Boko Haram, a movement claiming to act in the name of Islam, has killed tens of thousands of people in Nigeria and the neighboring countries of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Tens of thousands more have died amid the broader crisis that Boko Haram precipitated. Civilians, Muslims and Christians alike, have fallen victim to hunger and disease, and millions in the region now face precarity. Others have been killed by the Nigerian security forces, whose heavy-handed response to Boko Haram has exacerbated the conflict. Boko Haram is one of the deadliest jihadist groups in the world, and the crisis surrounding it is one of the globe’s worst.

Boko Haram took shape in the northeastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri in the early 2000s. The group became notorious—but also attracted support—for its contention that Western-style education (in the Hausa language, boko) was legally prohibited by Islam (in Arabic and Hausa, haram). In Boko Haram’s eyes,

---

1 Figures for the death toll are disputed and inexact. Some totals do not distinguish between the violence Boko Haram commits and the deaths inflicted by security forces and civilian vigilantes. Most databases rely on press reports, meaning that casualty counts can be too high or, more likely, too low. Some violence is never reported at all—journalists’ access to combat zones and especially to rural northeastern Nigeria has often been blocked by both Boko Haram and the Nigerian government. Institutions tracking violence include the Council on Foreign Relations (http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483), John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (http://www.connectsaisafrica.org/research/african-studies-publications/social-violence-nigeria/), and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (http://www.crisis.acleddata.com/category/boko-haram/).
Western-style education belonged to a larger, evil system. That system included multiparty democracy, secular government, constitutionalism, and “man-made laws.” For Boko Haram, all these institutions are not just un-Islamic but anti-Islamic.

Over time, Boko Haram has preserved core elements of its message. But Boko Haram has also periodically shifted its strategies, tactics, and self-presentation. This book reconstructs the movement’s history, paying attention to how its doctrine interacted with the changing environment around it.

The book is organized chronologically, dividing Boko Haram’s career into five phases. First, there was the movement’s prehistory: the decades from the 1970s to the 1990s, when its future founders grew up amid political uncertainty, disruptive urbanization, interreligious violence, and widespread debate about the relationship between Islam and politics. Second, from approximately 2001 to 2009, there was a phase of open preaching. One portion of Boko Haram attacked local authorities in 2003–4, but the group’s decisive turn to violence occurred in 2009, when the sect launched an uprising across several northern Nigerian states. This rebellion was crushed, and Boko Haram’s founder, Muhammad Yusuf, was killed by police. A third phase, from 2010 to 2013, centered on terrorism. Led by Yusuf’s companion Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram bombed major targets, including in the capital, Abuja, and perpetrated regular assassinations and raids in the northeast.

During a fourth phase, from 2013 to 2015, Boko Haram controlled territory in northeastern Nigeria. The group offered civilians a stark choice: embrace Boko Haram’s brand of Islam, or face violence. It was in this phase that Boko Haram’s most infamous attack occurred: the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls in the town of Chibok in April 2014. The fifth phase began when Boko Haram’s “state” largely fell to the militaries of Nige-
ria and its neighbors. Boko Haram then resumed its clandestine existence and intensified its terrorism. As part of its latest incarnation, Boko Haram declared its affiliation to the Islamic State, also known as ISIS and ISIL, in March 2015—a move that soon brought schisms within the group. With a host of actors now involved in the conflict, Boko Haram remains deadly.

Central Arguments

This book argues that Boko Haram represents the outcome of dynamic, locally grounded interactions between religion and politics. I stress the dynamism of these interactions because Boko Haram is reactive and adaptable. The group has sometimes subtly shifted its core doctrine in response to external events. I stress the local aspect of interactions between religion and politics because most of the key moments in Boko Haram’s history occurred in Maiduguri and northeastern Nigeria. The group’s trajectory reflects decisions taken by individuals, decisions shaped by the contingencies of their locality. A hyper-local view is necessary if one is to answer the question of why Boko Haram emerged in Maiduguri and not in Kano or Sokoto, or in any of the other numerous Nigerian and Sahelian cities where one can find poverty, corruption, and radical preachers. Only by closely examining Boko Haram’s history in northeastern Nigeria does it become possible to identify critical junctures in the movement’s trajectory.

This approach breaks with two prevailing explanations for Boko Haram’s emergence. One explanation holds that Boko Haram is best understood as an extension or even a puppet of the global jihadist movement—casting Boko Haram as a kind of “Nigerian al-Qaedaism,” and claiming that foreign backers,
especially Algerians, long pulled Boko Haram’s strings.\(^2\) A second explanation depicts Boko Haram as the product of a collision between poverty, “poor governance,” and economic disparities between northern and southern Nigeria.\(^3\)

These explanations fail because each emphasizes one factor as a master explanation for Boko Haram, either transnational jihadism or “relative deprivation.” But as William McCants has written, efforts to identify a single cause that drives jihadist movements are problematic. McCants has proposed a broader framework:

To my mind, the most salient [causes] are these: a religious heritage that lauds fighting abroad to establish states and to protect one’s fellow Muslims; ultraconservative religious ideas and networks exploited by militant recruiters; peer pressure (if you know someone involved, you’re more likely to get involved); fear of religious persecution; poor governance (not


type of government); youth unemployment or underemployment in large cities; and civil war.4

To the list, I would add politics, in the sense that jihadist movements are political actors and in the additional sense that political developments can enable or constrain their activities. In this book, I adapt Abdul Raufu Mustapha’s “empirically based multidimensional approach” for analyzing Boko Haram, which highlights five factors: religious doctrines, poverty and inequality, post-1999 politics, youth agency, and geography.5 But to avoid a “kitchen sink” problem where anything and everything is proposed an explanation for Boko Haram, I focus on interactions between religion and politics, and I flesh out the role of agency.

