

Review - Boko Haram

Written by Hussein Solomon

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Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency

By: Virginia Comolli

London: Hurst & Company, 2015.

During the course of 2014, 6,300 civilians were killed by the Nigerian Islamist sect Boko Haram (p.161). To put matters into perspective, 3,000 civilians were killed by Boko Haram fighters between 2009 and 2013 (p.1). The growing lethality of the group is clearly reflected in these numbers. Moreover the group has expanded its area of operations, striking not only in northern Nigeria but also the federal capital of Abuja as well as neighbouring states including Chad, Niger and Cameroon (p.5).

In this important book, Virginia Comolli expertly examines the phenomenon that is Boko Haram. The book is written in a vivid manner and avoids using technical jargon which makes it suitable for the general public. At the same time, this book is one of the best books on Boko Haram that I have read and I believe the reason accounting for this is the fact that the author did not merely rely on desktop research but also visited Nigeria and conducted scores of interviews with key policy makers as well as with ordinary Nigerians.

Unlike many books and articles which approach Boko Haram from a narrow counter-terrorism perspective, this book approaches its subject matter far more holistically – attempting to understand Boko Haram from a historical lens. After all how could one attempt to understand this terrorist group without understanding Usman Dan Fodio's jihad in 1804 from which Boko Haram draws its inspiration? How could one understand the different forms of government between northern and southern Nigeria without first discussing how British colonial rule governed the north separately from the south? Post-independence Nigeria saw both north and south coming together under a federal state. However the rift between north and south has never been breached, accounting for some sympathy for Boko Haram amongst northerners. Following from this, how could one grasp the origins of Boko Haram without understanding the socio-economic milieu and the vast disparities between north and south again? Consider the following, whilst poverty plagues 27 percent of the population in the largely Christian south, the figure for the largely Muslim north is 75 percent (p.2).

Not only, does Comolli contextualize the emergence of Boko Haram through a historical context and an examination of socio-economic variables but she also explores the movement's emergence through a thorough examination of other Islamist organizations in existence in Nigeria such as Dawaa, the Islamic Movement of Nigeria and the Yan Izala movement (pp.35-36). Very importantly, she makes clear that different facets of Boko Haram's ideology is shared by a number of other Islamist organizations. The chapter entitled 'What is Boko Haram?' is an exceptionally strong one specifically as it focuses on how the movement's two leaders – Mustapha Yusuf and Abubaker Shekau and their contrasting personalities shaped and reshaped Boko Haram in terms of its engagement with the Nigerian state, its areas of operation, its choice of targets and its alliances with various international organizations including Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Qaeda Central, and Somalia's Al Shabaab.

At the same time the book does have certain weaknesses. The section on the human security implications of the conflict (pp.92-94), does not quite fit into the chapter entitled 'The Internationalisation of Boko Haram', which focuses largely on strategic and tactical issues. Similarly, the subsequent chapter focusing on responses by the

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government is problematic. The first part focuses on the Nigerian government's response whilst the second part examines the Western response focusing on the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada, which could have been dealt with in a separate chapter. Moreover, when examining these responses what is sorely lacking is the responses from the African continent itself, especially in light of the African Union's Peace and Security Council and its own counter-terrorism regime as well as that of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

There are other issues too with this chapter. Despite her critique of the Nigerian security forces for their human rights violations in conducting counter-terrorism operations, I do not believe that she goes far enough with her critique. Indeed she asserts, "*I did not embark on this project with the aim of pointing my finger at the Nigerian government and its security forces*" (p.155). However, this is not about finger pointing and more to do with whether Nigeria's security forces are part of the problem thereby strengthening these Islamists, or part of the solution. There is abundant information pointing to the collusion of elements of the security forces with Boko Haram, which resulted in Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan hiring private security contractors to pursue the counter-terrorism campaign against Boko Haram. This is something which Comolli should have examined and does not.

Despite these shortcomings, this is a lucid and extremely well-informed book on a subject which is of growing global importance. I would certainly recommend the book to anyone who seeks to understand the emergence of Islamist violence on the African continent.

About the author:

Professor Hussein Solomon lectures in the Department of Political Studies at the University of the Free State, South Africa and is a Senior Research Associate of the Jerusalem-based think-tank Research on Islam and Muslims in Africa (RIMA). His most recent book is *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in Africa: Fighting Insurgency from Al Shabaab, Ansar Dine and Boko Haram* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015).