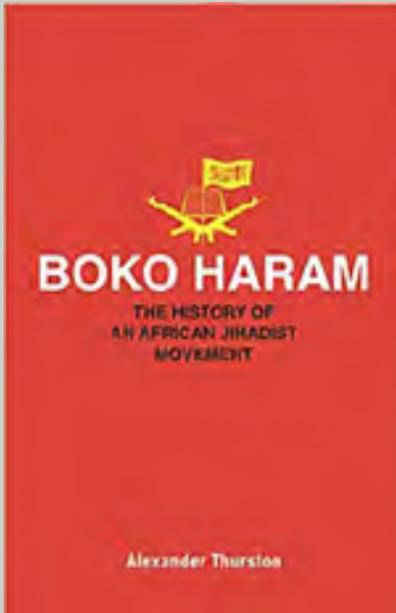


THE WRITTEN WORD

*Reviewed by LTC Stans Victor
Mouaha-Bell, Cameroon Army*

Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement



by Alexander Thurston

Princeton, N.J.: Princeton
University Press, 2017

Hardcover: US\$20.64

352 pages

THE VIOLENT NIGERIAN JIHADIST GROUP BOKO HARAM EXHIBITS A rare ideological complexity compared to other similar movements. Over time, the group grafted political motives and religious pretexts onto the core economic and social grievances that gave birth to it. Now, after seven years of conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian army in northeastern Nigeria, the humanitarian situation is catastrophic, and the socioeconomic fabric of the region is completely devastated. Since 2011, more than 30,000 people have been killed, and almost two million are either internally displaced or refugees in neighboring countries. The counterinsurgency forces fighting Boko Haram seem powerless to stop violence by the militants in remote parts of Nigeria's Borno State. The political leaders of the countries affected by the Boko Haram insurgency seem to operate in a real fog of war.

Author Alexander Thurston, an assistant professor of African studies at Georgetown University, manages to explain the complex environment and context that gave birth to Africa's deadliest terrorist group. Thurston argues at the outset that Boko Haram is the outcome of dynamics born from locally grounded ethno-religious interactions, and that its ruthlessness is partly a result of failed past efforts by the government to resolve such conflicts through violence.¹ Thurston also highlights how Boko Haram has adapted its strategies, discourses, and military and political objectives—in short, the group's ways, means, and ends—to respond to external events.

The book is an outstanding addition to the growing body of literature on both African studies and terrorism studies. The background to the author's research is a Nigerian social environment of mistrust and permanent suspicion, marked by tensions and crises between ethnic groups and political parties. Using a chronological approach, Thurston highlights five factors that can explain the rise of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria: religious doctrine, poverty and inequality, the chaotic political context marked by the end of military rule in 1999, youth unemployment, and the inaccessible topography of the region. Although Thurston distances himself from the all-too-common narrative that Boko Haram formed only because of poverty and rampant corruption in Nigeria, he acknowledges that the group emerged in a part of Nigeria where the government's public education program registered its greatest failures.² In the long run, this vacuum was filled by Islamist schools led by zealous activist preachers. It is on the interaction between religion and politics that Thurston focuses his analysis.

Understanding Boko Haram requires particular attention not just to the rise of religious extremism, but also to the social context in which Boko Haram emerged. A counterinsurgency strategy that emphasizes suppression cannot be viable, and Thurston reasonably maintains that body counts cannot be the only metric of its success. To make his point, Thurston revisits nearly 60 years of the political and religious history of Nigeria. He notes that, unlike traditional terrorist groups such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and ISIS, which usually

start their terror campaigns as small cells before gaining importance and expanding, Boko Haram already had a very broad popular base before transitioning to armed struggle in 2009. This singularity is explained by the resonance that the discourse of early Boko Haram leaders such as Mohammed Yusuf had among the local population, the pattern of Islamic authority in northeast Nigeria, and the effectiveness of the group's recruitment techniques among young people.

Thurston's analysis reveals four fundamental failures of governance that contributed to Boko Haram's radicalization: Nigeria's contentious politics, economic inequality, endemic corruption, and counterproductive conflict management strategies. Thus, he argues that the Nigerian government has been an instigator of violence and highlights its responsibility for the increased polarization of the region in conflict. This position, he notes, is echoed by Kyari Mohammed and other Muslim intellectuals who have raised pointed questions about the Nigerian government's response to Boko Haram. These scholars believe that the collusion of state authorities and *ulama* (Muslim clerics), combined with the state's resistance to examining the uprising's root causes, has set the stage for more violence.³

This framework allows Thurston and his readers to better understand Boko Haram's ethnoreligious dynamic, the most visible aspects of which are antimodernist goals, inflexibility and hostility to negotiation, and the total commitment of the group's members. Thus,

Boko Haram has deployed a doctrine of religious exclusivism to claim legitimacy for its message. It has presented itself both as the victim of other actors' aggressions and as a righteous vanguard fighting for the purity of Islam. The interplay of doctrine and events means that there is no easy way out of the crisis. Boko Haram represents an ugly paradox: its ideas have limited appeal but significant staying power. The group can be crushed militarily, yet the state violence fuels its narrative of victimhood.⁴

Each attack, ambush, and kidnaping fuels questions about Boko Haram's motivations. While regional military responses to the group are gradually becoming more effective, Thurston insists that no long-lasting



Nigerian children imitating Boko Haram terrorists

The book is an outstanding addition to the growing body of literature on both African studies and terrorism studies.

solution will emerge without a serious investigation into the political causes of the insurgency and the need for political reform.⁵ He emphasizes that political rhetoric is ultimately more important than religious rhetoric and must, therefore, be given priority in any proposed solution.

Throughout his tale, Thurston gives a compelling description of the spread of Salafist ideology and the political context in northeastern Nigeria. However, his analysis misses one essential point: his examination of the use of the “*takfir*” epithet (declaring other Muslims to be apostates) was very brief, despite the fact that it is at the root of the group’s religious legitimization of violence against civilians, and prompted serious theological and political debates within Boko Haram that eventually split the organization. This shortcoming, however, does not decrease the value of the book. All in all, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* is a rich and balanced account and very well-documented. This book is a must-read for anyone who is interested in African studies. ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LTC Stans Mouaha-Bell is a SOF officer in the Cameroon Army.

This is a work of the US federal government and is not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Foreign copyrights may apply.

NOTES

- 1 Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017), 33.
- 2 Ibid., 74.
- 3 Ibid., 148.
- 4 Ibid., 301.
- 5 Ibid., 302.

Abuja, Nigeria