Going further, I would emphasize again that the next challenge is to localize such factors—not just at the level of a country, but at the level of a city, Maiduguri, and a few states. After all, jihadist movements are diverse. Jihadist ideology is not a one-size-fits-all package of bad ideas. Rather, organizations like Boko Haram—even if they are in dialogue with global jihadist trends—develop localized doctrines that evolve through interactions with their surroundings. Additionally, Boko Haram merits a different kind of analytical treatment than that typically given to jihadist groups that began as small, clandestine militant cells. Almost uniquely among contemporary jihadist movements,

---
5 Abdul Raufu Mustapha has proposed one such framework for understanding Boko Haram, which is close to mine. See Mustapha, “Understanding Boko Haram,” in Sects and Social Disorder: Muslim Identities and Conflict in Northern Nigeria, edited by Abdul Raufu Mustapha, 147–98 (Suffolk: James Currey, 2014); in a way, the present book tries to localize Mustapha’s approach and to more deeply investigate his category of “agency.”
Introduction

it began as a mass religious movement before transitioning to armed struggle. And to an unusual degree among peer movements, it stresses Western-style education as an enemy.

This study builds on excellent academic studies of Boko Haram's doctrine, operations, and career. Journalists have provided valuable perspectives on the movement's violence, as well as on the atmosphere of corruption and contentious politics in Nigeria. Other studies address topics that this book cannot, for reasons of space, cover, especially Boko Haram's treatment of women.


10As this book went to press, Hilary Matfess was completing a book on Boko Haram and women, of which I have read only parts, but which promises to be a strong contribution. See also Mia Bloom and Hilary Matfess, “Women as Symbols and Swords in Boko Haram’s Terror,” PRISM 6:1 (March 2016), http://cco.ndu.edu
This book’s contribution lies in clarifying how ideas and environments interacted to produce and sustain Boko Haram. The book is not an ethnography, but rather a documentary history. Drawing on underutilized documents and sources, ranging from long-forgotten government reports to religious texts and propaganda videos in Arabic and Hausa, the book reveals the dynamism of Boko Haram’s doctrines and illuminates the political and social foundations of the localized niche that the movement came to occupy.

Religion, Politics, and Boko Haram

Religion and politics, as analytical categories, are highly contested. Here I adopt functional definitions suited to the task of analyzing Boko Haram. For my purposes, religion has two dimensions. First, it is a mode of speaking that lays claim to the values of a religious tradition, in this case Islam.11 Second, religion is a field of social interaction where actors and institutions present themselves as representatives of a religious tradition.

11This definition is akin to Talal Asad’s famous notion of Islam as a “discursive tradition.” See “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Occasional Papers Series, 1986. If the definition sounds tautological, that is because it is—perhaps what makes a discourse religious is the speaker’s self-conscious intention that he or she be understood as religious according to the conventions of a given tradition.
the religious field, “social capital” has to do with matters such as one’s perceived piety, knowledge, and charisma.\textsuperscript{12}

Many analysts, skeptical of the explanatory power of “religion” and conceiving of “religion” in terms of individual conviction and faith, dismiss any effort to examine the religious content of jihadist movements; others are keen to disassociate jihadism from Islam. It is impossible to say whether Boko Haram’s leaders, members, and sympathizers really “believe” in the group’s messages. But Boko Haram’s leaders and followers appear to care a lot about religious ideas. Boko Haram emerged in a context where religious study circles were widespread and where, whether out of piety or ambition, many young men assiduously sought religious knowledge. Some of the youth who joined Boko Haram were keenly interested in understanding theological issues. One early Boko Haram video shows Muhammad Yusuf answering detailed questions from the audience regarding Islam’s internal theological and sectarian divisions.\textsuperscript{13} Religious ideas also became a bitter source of conflict for Boko Haram: between Muhammad Yusuf and even more hardline voices within the early movement; between the movement and its closest religious peers; and between the movement and the wider society.

Boko Haram members, even the movement’s leaders, made sacrifices for those ideas. If leaders had simply sought power or had been “rational actors” motivated entirely by greed, one would have expected Yusuf not to have launched an ill-planned uprising against one of the most powerful governments in Africa. Moreover, one would not have expected Yusuf to remain defiant in custody when he must have sensed that his execu-


\textsuperscript{13}Boko Haram, untitled video called simply “Film.3gp,” undated, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xthVNq9OKD0.
tion at policemen’s hands was a distinct possibility. Indeed, the Boko Haram conflict has been marked by so many twists and turns, so much violence and hatred between people who knew one another personally, and so much contingency that it seems absurd to treat the participants as rational actors who could leisurely weigh the costs and benefits of their actions. It seems especially absurd to treat all participants in the crisis as secular rational actors who believe they inhabit a purely material universe.

