

Boko Haram

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Introduction

In July 2009, a showdown was brewing in Maiduguri, northeastern Nigeria's largest city. On one side were the followers of a charismatic local Muslim scholar named Mohammed Yusuf. Yusuf had risen over the course of a decade from relative anonymity to become one of the most influential (and radical) clerics in the country, building a community of thousands of followers informally known around the region as "Boko Haram" (roughly, "Westernization Is Forbidden"). A powerful public speaker and skilled organizer, Yusuf taught that Nigerian Muslims had fallen away from the "true" Islam of the Prophet's time and that it could only be restored by rejecting outside influences such as democracy and Western-style education. To that end, he and his supporters had amassed money, property, and (it was rumored) weapons in anticipation of a showdown with a government they regarded as entirely illegitimate.¹

On the other side were fearful local authorities, many of whom had watched Yusuf's rise with interest and even sought to co-opt or collaborate with him on their own political schemes in the years following

Nigeria's surprising return to democratic rule in 1999. In recent months, they had responded to growing evidence of his strength and rumored connections to more violent movements in North Africa and the Middle East by stepping up their campaign of public harassment and intimidation, and the situation was clearly escalating. It would take only a little spark to set off an explosion.

On July 26, Yusuf's supporters struck first, and the police and military responded with their full might. Within just a few days, eight hundred members of the group were dead, many reportedly killed in cold blood by security forces after the fighting had stopped. The tally included Yusuf himself, illegally executed behind a police station after interrogation. Soon after, the Nigerian government declared the movement over and the problem solved. Yet within a year, Boko Haram had rebuilt itself under the leadership of a charismatic and vicious figure named Abubakar Shekau, Yusuf's former second-in-command. Under Shekau, Boko Haram fashioned itself into a violent jihadist movement dedicated to destroying the Nigerian state and establishing its own strident vision of Islam as the law of the land. Within just a few years, it would become one of the deadliest insurgencies in the world, capable of mounting well-planned bombings, brutal hit-and-run attacks and assassinations, and even winning pitched battles with the Nigerian Army.

Yet for the vast majority of Nigerians, the realities of the war—and by 2013 it was indeed a war, with a

federal state of emergency in three of Nigeria's thirty-six states and a massive troop deployment—made little impression. Nigeria's political leadership downplayed the conflict's severity, both to its own people and the international community. Meanwhile, rumors (partially true but often wildly exaggerated) that the group was supported by foreigners circulated as proof that Boko Haram was not really a *Nigerian* problem after all but a local affair for Muslims “up there” to solve.

Even after nearly a decade of conflict that has displaced more than two million people, killed tens of thousands of civilians, and opened up a massive new front in the “global war on terror,” the conflict's geographic isolation to one of the country's poorest corners has left many Nigerians deeply alienated from the war in their midst. And although the broader global public has occasionally caught glimpses of this conflict, it remains poorly understood and underreported. The result has been nothing less than a massive and complex catastrophe that, as of this writing, affects millions of people across the Lake Chad Basin region, even as politicians in Abuja (Nigeria's capital) and international officials debate potential courses of action and struggle to provide security and assistance to some of the most vulnerable people in the world.

In part, this book is the story of Boko Haram as a movement and the violence it has perpetrated. But it is also a *social* history that examines the conflict in north-eastern Nigeria as a phenomenon much larger than

a single terrorist group and its actions. We have chosen to tell this story because, as you will soon see, we view Boko Haram's rise and bloody career as not only a product of its religious vision but also a consequence of Nigeria's deep-seated social and political challenges. Understanding Boko Haram and the destruction it has wrought requires first understanding the local circumstances that gave rise to it and that have fed the conflict ever since.

A Tale of Two Countries

In 2013, a story in the British newspaper the *Guardian* reported that Nigeria was the second-fastest-growing market in the world for champagne.² When Nigeria makes the international news, it is often for this sort of human-interest narrative that points a bit too cleverly to the country's vast contradictions. The country is home not only to famous oil reserves (35 billion barrels as of 2017) but also to two of Africa's three wealthiest men (entrepreneurs Aliko Dangote and Mike Adenuga). For anyone who has spent time in the tonier parts of Lagos, Nigeria's 21-million-person megacity, or encountered wealthy Nigerians abroad, it is not hard to believe that this rapidly growing country of 180 million citizens is an increasingly profitable market for luxury goods.

