African Studies: Outreach **BOSTON UNIVERSITY**

BOKO HARAM: BEHIND THE HEADLINES

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BOKO HARAM at a GLANCE
(from BBC News & other sources)

- Founded in 2002
- Initially focused on opposing Western education; then more broadly on corrupt, un-Islamic policies; in 2009 launched military operations to create an Islamic state
- Nicknamed Boko Haram, a phrase in Hausa meaning, "Western (or secular) education is forbidden" (boko = book; haram = forbidden)
- Official Arabic name, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, means "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad"
- Founding leader Mohammed Yusuf (above) killed in same year in police custody
- Succeeded by Abubakar Shekau. Military claims to have killed Shekau have turned out to be untrue.
- Membership: attracts primarily poor, unemployed Muslim youth in the Northeast. While the number is unknown, membership is believed to be small. The vast majority of Nigerians of all faiths are horrified by Boko Haram's kidnappings.

Maiduguri, the center of Boko Haram activity

NIGERIA at a GLANCE:
pertinent facts for understanding this crisis

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with more than 174 million people and nearly 350 ethnic groups speaking 250 languages. The country is split between Muslims and Christians, with 10 percent of the people following indigenous sects. Nigeria has long grappled with how to govern a diverse nation in which the struggle between Christians and Muslims over political power remains a significant factor in the ongoing unrest . . . Despite a per capita income of more than $2,700 and vast wealth in natural resources, Nigeria has one of the world's poorest populations. An estimated 70 percent of the population lives on less than $1.25 a day. Economic disparities between the north and the rest of the country are particularly stark. In the north, 72 percent of people live in poverty, compared to 27 percent in the south and 35 percent in the Niger Delta.

Nigeria is the eighth largest oil exporter in the world. Oil accounts for nearly 40 percent of the GDP, more than 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings, and roughly 80 percent of government revenues. Very little of the petro dollars trickles down to the masses because of corruption. *By recent World Bank estimates, 80 percent of oil revenues benefit only 1 percent of the population.*

75 million Nigerians or more than 50 percent of the national population are under 18. One-third of school graduates are unemployed (this figure is much higher in the North); experts suggest economy will have to expand dramatically to keep pace with growing demand for jobs. In an incident in March 2014, sixteen job applicants died in stampedes. 500,000 applicants scheduled to take employment test for 4,500 immigration service posts.

Unfortunately political violence has recurred often in Nigeria, and not only in the North. The country has long suffered from major divisions and distrust, with numerous coups, assassinations, plus the bloody civil war in the late 1960's when the southeast tried to become its own country, Biafra. The current crisis throws into question Nigeria's ability to function as a single state.

Para 1 from "Boko Haram," Mohammed Aly Sergie and Toni Johnson *Council on Foreign Relations*, Updated: May 5, 2014. para 2 & 3 from Osita Akoafu of Indiana University; para 4 by Barbara B. Brown.

Nigerian soldiers in Maiduguri

<u>OVERVIEW</u>[1]
*-**bolded** phrases indicate key points-*

There is a long history of governance in Northern Nigeria being based upon religious (Islamic) legitimacy. This theme was reinforced by the British, who saw the Northern Nigerian (Islamic) aristocracy as "natural rulers." At independence, the British designed the Nigerian electoral system to guarantee the continued dominance of Northern Muslim elites. This state of affairs remained more or less the norm until the early 2000s, when political power shifted from the North, heavily Muslim, Muslim, to the South, heavily Christian. This shift also coincided with an economic boom in Southern Nigeria. Northern Nigeria's political class remained relatively wealthy, but they no longer had access to the sort of state resources with which to provide "a cut of the national cake" to Northern populations in the form of education and economic opportunity. Thus, Northern populations suffered increasing levels of poverty, even as many parts of the south began to enjoy significantly improved standards of living. It was during this time that calls for Shari'a Law became increasingly common in the North, as many people believed that Shari'a law would not only prevent crime (a growing problem in the North over the past two decades) but also political corruption.

