an instruction for the inclusion of specific books on the reading list of an existing curriculum. Nevertheless, the fact that the president took the trouble to give such a directive on a matter of religious instruction could be disconcerting and inappropriate taking into account the neutrality

⁴⁴ Tukur, Sani and Garba, Abdullahi, “Fayemi, Pastors laud selection of Osinbajo as running mate to Buhari”, 19 December 2014, Premium Times, available at <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/173551-fayemi-pastors-laud-selection-osinbajo-running-mate-buhari.html>.

⁴⁵ Fayeseon, Abayomi, “Buhari meets Northern Christian leaders”, 2 February 2015, The Nation, available at <http://thenationonlineng.net/buhari-meets-northern-christian-leaders/>.

⁴⁶ “Buhari Trying to Islamize Nigeria – Fayose”, available at <http://www.informationng.com/2016/02/buhari-trying-to-islamize-nigeria-fayose.html>.

⁴⁷ “Why Buhari wants Islamic books included in Federal schools’ curriculum”, 3 August 2015, Vanguard, available at <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/08/why-buhari-wants-islamic-books-included-in-federal-schools-curriculum/>.

⁴⁸ Adesulu, Dayo, “What Nigeria stands to gain from Basic Education Curriculum revision – Obioma, NERDC boss”, 1 November 2012, Vanguard, available at <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/11/what-nigeria-stands-to-gain-from-basic-education-curriculum-revision-obioma-nerdc-boss/>.

that is to be expected from his office. Another cause for controversy has been the inclusion of Nigeria in a coalition (which Saudi Arabia claims to have created) of 34 Muslim countries to fight terrorism and the terror group Islamic State (IS).⁴⁹ The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) has particularly been vocal in opposing attempts to enlist Nigeria in a coalition of Muslim nations even if the aim of the coalition is to fight entities like IS and Boko Haram. In its statement regarding the matter, the secretary general of CAN said:

“This singular gesture of the Buhari government betrays so much, and tends to confirm our fears that underneath everything this government is doing, there is an agenda with strong Islamic undertones, aimed at undermining Nigeria’s pluralistic character and neutrality regarding government’s affiliation to any one religion. While joining hands with other countries to fight ISIS is something good, our country must not be tagged as a Muslim or Arab nation. Christians must make a public statement showing their discontent on this development which portends great danger to national unity and integration.”⁵⁰

Heeding such calls, President Buhari’s administration initially seemed to have rejected the idea of Nigeria joining the coalition.⁵¹ This was lauded as a “smart move” by some analysts.⁵² It should be noted that the coalition was unilaterally announced by Saudi Arabia and some of the states included in the list expressed their surprise at their inclusion in the coalition about which they claimed they had not been consulted.⁵³ However, the most recent reports at the time of writing indicate that President Buhari has now decided to make Nigeria part of the coalition.⁵⁴ The inclusion of Nigeria in the coalition led by Saudi Arabia is particularly troubling for Christian Nigerians because it is reminiscent of Nigeria’s membership in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC; formerly Organization of the Islamic Conference) in an era when military dictators hailing from northern Nigeria dominated politics in the country. Buhari’s decision to join the coalition of Islamic states implies Nigeria is an Islamic state. The symbolic significance of this act is very problematic.

All in all, while there has not been any substantial evidence to indicate that President Buhari has a conscious plan to spread the influence of Islam in Nigeria, some of his decisions and acts since he assumed the presidency have fed such fears. These decisions could be considered as tactless

⁴⁹ “Saudi Arabia forms Muslim 'anti-terrorism' coalition”, 15 December 2015, Aljazeera, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/saudi-arabia-forms-muslim-anti-terrorism-coalition-151215035914865.html>.

⁵⁰ “CAN protests moves to list Nigeria among Arab nations to fight ISIS”, 17 December 2015, Vanguard, available at <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/12/can-protests-moves-to-list-nigeria-among-arab-nations-to-fight-isis/http://www.vanguardngr.com/2015/12/can-protests-moves-to-list-nigeria-among-arab-nations-to-fight-isis/>.

⁵¹ Soniyi, Tobi, “Nigeria: Buhari Rejects Invitation to Join Coalition of Islamic States against Terror”, 23 February 2016, This Day, available at <http://allafrica.com/stories/201602240219.html>.

⁵² Omolayo, Omotola, “President Buhari Made A Smart Move by Rejecting The Saudi Arabia Coalition”, 25 February 2016, Ventures Africa, available at <http://venturesafrica.com/president-buhari-made-a-smart-move-by-rejecting-the-saudi-arabia-coalition/>.

⁵³ See Flood, Rebecca, “Two countries had no idea they were in Saudi Arabia's Muslim coalition to fight terrorism”, 18 December 2015, The Independent, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-announces-34-strong-coalition-of-muslim-nations-to-fight-terrorism-but-two-countries-a6779186.html>.

⁵⁴ “Terrorism: Buhari confirms Nigeria’s membership of Saudi’s Islamic coalition”, 6 March 2016, The Punch, available at <http://www.punchng.com/38715-2/>.

or insensitive, symbolic acts that undermine the neutrality of his office. Hopefully, such acts will remain the exception rather than the norm.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to evaluate the track record of President Buhari and see if he has kept his promises with regard to tackling Islamic militancy evident among Hausa-Fulani Muslim herdsman and others, particularly in the Middle Belt region in Nigeria, and whether he has kept his promise to maintain the religious neutrality of his office.⁵⁵ Unfortunately, with regard to the Middle Belt region, it is clear that the administration of President Buhari has failed to recognize the gravity of the situation and act with urgency to protect the farmers who are being subjected to devastating attacks by the Fulani militia. This failure has created an environment conducive to the perpetrators of the violence. Unless the government acts swiftly, most of the farmers in the area could be dispossessed of their land and many more could be killed. These Christian communities are being subjected to a systematic massacre that can be called *ethnic cleansing*⁵⁶ and are facing an existential threat. However, the Nigerian government has failed to act in a manner that is appropriate to the situation. With regard to the fears that President Buhari could use his office to spread the influence of Islam in Nigeria, the president has indeed made some decisions which enhance these fears. While these decisions do not necessarily reveal a commitment on the part of the president to “islamize” Nigeria, they show a degree of insensitivity to the sensibilities of Christian Nigerians who harbor such fears. Hopefully, this does not foreshadow a period in which the president would take decisions and measures that bolster one religion at the expense of another in Nigeria.

⁵⁵ See <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/184007-ill-be-president-of-all-nigerians-buhari.html>, last assessed 28 April 2016.

⁵⁶ See <http://theanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Ethnic-cleansing-in-the-Middle-Belt-Region-of-Nigeria-2015.pdf>, last accessed on 30 March 2016.