

BOOK REVIEW

Virginia Comolli. *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency*. London: Hurst & Co, 2015. vii + 230 pp. Acknowledgments. Maps. Notes. Index. \$27.95. Cloth. ISBN: 9781849044912.

In the field of Security Studies, the literature on Boko Haram has received quite a lot of attention. As the Boko Haram menace in Northeastern Nigeria surged following the extrajudicial killing of its founder, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009, international and local scholars from multiple disciplines were quick to offer insights into the activities of the jihadist movement. In retrospect, this escalation of interest accomplished two objectives. First, it succeeded in shedding some light on the origin, mandate, and operation of a largely faceless terrorist group. Beyond this, the copious literature on Boko Haram further fueled unsubstantiated speculations concerning the group's identity, with the resulting emergence of confusing claims and stereotypes. It is partly on the basis of this confusion that the perception of Boko Haram is split between Nigeria's largely Muslim North and Christian South. Although several studies on Boko Haram are available, Virginia Comolli's *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency* offers a rich scholarly engagement on the subject which even non-academic readers will find interesting.

Comolli's book clarifies many of the debated issues on the existence and evolution of Boko Haram militants. Divided among seven chapters (including an epilogue), the author's detailed narrative outlines the genesis, ideology, evolution, and operational tactics of Boko Haram (and Ansaru) under its nefarious leaders including Mohammed Yusuf, Abubakar Shekau, and Khalid al-Barnawi. The introduction sets the appropriate tone for her study with the assertion that the seriousness of the security, humanitarian, and economic threats posed by the rising trend of insurgency in West Africa warrants a careful investigation of the menace of Boko Haram militancy. As Comolli points out, despite praise from both international and local experts on Boko Haram, most previous studies were limited in length and scope, and seldom provided a rich historical context. Her attempt to cover these omissions became an interesting assessment of the international dimension of the Boko Haram movement in addition to the responses by the affected governments in West Africa's Lake Chad region as well as by international actors (USA, United Kingdom, and Canada).

Comolli's analysis, based on three years of extensive field research and incredible access to major stakeholders, offers a comprehensive account of the Boko Haram movement for a wider audience including, but not limited to, scholars and government officials. *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency* locates the emergence of Boko Haram within the context of a detailed historicization of Islam in Nigeria, from its origin in the fifteenth century to the current day. In this manner, Comolli demonstrates the role that religion has played in shaping national identity and the implications this has for directing the social, economic, security, and political trajectory of a country as ethnically and religiously diverse as Nigeria. Her analysis leads to a discussion of the historical patterns of Islam in Nigeria, which goes on to explain the recurring trend of religious violence in the country. Chapter 2 captures the central thesis of the book, with the argument that Nigeria's Islamist insurgency cannot simply be understood within the narrow prism of religious warfare without taking into consideration the complexity of underlying political and ethnic contexts that are crucial to the search for a lasting solution. It is against this background that the book borrows from extant literature to review the splintering, transformation, and modernization of Islamic militant movements in Nigeria with emphasis on the Daawa movement, Yan Izala, and the notorious Maitatsine. A robust account of the ideological evolution and tactical operation of the radical Islamic movement is presented in Chapter 4.

It is true that Boko Haram means different things to different people. The author herself admits this dilemma in her attempt to identify the militant group as either an insurgent or a terrorist group. While this question might be largely semantic, Comolli's book underscores the Nigerian government's failure, encountered at the initial stage of combating Boko Haram's violence, to figure out the real intention of the militant group and to identify the appropriate state mechanism to address its jihadist ambitions. Comolli suggests that the violent pattern that accompanied Boko Haram's global prominence has been very much inspired, on one hand, by the Nigerian government's violent approach to the insecurity posed by the Islamic movement's campaign of terror, and on the other hand by the state's failure to address the country's spiraling socio-economic and development challenges. Her study seems to agree with the popular assumption that the escalation of Boko Haram's violent tactics was mainly triggered by the flawed leadership of former President Goodluck Jonathan. The USD2.1 billion arms fraud is a clear reminder of this fact.

Comolli acknowledges the difficulty in researching a constantly moving target such as Boko Haram, conceding that much has changed since the start of her project. Despite this, the book remains a significant reference for scholars and students in search of a historical context for the evolution of not just Boko Haram but also of the recurring trend of radical Islamic militancy in Nigeria. The author's simplification of the complex historical dynamics of Boko Haram stands out. Although a lot has happened since its publication in 2015, Comolli's *Boko Haram* book offers a well-researched

contribution from a western-based scholar on a phenomenon many are still grappling to understand. Indeed, the book reveals many aspects that could be relevant for future studies in such scholarship areas as Borderland Studies, Security Studies, and Regionalism (considering the substance of the ECOWAS Protocol and the soft power approaches to counter-insurgency).

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For more reading on this subject, see:

Meagher, Kate. 2013. "ASR FORUM: ENGAGING WITH AFRICAN INFORMAL ECONOMIES: Informality, Religious Conflict, and Governance in Northern Nigeria: Economic Inclusion in Divided Societies." *African Studies Review* 56 (3): 209–34. doi:10.1017/asr.2013.86.

Paden, John N. 1981. "Islamic Political Culture and Constitutional Change in Nigeria." *Issue: Quarterly Journal of Opinion* 11 (1–2): 24–28. doi:10.1017/S1548450500002638.