Boko Haram is one of several organizations which have called for "true Islam" as a means of ending the poverty and corruption, which some in the North see as a result of a political system corrupted by greed and corruption (this is more the "Boko" of which the popular nickname of the group refers). The group does not actually reject all "Western Education" -- more so it rejects what it sees as the corruption of the political class who have been driven by their desire for wealth to exploit the masses. It is worth noting here that in Northern Nigeria, one is not considered an adult until married, and it is impossible to get married unless one has amassed enough capital to set up a household. Groups like Boko Haram thus play upon not only the financial, but also the social, marginality of young men who feel frustrated by the broader economic and political situation.

That said, Boko Haram is not a peaceful organization. It is apparent by the middle of the last decade that they were willing to undertake assassinations of other religious leaders; later they undertook attacks on police stations as a means of acquiring arms. In 2009 this resulted in a confrontation with the Nigerian army and police. To say that the Nigerian government responded with a lack of subtlety would be an understatement. Using heavy weapons to crush the group, the police and military forces then executed much of the movement's leadership and dozens, if not hundreds, of suspected supporters. Videos of these executions have since circulated on YouTube and other websites, stoking popular furor at what is seen to be a corrupt (and now Southern-dominated) Government.   The government declared that the movement had been crushed. Apparently, however, a number of the leaders, including Abubakar Shekau, escaped. **By 2010 the group had gathered new followers and began carrying out significantly more sophisticated attacks on the government,** including a 2011 attack on the UN Headquarters in the capital of Abuja. **Again, government responses were heavy-handed, and civilians repeatedly alleged that police and army forces often killed more civilians than did Boko Haram.**

Alleged Boko Haram leader, Abubakar Shekau

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[1] Jonathan Reynolds, scholar of northern Nigeria at Northern Kentucky University, prepared this essay May 12, 2014 as an introduction to Boko Haram. [Boldface added]

During this period of 2010-2012, Boko Haram also began to release videos demanding the creation of an Islamic state. That the imagery and rhetoric of these videos were clearly informed by other Salafist/Jihadist movements around the world highlights the nature of contemporary world culture. **While it is still unclear as to whether Boko Haram has ties to any other groups, they are clearly informed by radical movement elsewhere**.

A moment taken from an uploaded video

The best take-away from all of this is that there is no "simple" explanation to the rise or actions of Boko Haram. The group is in many ways the product of a complex stew of economic, political, and social tensions which have come to a boil in Northern Nigeria over the past two or three decades. Without significant political and economic reform, it is likely that the situation will grow worse, rather than better.

<p align="center">*****</p>

<p align="center">UNDERLYING CONDITIONS:</p>

Not just a religious movement:

"It is important to view the current campaign as both political and religious; though there is a religious dimension, it would be wrong to write off Boko Haram (BH) as religious 'cranks'. Theirs is also an insurgency against the local Nigerian state, which, in the eyes of BH, is secular (or at least not properly Muslim). It is their politics that make them dangerous. The majority of those assassinated in Borno and Bauchi have been agents of governments at all levels – local dignitaries or there less protected younger brothers (the Shehu of Borno's; the former governor's), policemen and now soldiers have been shot . . . .

BH is of course demanding the state becomes properly Islamic, with shari'a law fully implemented etc., but more immediately they are also demanding that all their supporters be released from jails and all their followers be given an amnesty. BH's aim, in so far as I can make sense of it, is not for a show-down (which they would obviously lose again) but to get themselves recognised, by at least the Borno state, and to be allowed to continue, unmolested by the police or the SSS [State Security Service], with their preaching (however unorthodox) and their recruiting.

It dismays many Nigerians that the government is apparently refusing even to consider that the dissent-turned-violent is really indigenous and could possibly arise out of local desperation with the way the country is managed."
--Murray Last, Royal African Society, July 2011 *Boko Haram: militant political network or criminal calling card?* 3rd para is from

This article offers strong insights into how the shift in political power from Nigeria's North to South over the past decade, combined with economic decline in the North, has resulted in growing unemployment and popular dissatisfaction.

Maiduguri, Nigeria

Boko Haram's origins lie in grievances over poor governance & sharp inequality.

