

What Makes Boko Haram Run?

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Boko Haram, a radical jihadi movement that seeks to destroy the secular Nigerian state and its market-based economy, is no closer to its stated goal of establishing God's kingdom on earth, but it has hardly been eradicated from the country's impoverished northeast. From 2011 to 2015, the militant group captured territory as large as the state of Maryland. Nigerian security services have since dislodged it from almost all of that area, but the government still does not fully control the northeast, despite President Muhammadu Buhari's December 2015 statement that the Nigerian security services had "technically" defeated Boko Haram. Moreover, Boko Haram appears to be shifting from a preoccupation with the Nigerian state to wider regional ambitions, which may reflect growing ties to the self-proclaimed Islamic State's redoubt in Libya.

Since 2009, Boko Haram has been responsible for at least [twenty thousand deaths](#), far exceeding those attributed to the Islamic State. In 2015, the think tank Institute for Economics and Peace designated it the [world's deadliest terrorist movement](#). What's more, in its war against Boko Haram, the Nigerian security services have caused an additional eight thousand deaths. The conflict has also internally displaced [more than two million people](#), and several hundred thousand Nigerians have fled to neighboring countries as refugees. Little food has been planted or harvested in the war zone, and food prices in some areas have soared. Few of the internally displaced have been able to go home for good, contrary to frequent optimistic statements from officials. It is hard to see how Nigeria can meet the northeast's humanitarian needs without assistance from its partners, especially the United Kingdom, the United States, and the United Nations.



A girl

walks past a destroyed mosque in the town of Mararaba after the Nigerian military recaptured it from Boko Haram. (Photo: Akintunde Akinleye/Reuters)

Boko Haram's Evolution

The traditional Islam of the northeastern Nigerian establishment is tolerant, incorporating elements of African indigenous religions and Sufi mysticism. Boko Haram, by contrast, adheres to Salafist theology; it preaches a literal reading of the Quran and other seventh-century holy texts, and argues that behavior based on a literalist reading of those texts defines a genuine Muslim. Accordingly, its preachers argue that practitioners of the traditional Islam of the region are apostate and deserve to die. Thus, most of Boko Haram's victims have been Muslims, not Christians.

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Though Boko Haram was established around 2003, it is rooted in a much older tradition of Islamic resistance to the British colonial administration and post-independence Nigeria's military and civilian secular governments, which have largely ignored the northeast. With desertification, high rates of population growth, and little investment, the population is among the poorest in Nigeria, and getting poorer. Northeastern elites, with wealth often derived from smuggling and corruption, eagerly participate in the secular state while remaining remarkably distant from most other inhabitants of the region. Hence, Boko Haram's message of justice for the poor resonates much

more in the northeast than in other predominantly Muslim parts of the country.

Boko Haram was founded as a predominantly peaceful communal movement led by Mohammed Yusuf, a charismatic *malam*, or teacher, and evolved over a decade to become the militant group it is today. Remarkably little is known about its structure and leadership. Myths abound.

Yusuf was [murdered](#) while in police custody in 2009. Abubakar Shekau has claimed to be Yusuf's successor and was the face of Boko Haram in lurid videos that featured beheadings. However, it is unclear how much authority Shekau actually has, especially since the movement has expanded beyond the surviving members of Yusuf's commune.

Shekau publicly declared his allegiance to the Islamic State in March 2015, as Nigerian security forces were dislodging Boko Haram from the territory it had occupied. (It is unclear whether he was speaking for the movement.) He has rarely been heard from since then. Some speculate that he is fighting in Syria, or has since died. Some have also speculated that Boko Haram is led by a council, or *shura*, but the membership of one has never been identified. In response to public pressure, successive Nigerian administrations have sought to open a dialogue with Boko Haram about the nearly three hundred schoolgirls kidnapped in 2014, but no one is certain of what individual or body can speak for the group.

Elections in March 2015 brought Buhari to power, marking the first time in Nigeria's history that an opposition candidate won the presidency in elections regarded as credible. Buhari campaigned on the dual promise to fight corruption in Nigerian society and restore security by destroying Boko Haram. As president, he has sought to coordinate military efforts against Boko Haram by Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. He introduced military personnel changes and other reforms of the Nigerian army. He has also called for an end to human rights abuses by the security services, a driver of Boko Haram recruitment, though as yet to little visible effect.

What Does Boko Haram Want?