In recent years, Nigeria's wealthy reputation has become one of its most visible exports. Everything from a 2016 documentary called *Lagos to London: Britain's New Super-Rich* to a recent "Kleptocracy Tour" of London

highlighting suspiciously expensive real estate owned by Nigerian politicians paints an admittedly not particularly flattering picture of a nation in ascendance. And, indeed, at least some Nigerians see this extravagance as an opportunity. Since 2009, when Nigeria's Ministry of Information launched a notorious "rebranding" campaign designed to change the country's international image, the government's goal has been to repackage it as an up-and-coming power, deflecting attention away from the corruption and poverty that remain major problems in the lives of ordinary citizens.

This new Nigerian image—a country that dominates international music and film charts, hosts powerhouse media and fashion industries, and is a hub of investment and financing for technological innovation—is true, and it reflects improvements in the lives of many Nigerians. But it also obscures other, harder realities. Nigeria is the only large country in the world that has seen an *increase* in the number of people living in extreme poverty since 1990, and, although it returned to civilian rule in 1999, the promise of (as many Nigerians put it) a "democratic dividend" paid off to ordinary, working-class people in the form of better government and greater attention to issues of social justice has not arrived.

What does this inequality look like? Lagos's glamour hides massive slums such as Makoko, where hundreds of thousands live in ramshackle houses built on stilts in the city's lagoon. And the country's inadequate infrastructure means that even middle-class Nigerians struggle to

obtain services such as electricity and safe, affordable transportation, while the poor lack necessities such as clean water and health care. In the Niger Delta, home to the country's oil reserves, activists and militants have fought a decades-long battle with the federal government, demanding their "fair share" of the resources that have brought the country billions while polluting their air and ground. And in the country's Muslim-majority north, there is a long history of religious scholars and activists using the language of Islam to challenge corruption, poor governance, and a lack of social justice.

The idea that the Nigerian story is a "tale of two countries" is not new. Chinua Achebe used it in his 1987 novel *Anthills of the Savannah*, which depicts a fictional West African country called Kangan (a loose stand-in for Nigeria) deeply divided between its capital's wealth and cosmopolitanism and the poverty and neglect of its interior. But many Nigerians (and a fair number of outsiders) see the most important division between Nigerians as civilizational, pitting an increasingly prosperous majority-Christian "south" against a "backward" Muslim-majority north. The two halves of what we call Nigeria today—brought together by colonial fiat in 1914—do have important and durable differences in terms of culture and language, in how they were governed by their colonial rulers, and (to some extent) in their levels of prosperity today. These differences are real, and they have played a significant role in shaping the country's legacy of ethnic and religious conflict.

But are they inevitable and unresolvable? Many Nigerians still agree with the legendary politician Obafemi Awolowo, who wrote that Nigeria was a country without a nation, a “mere geographic expression.” For his part, Achebe, in his final book in 2012, *There Was a Country*, revealed that he had come to see the country’s pained history of violence and civil war in civilizational terms, describing his own ethnic group (the Igbo) as naturally open to cultural change and progress, while Muslims from the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups (collectively the majority in northern Nigeria) are “hindered by a wary religion” and their desire for domination.³

But if there are really two Nigerias, these simplistic and reductive accounts do not do either of them justice. For one, they mask the many ways in which Nigeria’s economic, political, and social interconnectedness transcends religious and ethnic differences. For another, in Nigeria, corruption and its benefits know no particular ethnic or religious boundaries, a fact that has often made it harder, rather than easier, to build coalitions to address the country’s biggest challenges. And, finally, they fail to recognize just how much the citizens of any country, whatever their differences, share a common fate. Sooner or later, a crisis for some Nigerians becomes a crisis for all.

The Stolen Girls

Unofficially, Boko Haram became a “crisis for all” on the night of April 14, 2014, in the sleepy town of Chibok,

roughly 120 kilometers south of Maiduguri. There, members of Boko Haram stormed the compound of a girls' secondary school, reportedly looking for building supplies. What they found instead were hundreds of young women who had recently returned from a break to take their final examinations. Despite rumors of an impending attack, government forces had been slow to provide additional security, so when the assailants arrived they encountered almost no resistance. In all, they kidnapped 276 students that night, girls who aspired to become doctors and nurses, teachers and scientists. Although "the Chibok girls," as they would come to be known, were hardly Boko Haram's first victims, their fate quickly became a symbol at home and abroad of the struggles and violence faced by many ordinary Nigerians living in the shadow of their country's prosperity.