While Boko Haram can't be neatly characterized as an insurgency or terrorist organization, its origins appear rooted in grievances over poor governance and sharp inequality in Nigerian society. "The emergence of Boko Haram signifies the maturation of long-festering extremist impulses that run deep in the social reality of northern Nigeria," writes Nigerian analyst Chris Ngwodo. "But the group itself is an effect and not a cause; it is a symptom of decades of failed government and elite delinquency finally ripening into social chaos."

Efforts to address dissatisfaction among Muslims in northern states, such as the reintroduction of sharia criminal courts, weren't successful because the courts weren't considered fair. Human Rights Watch said in a 2011 report that "corruption is so pervasive in Nigeria it has turned public service for many into a kind of criminal enterprise."

Police brutality and impunity added to the tensions. A 2009 Amnesty International report (PDF) said Nigerian police were responsible for hundreds of extrajudicial killings and disappearances each year that largely "go uninvestigated and unpunished." The group said in a later report that nearly one thousand people, mostly Islamist militants, died in military custody in the first half of 2013. Human rights advocates say Nigerian authorities are rarely, if ever, held criminally accountable for the public executions of Boko Haram followers. In 2011, the government began to try five police officers connected to Yusuf's killing, and started the court martial of a military commander responsible for troops that allegedly killed forty-two sect members in 2009, but both proceedings weren't concluded as of February 2014.

Boko Haram has used the growing grievances to promote the idea that an Islamic state would bring a better and more just government to power . . .

Nigeria has long grappled with how to govern a diverse nation in which the struggle between Christians and Muslims over political power remains a significant factor in the ongoing unrest. Sectarian violence, particularly in Kaduna, Plateau, Nasarawa, and Benue states, the central part of the country where religious groups as well as farmers and herders collide, boosted the death toll. More than 25,000 people were killed in Nigeria since 1999, according to Human Rights Watch and the CFR Nigeria Security Tracker.

Despite a per capita income of more than $2,700 and vast wealth in natural resources, Nigeria has one of the world's poorest populations. An estimated 70 percent of the population lives on less than $1.25 a day. Economic disparities between the north and the rest of the country are particularly stark. In the north, 72 percent of people live in poverty, compared to 27 percent in the south and 35 percent in the Niger Delta.

Poor living conditions in Nigeria

Another crucial factor in economic inequality is oil. In his book *Nigeria: Dancing on the Brink*, Campbell writes that the "formal politics" of northern Nigeria are "overwhelmingly dominated by Muslim elites, who have, like their counterparts across the country, benefited from oil wealth at the expense of regional development." He says that the central purpose of the Nigerian state is to divide up the country's oil wealth among elites, making Nigeria's politics a "zero-sum game."

"Boko Haram," Mohammed Aly Sergie and Toni Johnson *Council on Foreign Relations,* Updated: May 5, 2014.

Even older currents underlie this crisis:
"I would suggest, then, that the [2009] Boko Haram incident[2] followed a pattern that goes back at least some 200 years in northern Nigeria, and has a logic to it that is understandable given the conditions of life for the poorly educated young today in a Nigeria where the elite are astonishingly well-off on 'stolen' money. The young know this as never before . . .

What distinguishes it from colonial and pre-colonial groups is [a] it is based in
cities, not in 'camps' deep in the countryside, and is dispersed within cities; [b] it is using
assassination, guns and explosives; [c] it is using mobile phones, motorcycles, cars. In short, despite slogans such as 'boko haram' ('westernisation is wrong'), it is not an arcane throw-back: it is modern and dangerous . . . .

Murray Last, "Patterns of Dissent," in Annual Review of Islam in Africa, 2008/09;
http://www.cci.uct.ac.za/usr/cci/news/Murray_Last.pdf
This piece offers a bit of historical background, both over the past 200 years an over the past decade. It offers good insights into Nigerian politics, Christian-Muslim tensions in the country, and inter-Islamic tensions as well.

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[2] When heavy-handed police response to Boko Haram set off an armed uprising and clash with security forces, leaving 800+ dead.