Even though years have passed since Boko Haram began its violent campaign, there is little consensus among policy makers and observers about whether it is a broad-based populist movement or a terrorist organization with links to the Middle East. Buhari, like his predecessor, Goodluck Jonathan, has argued that Boko Haram is a terrorist organization with links to the Islamic State, and similar in theology, goals, and tactics to al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Both administrations advocated the destruction of Boko Haram through military force,

though they claimed to be open to negotiations. A competing narrative, held by many analysts and journalists, sees Boko Haram as highly decentralized and diffuse in its structure and goals, with, at least up to now, a domestic focus. This narrative sees Boko Haram as part of the broader Salafist revival underway across northern Nigeria.

Boko Haram may now be drawing closer to the Islamic State's redoubt in Libya; according to Brigadier General Donald C. Bolduc, the commander of U.S. Special Operations in Africa, Chadian forces [intercepted a convoy](#) of light weapons and ammunition believed to be from Islamic State militants as it moved south from Libya toward territory where Boko Haram is active. This could be a harbinger of closer ties.

True Believers, Profiteers, and Others

An understanding of Boko Haram's taxonomy might assist Nigeria's partners develop an approach to Boko Haram that is more successful than the current emphasis on military methods. Three predominant tendencies fall under the Boko Haram umbrella: jihadis, opportunists, and northerners forced by circumstance into the militant group's orbit.

At the movement's core are fanatical jihadis who followed Yusuf, and later, Shekau. These ideologues resemble Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and other Islamic State preachers in Syria and Iraq in their theology. However, unlike the Islamic State, Boko Haram has never articulated a concrete political program. Indeed, before March 2015, when Boko Haram controlled extensive territory, it showed little interest in day-to-day governance beyond the use of sharia courts to root out secular influences.

A second group might be labeled ambitious pragmatists or opportunists. They too wish to destroy or capture Nigeria's political economy, but rather than for ideological reasons, for their benefit or that of their patronage and clientage networks. This group likely includes mercenaries Boko Haram pays to carry out missions, as well as those to whom the movement has lent money or supplied wives. (The former is a practice initiated by Yusuf, the latter a likely motivation for the widespread kidnapping of young women. Both can be justified in Salafist doctrine, but also serve to bind beneficiaries to the movement.) Some opportunists likely use their affiliation with Boko Haram to gain leverage in disputes over land use or property. The opportunists likely include criminal networks involved in smuggling, bank robbery, and other illegal activities.

A third group appears to be those who have been forced by circumstances to join Boko Haram.

They include northeastern Nigerians who fear the security services or are made to buy protection from adherents of Boko Haram. Some have been pressured by the leadership of their patronage/clientage networks or their families. They also include those female suicide bombers succumbing to pressure or seeking revenge on the security service for having killed their family members.

Personal relationships, rather than formal institutions, dominate life in Nigeria. Such patronage networks likely bridge the varying tendencies within Boko Haram and entwine the movement with broader northeastern Nigerian society, and likely facilitate Boko Haram's acquisition of weapons, food, and money. These networks are replacing traditional ones under siege by forces ranging from climate change to modernization to the Salafist religious revival, Boko Haram, and security service abuses. This restructuring of northeastern society makes the government's efforts to eradicate Boko Haram by military means especially difficult.

Outlook

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Against a background of Boko Haram depredations, security-service abuses, the collapse of agriculture, and the drying up of legitimate trade, most economic activity in the northeast has ceased. The region is experiencing rapid food price increases and faces the prospect of famine. Local elites have been destroyed or discredited in many communities. Meeting the humanitarian and security challenges of the northeast exceeds the capacity of the Nigerian state and will require sustained food and medical assistance from its international partners, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, which have long had close ties with the Nigerian government.

As with previous administrations, national pride and concerns about the appearance of neo-colonialism have made President Buhari reluctant to seek humanitarian assistance. He must overcome that reluctance; the immediate humanitarian challenges are too great and too multifaceted to be addressed by Nigeria alone.

At a deeper level, addressing the crisis of the northeast will likely require rebuilding northeastern society on a more solid basis than has existed in the post-colonial period. A start would be for Abuja to end the security services' abuses and rein in corruption. Buhari has made more progress

with the latter than the former. But beyond that, the Buhari administration has not given much thought to how to reconstruct northeastern Nigeria. National and international envisioning needs to begin now.