Caring about religion is a part of jihadism generally. As Shadi Hamid has remarked in the case of the Islamic State, “religion matters a great deal” to jihadists: “It inspires supporters to action; it affects the willingness to die (and, in the case of ISIS, the willingness to kill); it influences strategic calculations and even battlefield decisions.”14 As one study of jihadists in Pakistan has found, “religious ideals . . . can influence individual and collective choices” when those ideals have “moral or practical appeal for the believer” and “when the prescribed beliefs were repeatedly seen to help address the everyday realities of life.”15 My findings are similar, and they parallel a recent study of recruitment into Boko Haram. That study’s authors found that “religion was a thread running through many stories of youth choosing to join,” but they also found that recruitment was a complex affair involving financial incentives, social pressures, and varying degrees of coercion.16 Taking religion’s role

Introduction

seriously, not just as it informs jihadist rhetoric but also as it shapes jihadist action, does not have to mean saying that the Islamic State or Boko Haram represent Islam’s “center of gravity.”17 Nor does it have to mean discounting other, political and socioeconomic explanations.

Even if religion was simply ideological cover for Boko Haram’s ambitions, its religious messages would be worth studying. Far from being the ravings of madmen, its leaders’ sermons and videos are structured speeches. Religion, or what Boko Haram considers religion, is part of that structure. By paying attention to what Boko Haram actually says, one can learn a great deal about the movement—not only about how it understands jihad, but also about how it frames events in religious terms.

Moreover, “religion” does not necessarily refer to individual belief. Paying attention to the “religious field” can also shed new light on jihadism. In northern Nigeria’s religious field, Boko Haram occupies a complicated niche: the movement benefited from existing infrastructures but also took advantage of important vacuums. Building on one classic study of “the fragmentation of sacred authority” in northern Nigeria,18 I trace religious fragmentation in Maiduguri and northeastern Nigeria between the 1970s and the 2000s, showing how this atmosphere contributed to Boko Haram’s emergence. One consequence of that approach is, for me, an uncomfortable but necessary observation: Boko Haram’s early messages were less marginal, in the context of northern Nigeria, than is often assumed. As one study of a Saudi Arabian dissident movement found, “fringe” movements sometimes start out with support from mainstream religious au-

Introduction}

thorities. Dissidents can experience the loss of mainstream support as a critical juncture on the road to violence.19 This trend fits Boko Haram as well: it first sought to co-opt more mainstream religious rhetoric and then reacted violently when mainstream voices denounced it.

Reading through the historical record, I found many post-colonial northern Nigerian elites—university intellectuals, members of the hereditary ruling class, politicians, and others—espousing antipathy toward Western-style education and secular government. Few of these figures advocated armed jihad in the 1980s and 1990s. Those who are still living have all denounced Boko Haram. Nevertheless, it is important to show that Boko Haram’s ideas did not come out of thin air. The movement tried to harness and amplify certain ideas that were already circulating in the religious field, particularly during the period between 1999 and 2003, when northern Nigerian states were intensively implementing Islamic law (shari’a)20—a development that is indispensable to understanding Boko Haram’s emergence.

Politics, for this book’s purposes, has two aspects. On one level, politics involves a struggle to control resources, resource flows, and decision making—a struggle over “who gets what, when, how.”21 This kind of politics necessarily involves an effort to build coalitions and marginalize opponents. Boko Haram has often been portrayed in analytical literature as the result of impersonal, abstract forces like economic deprivation, regional


disparities, unemployment, corruption, poor governance, and educational backwardness. In Nigeria’s “do or die” politics, however, these forces operate in intensely political and personal terms. The politics that helped birth (and sustain) Boko Haram had to do with stark questions of who wins and loses, who uses whom, and whose expectations are raised only to be met with bitter disappointment later. A focus on the politics of “who gets what” illuminates critical features of life in northeastern Nigeria from the 1970s to the present. The combination of ferocious political competition and unaccountable politicians translated into bitterness among Boko Haram’s core constituencies.

On another level, politics is a struggle to define a community’s values, to make or unmake a consensus. In this sense, politics and religion are intimately related: religious blueprints for reorganizing society are inevitably political projects as well. Boko Haram’s leaders are political figures not just because they seek to control people and territory, but also because they want to redefine what it means to live in the Lake Chad region and what it means to be a Muslim there. The struggle to define values often plays out in the arena of symbols, and the Boko Haram crisis is no different—Boko Haram has sought to appropriate not only the Qur’an and the Sunna (model) of the Prophet Muhammad, but also figures from northern Nigeria’s past. Boko Haram’s leaders have repeatedly rejected central symbols of Nigerian national identity—the constitution, the pledge of allegiance, the national anthem—and have proposed countersymbols, including the “strange flags” flown by Boko

---


Haram since 2003. Boko Haram has fixated on politics in the narrow sense of disrupting elections and challenging politicians, but also in the broader sense of trying to remake the symbolic landscape of Nigeria and its neighbors.

There are significant gaps in what can be known about Boko Haram at present. Even basic facts, such as whether its official leader, Abubakar Shekau, is alive or dead, are contested. The group’s leadership structure, financial operations, internal culture, and recruitment strategies remain largely opaque. Various conspiracy theories, most of which depict Boko Haram as a front for other actors, have distorted analysis of the group. At the same time, there is a dangerous temptation to depoliticize movements like Boko Haram, and to erase the histories of backroom deals, impunity, and state violence that can drive jihadism. While unequivocally condemning Boko Haram, this book also contends that just as politics was part of the cause of the violence, so must politics—including controversial decisions about who wins and loses in the aftermath of the crisis—be part of the solution.