Last's more recent article: Boko Haram: militant political network or criminal calling card? Royal African Society, July 2011. http://www.opendemocracy.net/opensecurity/murray-last/boko-haram-militant-political-network-or-criminal-calling-card-0 This offers a bit more information on Boko Haram's increasing radicalization following the Nigerian government crackdown in 2009.

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MEANING of the NAME '*BOKO HARAM*'

"Boko Haram's message was clear: "boko", the western-style education that equips you for the modern corrupt life of Nigerian politics and business, is un-Islamic and should be shunned. [Boko simply derives from 'book', which when in roman script is iconic of western education; "Boko Haram" simply became the nickname (and slogan) for the group."
Murray Last, "Patterns of Dissent," in Annual Review of Islam in Africa, 2008/09

First introduced by the British, *boko* school was resisted by religious leaders who saw it as a trap to wean vulnerable and unsuspecting youth away from the religion of their forebears and towards the Christianity of the colonial overlords. Even after independence in 1960, many community leaders and family heads (inevitably fathers) in northern Nigeria suspected that *boko* education would lure their sons away from the proper values of respect and fear of God that constituted the touchstone of Hausa society. The very notion of girls being led down the corrupting path of *boko* raised hackles over premature, out-of-wedlock sex and general promiscuity. Most families in northern, Muslim Nigeria have come to terms with the inevitability, if not the desirability, of female literacy and education. Boko Haram represents a retrograde belief system and criminal enterprise that nevertheless taps into older prejudices towards secular schooling in general, and female education in particular.
William Miles, Northeastern University, *Breaking Down Boko Haram* http://cognoscenti.wbur.org/2014/05/09/nigeria-schoolgirls-kidnapping-william-f-s-miles

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NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

It dismays many Nigerians that the government is apparently refusing even to consider that the dissent-turned-violent is really indigenous and could possibly arise out of local desperation with the way the country is managed.
[T] he President confidently labels Nigeria's terrorism as part of a world-wide phenomenon and so it is not truly 'Nigerian' in origin or context: outsiders are blamed – al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) or Somalia's al-Shabaab , or al-Qaeda more generally. . . The President has called upon Boko Haram to show itself so that talks might start – but so far the Nigerian state's security men have remained strikingly hawkish, being confident they can again wipe out Boko Haram. Almost all Nigeria's military/security top brass are not Muslims but, like the President, come from southern Nigeria where there has been a lot of talk, especially among articulate Christian intellectuals, about how Nigeria should rid itself of the 'backward' Muslim north. There is a growing 'anti-Islam' rhetoric, not just in southern Nigeria but in the diaspora too. . . The Muslim-Christian dimension is especially worrying.

Finally, the crisis over Boko Haram has resulted in a recent Nigerian budget in which 20% of the whole has been earmarked for security. In practical terms, this means a lot of money for contracts to buy new technology (like CCTV cameras and radio communications), new weaponry, new helicopters or armoured vehicles, new or reinforced security infrastructure; and this means massive profits for those who get those contracts. Emergencies can be profitable. . .

Nigerian women and mothers demonstrate to bring attention to the parliament

Nigerians will doubtless find ways to overcome this crisis, but the solution may not lie in counter-violence. [I]t will take remarkable acts of statesmanship to achieve an honourable peace – but it was done in 1970 after Nigeria's bloody civil ('Biafran') war. It can be done again: there is a sufficient cadre of remarkable people in Nigeria to bring peace about, if not now then in a short while.

Last's Murray Last, "Nigeria's Boko Haram: The Anatomy of a Crises," *E-International Relations*, 30 January, 2012 http://www.e-ir.info/2012/01/30/nigerias-boko-haram-the-anatomy-of-a-crisis/ This article offers strong insights into how the shift in political power from Nigeria's North to South over the past decade, combined with economic decline in the North, has resulted in growing unemployment and popular dissatisfaction. And Murray Last, "Nigeria's Boko Haram: The Anatomy of a Crises," *E-International Relations*, 30 January, 2012 http://www.e-ir.info/2012/01/30/nigerias-boko-haram-the-anatomy-of-a-crisis/

President Jonathan appears intent on quelling Boko Haram by force through a "state of emergency" that will continue until May 14, 2014, with debate mounting over whether to extend it further. Many experts argue that Boko Haram can't be defeated on the battlefield; the group appears to be gaining strength after the crackdown, acquiring better weapons and fielding more fighters than ever. "Boko Haram [is] better armed and better motivated than our own troops," Borno state governor Kashim Shettima said in February 2014.