This kidnapping was only the most recent tragedy in a community that had suffered more than its share. The town takes its name from the local hills where its residents once fled to escape from slave raiders sent by powerful local kingdoms, who roamed the region until the late nineteenth century. More recently, as a Christian-majority enclave of roughly sixty thousand citizens in a state home to nearly six million, Chibok's residents have often faced inattention or even marginalization from local authorities. Not that there was much to go around: Borno State and its neighbors in the northeastern region suffer from some of the highest rates of poverty, illiteracy, and child and maternal health risks in all of Nigeria.

Soon after the attack, there was a surge in international interest in Boko Haram, accompanied by new efforts to explain the group's motives, goals, and place in the world of global terrorism. Much of it depicted the group's actions first and foremost as an attack on girls and their access to education. American celebrities such as Angelina Jolie, George Clooney, and (perhaps most famously) Michelle Obama promoted the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag, originally begun on Twitter by Nigerians, as a vehicle for drawing attention to the female victims of religious extremism around the world. Another similar narrative emphasized the role of poverty and a lack of education in driving extremist violence in places like northeastern Nigeria. After all, what better evidence of the link between poverty, ignorance, and violence than a group of radical extremists in one of the poorest parts of the world who declared "Western education" forbidden by God and kidnapped girls who attempted to access it?

Unfortunately, this outrage did little to stem the tide of violence. At best, stories like the Chibok kidnapping can lead to globally organized movements that lobby governments and international agencies. At worst, sensationalist international media coverage actively detracts from the work of local organizers, whose appeals are drowned out by the megaphone of what the Nigerian American writer Teju Cole has referred to as the "White-Savior Industrial Complex." However well-intentioned, this global activism has had very little real

on-the-ground impact on either Boko Haram or Nigerian policy toward the conflict. And while Boko Haram's victims have certainly drawn less attention internationally than those of attacks in cities such as Paris, Brussels, San Bernardino, and Istanbul (to name only a few), it is not a lack of press coverage that allowed the group to kill more than twelve thousand civilians and displace 2.6 million from their homes and communities from 2010 to 2017.

Boko Haram as a Nigerian Story

Chibok and its aftermath are essential to the Boko Haram story, but one of our goals is to take you beyond those headlines and into a deeper understanding of the conflict's origins and its consequences for the millions of ordinary Nigerians caught in the crosshairs. Cutting through a tangled web of evidence, we hope to offer a clear and concise story about who the members of Boko Haram are, where they came from, how they have operated, and the toll they have taken on the ordinary Nigerians (and Cameroonians, Chadians, and Nigeriens) in their path.

More broadly, we hope that the book will help readers understand how the story of the “two Nigerias”—one wealthy and globalized, the other poor and insecure—has influenced both Boko Haram's emergence and the Nigerian government's tragically ineffective response to it. Certainly, it is important to acknowledge Boko Haram's place in a larger global story about the rise of

jihadist terror and insurgency in the early twenty-first century. But we also argue that the group's history, rise, and (hopefully) fall are deeply connected to this Nigerian story, in which a country of great wealth and opportunity nonetheless found itself confronting one of the world's deadliest insurgencies.

In the hands of the country's ruling class, a simplistic version of the "two Nigerias" story emphasizing the inevitability of conflict over the country's ethnic and religious differences helped nurture the conditions that made Boko Haram possible. Yet, as we hope to show, a more nuanced understanding of how inequality, injustice, and poor governance unite many Nigerians across lines of ethnic and religious identity also reveals how the struggle against Boko Haram has brought out the country's best. Beyond discussions of Boko Haram's history, ideology, and tactics, this book aims to tell stories about how a wide range of Nigerians—particularly artists, writers, and musicians—have responded to the crisis, often in ways that bring Nigerians together rather than pushing them further apart.

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As of this writing, the story of Boko Haram and the fight against it remains unfinished. Although the Nigerian government has repeatedly declared them "technically defeated," they continue to kill. Millions of residents of northeastern Nigeria (and across the Lake Chad Basin) are unable to return to their homes and begin the long

process of rebuilding their communities, while others are terrorized (and, increasingly, taxed for revenue to sustain the insurgency) by members of the ISIS-affiliated “Islamic State in West Africa,” a Boko Haram offshoot that split with Shekau in 2016. Some but not all of the Chibok girls have been released from captivity following negotiations between the government and leaders of the Boko Haram faction that held them, and protesters continue to challenge government’s inability to free the thousands of other captives who remain. Meanwhile, new abductions and suicide bombings have continued with depressing frequency. Although events may eventually overtake some of the details we offer here, we hope that this book provides a useful marker along the way to what will surely be more comprehensive histories in the years to come.