**Boko Haram: What’s in a Name?**

As a movement, Boko Haram has been known by many names. Parts of the movement have been labeled “Yusufiyya,” after its founder. The “Nigerian Taliban” label stuck for a time.

---


26 This section is a modified and updated version of my blog post “Boko Haram: What’s in a Name?,” which appeared on Sahel Blog on January 7, 2013, https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2013/01/07/boko-haram-whats-in-a-name/.
after the 2003–4 uprising. The phrase “Boko Haram” is itself a nickname given by outsiders. One sect member has said:

This appellation appeared first among the general public. On one side, that was a result of their difficulties in pronouncing the true name, and from another side it is an appellation derived from what our scholars frequently mentioned in order to counsel people, especially parents and the students of institutions and universities, and the rest of those concerned with education. . . . In any case we are dissatisfied with this appellation and we do not call ourselves by it. Calling us by it is a form of derisive nicknaming.

In the sect’s early days, the member continued, Yusuf “did not name the society by any name.” Even the group’s official Arabic name came only when Shekau took power.27

“Boko Haram” is often rendered in English as “Western education is forbidden.” That translation, however, sacrifices some nuance and depth. Haram is an Islamic legal term designating a forbidden act. Yusuf argued that Islam itself forbid Western-style education: “These foreign, global, colonialist schools have embraced matters that violate Islamic law, and it is forbidden to operate them, support them, study and teach in them.”28 Yusuf’s invocation of colonialism was deliberate—he saw total continuity between northern Nigerian Muslims’ experience of subjugation to Britain from 1900 to 1960 and their position in postcolonial Nigeria. Muslims, Yusuf felt, needed to protect the purity of Islam from any other systems that might corrupt it. Hence Yusuf claimed that declaring Western-style educa-

28 Muhammad Yusuf, Hadhihi ’Aqidatuna wa-Manhaj Da’watina (Maiduguri: Maktabat al-Ghuraba’, likely 2009), 84.
tion haram was an obligatory religious act, rather than merely his personal opinion. Boko Haram has repeatedly resorted to the claim that it is merely implementing what Islam enjoins, rather than placing new demands on anyone.

Boko is a tricky word to translate. One false etymology holds that the word is a corruption of the English “book.” Linguists, however, believe that boko is an indigenous Hausa word. Originally, it meant “fraud,” “sham,” or “inauthentic.” It could be used as a verb meaning “doing anything to create [an] impression that one is better off, or that [something] is of better quality or larger in amount than is the case.” Boko-boko could mean “hoodwinking.” During British colonial rule in northern Nigeria, this original meaning of boko as “fraud” was attached to Western-style schooling and to the Romanized script for writing Hausa, known as Hausar Boko. Calling Western-style education boko connoted a feeling that colonial schools could mislead Muslims into accepting false knowledge. In present-day northern Nigeria, some Muslims feel deep ambivalence toward Western-style education: such schooling is sometimes viewed with suspicion, but it is also recognized as a path to worldly success.

More than just education is bound up in the word boko. The phrase ‘yan boko, where ‘yan means “people,” could be translated as “representatives of Western education”—people who have graduated from Western-style schools. But the phrase can have a broader connotation—“people who operate within Western-style frameworks and institutions” or “representatives of Western culture” or even “Westernized people.”

---


are elites, who hold power because they can navigate Western-style institutions. And just as Western-style education itself can simultaneously evoke suspicion and aspiration, so too can its products be both despised and admired.

Put all these ideas together, and “Boko Haram” means something like “Western culture is forbidden by Islam” or “the Westernized elites and their way of doing things contradict Islam”—not just in schools but also in politics and society. As the sect itself said in one statement:

Boko Haram does not in any way mean “Western Education is a sin” as the infidel media continue to portray us. Boko Haram actually means “Western Civilisation” is forbidden. The difference is that while the first gives the impression that we are opposed to formal education coming from the West, that is Europe, which is not true, the second affirms our believe [sic] in the supremacy of Islamic culture (not Education), for culture is broader, it includes education but not determined by Western Education. In this case we are talking of Western Ways of life which include: constitutional provision as if relates to, for instance the rights and privileges of Women, the idea of homosexualism, lesbianism, sanctions in cases of terrible crimes like drug trafficking, rape of infants, multi-party democracy in an overwhelmingly Islamic country like Nigeria, blue films, prostitution, drinking beer and alcohol and many others that are opposed to Islamic civilisation.31

The word boko stood in for a system of ideas and institutions that the group not only rejected, but also considered diametrically opposed to the countersystem represented by its version of Islam.

Under Shekau, the group adopted the official Arabic name “Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da’wa wa-l-Jihad.” The widespread translation “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad” conveys the basic meaning but misses a few nuances.

First, it is important to examine the notion of ahl al-sunna, short for ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama’a, meaning “the people of the Prophet’s model and the Muslim community.” Al-jama’a conveys the notion of consensus within the community. To claim the title ahl al-sunna is to claim the right to dictate who is and is not a true Muslim. The idea of ahl al-sunna is particularly important for Salafi Muslims, a movement I discuss below. For Salafis, the phrase ahl al-sunna functions to suggest that there should be no difference between being a Sunni and being a Salafi. Salafis claim not just that they “propagate” the Prophet’s teachings, but that they alone embody them.