"Boko Haram," Mohammed Aly Sergie and Toni Johnson *Council on Foreign Relations,* Updated: May 5, 2014.

A Nigerian Muslim, woman lawyer and human rights activist interviewed on how to approach this crisis: http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news-events/articles/2014/05/09/joining-the-effort-to-bring-back-our-girls

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WHAT WOULD BE A USEFUL U.S. RESPONSE?

It is little wonder that this story is so new to American ears. According to the Tyndall Report, which monitors daily broadcasts of the three major U.S. networks, there was not a single television news story about Boko Haram in 2013. This absence of information comes despite the fact that the group claimed responsibility for the deaths of more than 1,500 people in the past year. Not only is the Chibok case not the first kidnapping of girls, but boys fare even worse in these attacks. Americans ask why these girls were taken and why they can't be found without having any of the information which would answer those questions. The anger and sadness exist in a vacuum and are therefore useless in bringing about a resolution.

Because Americans are so poorly informed about the rest of the world, and so strangely enamoured of their own government and its intentions, they automatically fall back to the worst solution of all, foreign military intervention. President Obama has said that he will assist the Nigerian military. That solution may please people who are understandably concerned about the fate of these young women, but that doesn't make it very helpful.

The last thing Nigeria needs is a foreign military presence to prop up its corrupt government. While Americans wring their hands over the abducted teens, they know nothing about the African strong men supported by their government who do the very same thing. American allies like Yoweri Museveni in Uganda and Paul Kagame in Rwanda have kidnapped children and forced them to become soldiers. . . . It is difficult not to have a strong emotional reaction to such a terrible story but that is the precise moment to dig deeper and search for complexities. That is the least that can be done to help bring back our girls.

For the full commentary by Margaret Kimberley, editor at Black Agenda Report:
http://allafrica.com/stories/201405201201.html?viewall=1

Other perspectives:

US secretary of state John Kerry's announcement that Washington has a team in Nigeria to assist in the hunt for more than 200 abducted schoolgirls included a twist. "We are also going to do everything possible to counter the menace of Boko Haram," he said.

Kerry didn't elaborate, perhaps because the US and Nigeria do not agree on the nature of the menace let alone how to counter it.

American officials are themselves divided. General Carter Ham, the then-commander of US Africa Command, Africom, has said Boko Haram wants to emulate al-Qaida and attack the US. Defence officials are looking to Washington's alliance with Yemen, with its close intelligence cooperation and CIA drone strikes, as an example for dealing with Boko Haram.

But former top American diplomats have a less alarmist take. They say Boko Haram remains focused on Nigeria and that confronting the deep poverty and alienation that many people in parts of the Muslim north of the country feel is key to defeating the insurgency.

They also warn that the Nigerian army's brutal counter-insurgency campaign has strengthened Boko Haram and complicated American military assistance.

http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/09/boko-haram-us-security-policy-nigeria-kidnap

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MEDIA COVERAGE: are there distortions?

Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie

Remind students about falling into the trap that Africa is only about crises. Watch the TED talk *"The Danger of a Single Story"* by Nigerian novelist, Chimamanda Adichie:
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/09/opinion/brooks-the-real-africa.html and
http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

Liberian Nobel Peace Prize winner, Leymah Gbowee, reminds us that it was Nigerian women who stood up, demonstrated and insisted that the world take notice, since the Nigerian government was unwilling to do anything. This reminded her of the outstanding role Liberian women (led by Gbowee) took in ending their country's civil war. www.latimes.com/opinions/op-ed/o-e-gbowee

Ghanaian-American commentator on how this conflict has been portrayed:
http://africasacountry.com/bringbackourgirls-what-took-the-world-so-long/