Nevertheless, spreading the message is important—hence the idea of da’wa, “calling people to Islam.” Many Salafis consider da’wa their core duty. The call extends to non-Muslims, but it also involves enjoining other Muslims to bring their own practices and beliefs in line with Salafis’ understanding of Islam. By emphasizing da’wa, Boko Haram sought to convince itself, other Salafis, and other Muslims that it had not abandoned global Salafism’s missionary goal. But adding “jihad” to the group’s name conveyed a readiness to fight. The full Arabic name might be translated “Salafis for Preaching and Jihad,” or even “Orthodox Muslims Who Call People to True Islam and Who Engage in Holy War”—again, “True Islam” according to Boko Haram.

With its affiliation to the Islamic State in 2015, Boko Haram’s official name became Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya, or “Islamic State

---

32 Often rendered in clumsy, partly phonetic transliterations.
West Africa Province.” This name positioned Boko Haram as an administrative unit within the Islamic State’s “Caliphate.” As with other “provinces,” the name intentionally ignored internationally recognized boundaries—after all, Boko Haram did not become the Islamic State’s “Nigeria Province.” When it accepted Boko Haram’s allegiance, the Islamic State emphasized the way its provinces were redrawing maps: “It was the rejection of nationalism that drove the mujahidin (fighters) in Nigeria to give bay’ah (fealty) to the Islamic State and wage war against the Nigerian murtaddin (apostates) fighting for the Nigerian taghut (idolatrous tyrant).” The Islamic State and its new affiliate sought to depict the conflict in Nigeria entirely in religious terms: all actors were judged to be genuine Muslims, “crusader” Christians, or “apostates.”

Religious Ideologies: Salafism, Jihadism, and Salafi-Jihadism

To understand Boko Haram’s worldview and place the sect in its global, national, and local contexts, three terms are critical: Salafism, jihadism, and Salafi-Jihadism. These terms are widely used but seldom precisely defined.

“Salafism” derives from the Arabic salaf, meaning “predecessors.” The phrase al-salaf al-salih or “pious predecessors”
has special resonance in Sunni Muslim communities, referring to the earliest Muslims, whom contemporary Muslims see as pure. Salafis strive to emulate those early Muslims, but like other Muslims, they make choices about which aspects of the early community to highlight, and which to downplay. Theologically, Salafis emphasize a literalist understanding of the Qur’an and the Sunna (tradition or model) represented by the Prophet Muhammad. Salafis narrowly interpret the Islamic injunction to worship one God, and they try to “purify” other Muslims of alleged deviations in belief and practice. Historically, Salafism in its present form dates to the twentieth century, when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia began to act both as a hub, attracting Salafis to the kingdom from elsewhere, and a transmitter, disseminating Salafism to new areas. By the closing decades of the twentieth century, Salafism had spread throughout the world—but it had also become “localized” in various nations, including Nigeria.

“Salafi-jihadism” is one major branch of the Salafi movement, but jihadism’s origins are different than those of Salafism. In Islamic history, jihad (meaning “to strive”) has encompassed both military and nonmilitary meanings. Jihad was the subject of intensive legal debate that restricted its scope and

imposed conditions for who could lead a jihad. “Jihadism,” in contrast, refers to an ideology that took shape between the 1960s and the 1990s, initially among radicals inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood’s Sayyid Qutb (1906–66). During these decades, jihadists took a complex legal and spiritual concept, reduced it to military action and ideological extremism, and oriented it toward new enemies. Few of the original jihadists were fluent in the theological world of Salafism.

For jihadists, many Muslim rulers are Muslim in name only. In jihadists’ eyes, these rulers’ reliance on “man-made laws,” their repression of Muslim activists, and their alliances with the West expose them as infidels. Some jihadists identify the West—particularly the United States and Israel—as the “far enemy” or ultimate target, believing that Muslim societies cannot be purified so long as the United States maintains its global hegemony. “Salafi-jihadism,” then, refers to the combination of Salafi theology with jihadist ideology, a hybridization that solidified in the 1990s. For groups like Boko Haram, one consequence of that fusion has been a pronounced willingness to commit violence against Muslim civilians. If Salafis view non-Salafi Muslims as being at risk of deviation, and if jihadists view most Muslim rulers as infidels who merit death, then Salafi-jihadists treat ordinary Muslims as needing violent correction. And even if one views the Salafi-jihadist ideology as a mere cover for jihadists’ material ambitions, the ideology is nonetheless important to understand in that it becomes a

key way such groups attempt to communicate with the rest of the world.

Patterns of Islamic Authority and Dissent in Northern Nigeria

To situate Boko Haram in its religious context, it is helpful to understand the major players in northern Nigeria’s Muslim religious field. First, there are hereditary Muslim rulers or “emirs.” The emirs are descendants of families that came to prominence during the nineteenth century. In northwestern Nigeria, the foremost hereditary ruler is the Sultan of Sokoto, descended from Uthman dan Fodio (1754–1817). Dan Fodio established the Sokoto Caliphate, a Muslim empire, in the early nineteenth century, defeating local Hausa kings and uniting their territory under a system where his lieutenants ruled different emirates.

Precolonial northeastern Nigeria, meanwhile, became the eventual epicenter of the Bornu empire, another Muslim polity. In the nineteenth century, Bornu became a target of dan Fodio’s jihad. The empire turned to a Muslim scholar, Muhammad al-Amin al-Kanemi (1776–1837), for military help and religious legitimacy. After Bornu successfully resisted the jihad, al-Kanemi’s descendants displaced the ruling dynasty. The present Shehu of Borno, considered northern Nigeria’s second-most senior hereditary ruler after the Sultan of Sokoto, is a descendant of al-Kanemi.

Second, there are Sufi orders. Sufism offers spiritual disciplines that aim to bring the believer into closer contact with God and the Prophet. In Nigeria as elsewhere, most Sufis are organized into orders that involve hierarchies of shaykhs.
Northern Nigeria’s most prominent orders are the Tijaniyya, which was founded in North Africa in the late eighteenth century by Ahmad al-Tijani (1737–1815), and the Qadiriyya, which traces its lineage to the Persian mystic Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (1077–1166). In Nigeria, Sufism was a relatively elite phenomenon until the mid-twentieth century, when Sufi reformers transformed the Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya into mass-based organizations. Sufism now shapes the spiritual life of many Muslim communities in the north.

Long-standing links between the emirs and Sufi shaykhs make these groups a “Muslim establishment” for northern Nigeria. Groups that oppose the Muslim establishment of emirs and Sufis often find themselves marginalized. Sometimes, the status quo has been destabilized. For example, on the eve of the colonial conquest, a warlord from present-day Sudan named Rabih al-Zubayr conquered and ruled Bornu between 1893 and 1900, when the French killed him in battle. The combination of Rabih’s adventuring and the colonial conquest fundamentally disrupted life and politics throughout the empire. This turbulence affected Bornu’s subsequent integration into British and French colonies, with both colonial powers openly manipulating succession within the ruling family of Bornu. But as an establishment, the emirs and the Sufi shaykhs survived the disruptions of both the late precolonial period and colonialism itself.

British colonialism preserved, but also fundamentally altered, the position of the emirs in northern society. For the first time, the emirs were subjected to the authority of non-Muslim outsiders, which altered the social contract between

---

the emirs and their subjects. In the postcolonial period, civilian politicians and military administrators sometimes openly challenged or manipulated the emirs. Many northern Muslims continue to respect their hereditary rulers. But some Muslims have come to see these rulers as creatures of the true political authorities, be they British colonialists in the past or Nigeria’s elected politicians in the present.

Third, there is the Salafi movement. Northern Nigerian Salafism originated with Abubakar Gumi (1924–92). Educated in colonial schools, Gumi served as northern Nigeria’s senior Muslim judge after independence. After 1966, when Gumi’s political patron was killed in a military coup, Gumi shed his official roles and became an anti-Sufi polemicist. In 1978, his followers founded Jama’at Izalat al-Bid’a wa-Iqamat al-Sunna (the Society for the Removal of Heretical Innovation and the Establishment of the Prophet’s Model). Known as Izala, this mass organization spread anti-Sufism throughout northern Nigeria, including to Maiduguri, where Boko Haram originated. Izala’s activism provoked bitter debates between Sufis and Salafis.

In the 1990s, generational change evoked intra-Salafi competition. Young Izala preachers like Ja’far Mahmud Adam (1961/2–2007) studied at Saudi Arabia’s Islamic University of Medina in the 1990s. They returned home to find Izala divided after Gumi’s death. Drawing on the prestige of their education, the Medina graduates built a following outside Izala,

---


teaching texts they had studied overseas. They also recruited young preachers into their network. One of these recruits was Muhammad Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, although he soon became too controversial for the mainstream Salafi movement. Adam and Yusuf’s break was a major milestone on Boko Haram’s road to jihadism. Today, most Nigerian Salafis, including Izala and the Medina graduates, bitterly oppose Boko Haram.

Throughout the history of present-day northern Nigeria—indeed, throughout centuries of history in northwest Africa as a whole—Islamic movements have arisen and demanded that the surrounding societies purify themselves, embrace Islamic law, and throw off the domination of outsiders. Uthman dan Fodio’s jihad began with such a purifying impulse. Other historical rebellions have included various “Mahdist” uprisings, led by men who claimed to be the Mahdi, a figure some Muslims believe will appear near the end of time. Postcolonial Nigeria has seen its share of uprisings as well, most infamously the millenarian “Maitatsine” group that I discuss in chapter 1. Maitatsine followers wreaked havoc in northern cities off and on from 1980 to 1985.

Boko Haram has strategically drawn on some of the styles of previous movements, sometimes working to claim the mantle of dan Fodio. In a compelling study, Murray Last has compared movements of religious dissent in northern Nigeria. Such movements, Last found, typically first withdraw from the surrounding society to preach purification. Only after conflicts with authorities have the dissenting movements launched up-


45Kassim, “Defining and Understanding.”
risings. Last has shown that over the past two centuries, authorities have often pursued one of two responses to dissent: ignoring it or crushing it. Boko Haram fits many of these patterns.

Other analysts, less subtle than Last, have portrayed Boko Haram as the second coming of dan Fodio, Rabih, or Maitatsine. There are problems with such approaches. For one thing, both Maitatsine and Boko Haram originated in an urban setting, breaking with the rural character of previous uprisings. Additionally, Boko Haram is theologically distinct from dan Fodio (a committed Qadiri Sufi), Rabih (a Mahdist sympathizer), and Maitatsine (whose founder developed idiosyncratic readings of the Qur’an and claimed to be a prophet). Understanding Boko Haram requires attention not just to past religious uprisings, but also to the context in which Boko Haram emerged, including Nigerian politics at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Nigeria’s Contentious Politics

Nigeria is one of the most important countries in the world. It has, by far, Africa’s largest population, 180 million or more people. By 2050, Nigeria may have 400 million people. 

---

46 Murray Last, “From Dissent to Dissidence: The Genesis and Development of Reformist Islamic Groups in Northern Nigeria,” in Sects and Social Disorder, 18–53.
49 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs/Population Division, “World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision, Key Findings and Advance
Analysts often portray Nigeria as a prisoner to the legacies of colonialism. It is true that British rule—which formally began in the south in 1861, and in the north in 1900—brought together diverse peoples. It is also true that the colonial government administered northern and southern Nigeria in different ways, even after the “amalgamation” of the two territories in 1914. The north experienced “Indirect Rule” through the emirs. Indirect Rule left a multifaceted legacy with two prominent negative aspects: first, the imposition of Muslim rule over some non-Muslim populations, which fostered lasting bitterness and contributed to postcolonial religious violence in the north; and second, a low level of educational and economic development for northern communities. The south developed a more vibrant economy, more progressive politics, and better infrastructure.

These colonial differences generated postcolonial disparities, with greater economic opportunity in the south. But it would be a mistake to stereotype Nigeria as an African state doomed to perpetual conflict because of “artificial borders.” Even when outsiders have been at their most pessimistic about Nigeria’s prospects, the country has surprised them: witness Nigeria’s historic transfer of power from one civilian party to another with the election of President Muhammadu Buhari in 2015. Nigeria, with as many as 550 linguistic groups and with grim legacies of intercommunal violence, will likely never eliminate the challenges of managing diversity and building

---


national unity. Those challenges, however, have occasioned creativity as well as conflict.

Following its independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria underwent tremendous political fluctuations: a civilian-led parliamentary system from 1960 to 1966, a succession of military rulers and failed democratic transitions from 1966 to 1999, and a period of unbroken multiparty civilian rule from 1999 to the present (the Fourth Republic). Nigeria's 1999 constitution established a strong presidency, a bicameral legislature, and a federal system comprising thirty-six states. The president and the country’s powerful governors are limited to two terms in office. Elections for national and state offices are held every four years. Democratization has amplified ordinary people's demands for better and less corrupt government—even if those demands are seldom met.52

For understanding Boko Haram, four aspects of Nigerian politics are relevant: cutthroat elections; pervasive corruption; severe inequality; and the violence and impunity that surround approaches to conflict management. Subsequent chapters detail how these trends operated at the level of the northeast, but for now a more general overview is in order.

Nigeria’s elections are highly contested but sometimes blatantly fraudulent. From 1999 to 2015, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) held the presidency and often controlled a majority of legislative seats and state governments. But politics remained competitive. Around the country, gubernatorial elections were and are often hard fought. In addition to pouring vast sums of money into these elections,53 governors

and other political “godfathers” sometimes recruit youth and criminals to harass rivals and voters. The 2003 gubernatorial election in Borno State, a key event in the empowerment of Muhammad Yusuf, was part of a larger trend where godfathers recruited unsavory actors to help them take power, and then later turned on these allies.

Corruption is widely seen by Nigerians as their country’s biggest problem. Corruption afflicts the highest levels of government. In 2006, the head of Nigeria’s Economic and Financial Crimes Commission estimated that some $380 billion had been “stolen or wasted” since independence.\(^54\) A decade later, Nigeria’s minister of information alleged that $9 billion had been lost to corruption just during the 2010–25 tenure of President Goodluck Jonathan, including $2.1 billion purportedly stolen from funds allocated for fighting Boko Haram.\(^55\) Corruption is not just at the top: it pervades everyday life. Police officers systematically extort citizens.\(^56\) There are off-the-books fees for many bureaucratic processes.\(^57\) Corruption creates resentment among many citizens and weakens the state’s ability to respond to insecurity.

In terms of inequality, Nigeria’s economy is usually one of the fastest growing in the world. In 2014, Nigeria became, temporarily, Africa’s largest economy and the world’s twenty-sixth largest economy, with a gross domestic product of nearly $510 billion. Yet population growth—from 89 million in

---


\(^57\)D. Smith, Culture of Corruption.
1991 to over 140 million in 2006, to more than 180 million in 2016—has outpaced economic growth. As of 2016, 43 percent of the population was under the age of fifteen years; another 19 percent was under the age of twenty-five.\textsuperscript{58} Economic growth has been mostly jobless. Under the Fourth Republic, government economic policies featured “limited focus on poverty reduction, jobs creation and income generation.”\textsuperscript{59} The result is that most Nigerians are poor. More than 60 percent live on less than a dollar per day.\textsuperscript{60} Official unemployment stood at 24 percent in 2011,\textsuperscript{61} and it is likely far higher.

If Nigeria’s economy looks deeply unfair at the national level, it looks even worse in the north. In the postcolonial period, northern agriculture—the region’s key employer—weakened amid dependence on oil and greater centralization of power and wealth at the federal level.\textsuperscript{62} When economic recession hit Nigeria after the oil boom of the 1970s, the north lost ground. Between 1980 and 2006, the poverty rate in the North East zone rose from 35.6 percent to 72.4 percent—making it the second poorest zone in the Nigerian federation after the North West (79.2 percent). Poverty rates in Nigeria’s three southern zones rose through the same period, reaching between 55.9 percent and 63.1 percent in 2006, but have remained lower than in

the northern zones.63 Meanwhile, birthrates in 2008 were 7.3 children per woman in the North West and 7.2 children per woman in the North East, well above southern zones’ rates of fewer than five children per woman.64 As chapter 1 describes, the period from the 1970s to the 1990s saw massive dislocation and ad hoc urbanization in northern cities like Maiduguri. Many youth were struggling or jobless at precisely the time when hereditary Muslim rulers were losing their long-standing powers of surveillance and control.

Meanwhile, Nigeria has a de facto system of violence and impunity when it comes to rebellions and riots. When rebellions occur, Nigerian authorities pursue a straightforward process to restore order: first, deploy force (usually soldiers rather than police) to stop or slow the disturbance; second, make gestures of reconciliation, such as granting amnesty to combatants or releasing prisoners back into normal life; and third, exhort all parties to move on in a spirit of unity. Authorities seldom make systematic efforts to hold perpetrators of violence accountable.

Over the long term, this approach to conflict has left grievances unaddressed. And when the playbook does not work, politicians and security forces have difficulty adapting. Boko Haram arose partly because of the Nigerian government’s failure to effectively resolve past incidents of inter-religious violence, and the prolongation of the Boko Haram conflict owes much to the widespread human rights abuses committed by


the security forces against actual and suspected sect members. Conflict management strategies from Nigeria’s past have not helped end the threat posed by a movement that questions the fundamentals of Nigeria’s existence, including the secularity of the state, the possibility that Muslims and Christians can live together in peace, the prospects for multiparty elections to ensure good governance, and the idea that the past can be forgotten. President Jonathan, in office for the most severe portions of the insurgency, made halfhearted efforts to talk to Boko Haram, but his administration’s overall approach emphasized repression. President Buhari has shown more flexibility, but the Nigerian military continues to speak and act as though body counts and territorial control are the main metrics of success.

In sum, Nigeria’s contentious politics, economic inequality, endemic corruption, and counterproductive conflict management strategies are part of the environment that contributed to Boko Haram’s rise. This book shows how environmental factors influenced the decisions of local actors. But Boko Haram’s emergence was not inevitable, and the sect has interacted dynamically with the political dysfunction and economic malaise that surround it.

The Structure of the Book

Chapter 1, “The Lifeworld of Muhammad Yusuf,” examines interactions between religion and politics in Nigeria during the first three decades of Yusuf’s life (1970–99). Despite government-led efforts to build national unity in the wake of Nigeria’s 1967–70 civil war, religion became more prominent in elite debates over policies and institutions, as well as in local, intercommunal clashes. Such clashes were seldom followed by serious efforts
to hold perpetrators accountable. At the same time, a host of new Muslim voices arose in northern Nigeria, where they competed for influence, sometimes by voicing strident opinions on politics.

Chapter 2, “Preaching Exclusivism, Playing Politics,” reconstructs Boko Haram’s activities and messages between its emergence in the early 2000s and its disastrous mass uprising in 2009. Yusuf and his companions defined Salafi Muslim identity narrowly and exclusively. At the same time, Boko Haram dynamically responded to fluctuations in the sect’s political position. The movement also reacted to internal debates among its leaders and to disputes between Yusuf and other Salafis.

Chapter 3, “‘Chaos Is Worse Than Killing,’” examines Boko Haram’s initial resurgence under Abubakar Shekau. From 2010 to 2013, the sect adopted terrorist tactics and brought its violence into new parts of northern Nigeria. Shekau presented violence as the only theologically legitimate option left for Boko Haram. Yet amid ideological justifications, the group pursued score settling and predation. Chapter 3 also reviews the story of Boko Haram’s loose relationship with al-Qa‘ida and its affiliates.

Chapter 4, “Total War in Northeastern Nigeria,” recounts the transformation of the conflict, starting in 2013, from guerrilla warfare to broader forms of violence and contestation. Boko Haram’s approach evolved in response to the crackdown by Nigeria’s security forces and the emergence of the Civilian Joint Task Force, a government-backed vigilante movement in northeastern Nigeria. The pursuit of total war by both sides is critical context for understanding some of Boko Haram’s most brutal actions, including its kidnapping of the Chibok girls.

Chapter 5, “Same War, New Actors,” discusses the increasing involvement of external actors. These actors include Nige-
ria’s neighbors—especially Niger, Cameroon, and Chad—and a wider range of international players, from the United States and France to the Islamic State. As with the mutually reinforcing violence of Boko Haram and Nigerian security forces, the involvement of Nigeria’s neighbors and outside actors has further intensified the conflict. Amid Boko Haram’s military defeats and its increasing violence against Muslim civilians, prominent voices within the group increasingly questioned Shekau’s leadership in 2016. These dissidents sought to soften the group’s message and reduce its insularity, refocusing its enmity on the state and Christians.

At the time of writing, Boko Haram remains a serious security threat for Nigeria. In 2015, the new administration of President Buhari promised to defeat the sect by the end of that year. In December, Buhari proclaimed the “technical” defeat of the group. A year later, Buhari announced the “final crushing” of Boko Haram. But it was clear that Boko Haram would continue to trouble Nigeria for some time to come. Even once the sect is defeated, the crisis will have long-term humanitarian, political, and religious repercussions. If Boko Haram is partly a result of the failure of past efforts to resolve conflict through violence, then it will be vital for Nigerian authorities and citizens—and their partners in Africa and beyond—to address the aftereffects of the crisis in a way that reduces, rather than increases, the prospects for renewed conflict in the future.
