

# **“SMALL FIRES CAUSING LARGE FIRES”: THE RISE OF BOKO HARAM IN NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA AND ITS TRANSNATIONAL POSTURE IN THE LAKE CHAD BASIN**

*Gershon Adela, University of Calgary, Canada*

## **Abstract**

The Islamist group, *Jama'atul Ahul Sunnah Lidda'wati wal Jihad*, translated as “people committed to the propagation of the Prophet’s teachings and jihad”, is commonly known as *Boko Haram*, which means “Western education is forbidden.” It originated in Nigeria’s northeastern state of Borno in 2002, but its violence extends into neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger in the Lake Chad Basin. This article provides an overview of the factors that led to the emergence of Boko Haram, its resort to violence, and rapid expansion in the Lake Chad Basin. The article argues that the Boko Haram insurgency is the result of the combination of overlapping and self-complementing factors. The similarity of these factors across Nigeria’s neighboring countries in the Lake Chad Basin has led to the rapid escalation of Boko Haram’s conflict.

## **Introduction**

The conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government has been raging for over a decade now. The conflict, which started in 2009 and is centered in Nigeria’s northeastern region, has caused unparalleled disruptions in the region’s social, economic, and political order. It has resulted in the deaths of thousands of people and the displacement of millions. The group’s violence extends beyond the borders of northeastern Nigerian into parts of neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger in the Lake Chad Basin (Tar & Bala, 2019; Felter, 2018). Since its inception, the Boko Haram insurgency has spawned a plethora of interpretations. On one hand, it is seen as an extension of the wider global jihadi network, while on the other hand, it is perceived as a construct of northern Nigerian political elites. It is also recognized as a product of the continuous quest for Islamic religious dominance in Nigeria (Mbah et al., 2017; Mustapha, 2014; Zenn, 2014a; Zenn, 2014b). This article presents an overview of the insurgency, which is wreaking unprecedented havoc in northeastern Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin. It begins by delving into the origin and ideological bent of Boko Haram. The article further examines the religious, political, and socioeconomic factors that led to the emergence of the Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria and its rapid expansion into the Lake Chad Basin.

## Origin and Ideology of Boko Haram

Different sources give contradictory accounts of the origin of Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria. One account holds that Boko Haram is an offshoot of religious reformist movement *Jama'at izarat al-bid'a wa-iqamat al-sunna* meaning “the community for the eradication of un-Islamic innovations and the establishment of the Sunna” (Kane, 2003, p. 85). It is popularly known as *Yan Izala* in Hausa meaning “members of the Izala movement” (Kane, 2003, p. 1). Established in 1978 in the city of Jos in north-central Nigeria by Malam Isma'ila Idris, the main aim of the movement is to ensure that modernization does not erode the Islamic values of Nigeria's northern region (Weismann, 2011, pp.149–154). The radical Salafist teachings of Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, the spiritual leader of the Yan Izala movement, drew more followers into the group. They included Mohammed Yusuf, a native of Girgir in Yobe State. Internal divisions in the movement in the 1980s and 1990s, however, led to the emergence of splinter movements within the Yan Izala, notably the *Ahl al-Sunna* movement founded by Ja'afar Mahmud Adam. Among the followers of the new sub-movement and student of Ja'afar, was Mohammed Yusuf (Loimeier, 2012, p. 145; Thurston, 2016). However, in 2002, Yusuf broke ties with the Yan Izala sub-movement and its founder Ja'afar Mahmud Adam due to ideological differences. Owing to his radical interpretations of the Quran, Yusuf embraced the use of violence and the killing of infidels as an acceptable method for a jihad. He also rejected Western education and institutions of innovation and modernity in Nigeria including modern Islamic schools (Amara, 2020; Umar, 2012). Consequently, Mohammed Yusuf founded the *Jama'atu Ahlus Sunna Lidda'awati Wal Jihad* also known as Boko Haram, in Maiduguri, northeastern Nigeria, in 2002 to practice and teach what he perceived as the purest form of Islam (Anugwom, 2019).

Another account of Boko Haram's origin claims that the group dates to 1995 as the *Ahlusunna wal'jama'ah hijra* (People of the Sunnah and the community) or *Shabaab* Muslim Youth Organization located in Nigeria's northeastern town of Maiduguri in Borno state. Although it was a religious study group, the group's ideological orientation changed when its leadership shifted to Mohammed Yusuf after its founder, Abubakar Lawan, left for Saudi Arabia to further his education at the University of Medina in 2002 (Onuoha, 2014a). Yusuf's radical Quranic interpretations and disdain for Western education consequently earned the group the name 'Boko Haram' from the media and the people in Maiduguri (Ekhomu, 2019, pp. 4–6).

Irrespective of its murky beginning, all the accounts concerning Boko Haram's origin establish that the group emerged as an autonomous movement in 2002 with Mohammed Yusuf as its founder and leader. Yusuf's radical interpretation of the Quran, preference of a militant path to jihad, and disdain for Western education set Boko Haram up as a religious movement ready and willing to resort to violence as a means of promoting its ideologies (Faluyi et al., 2019). The majority of Boko Haram members are youth from the Kanuri ethnic group, which comprises the largest ethnic community in Nigeria's Borno state but also straddles the border into Cameroon, Niger, and Chad (Ojochenemi et al., 2015).

Boko Haram's conflict with the Nigerian government began in July 2009. A confrontation between the group's members and a detachment of the Nigerian police on June 11, 2009, sparked a series of conflicts between Boko Haram supporters and Nigerian security forces that spread through the northern states of Bauchi, Kano, Yobe, and Borno. The four-days of violence, which began on July 26, 2009, resulted in the death of at least 700 members. Mohammed Yusuf, the sect's leader, was also captured and later killed by the Nigerian police (Ekhomu, 2019, pp. 21-22; Onuoha, 2014b; U.S. Congress, 2011). Under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, formerly a deputy of the late Muhammad Yusuf, Boko Haram carried out a widespread insurgency against government targets, civilians, schools, churches, mosques, markets, and villages in northeastern Nigeria. These included an assault on a prison in Bauchi in September 2010, which freed about 700 prisoners, including members of Boko Haram, and the bombing of the U.N. building in Abuja in August 2011, which killed over 20 people and injured more than 80. Boko Haram also abducted more than 270 schoolgirls from the northeastern town of Chibok in Borno State in April 2014 (Blanchard, 2016; U.S. Congress, 2011). The group is currently active in Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, exacerbating the general insecurity in the Lake Chad Basin. Since May 2011, the Boko Haram conflict has claimed more than 37,500 lives, created over 244,000 refugees in northern Nigeria, and displaced over 2.5 million people in the Lake Chad Basin (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). However, in 2016, Boko Haram split into two factions, with the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) emerging as an independent movement under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the son of Mohammed Yusuf (International Crisis Group, 2019; Omeni, 2019, pp. 47-50). Although both Boko Haram and ISWAP continue to utilize violence to achieve their goal, ISWAP's operational tactics differ from those of Boko Haram. While Boko Haram continues to attack innocent civilians including Muslims, ISWAP mostly focuses on military targets. Consequently, ISWAP's offensives have resulted in more military casualties than civilian casualties (International Crisis Group, 2019).

Boko Haram's ideology espouses a complete rejection of Western influences, namely education, modernization, democracy, and Christianity. Yusuf regarded Western influence as morally corrupting for Nigeria, making it religiously forbidden to Muslims (International Crisis Group, 2019). This ideology is embedded in *Salafi Jihadism* and its radical interpretation of the doctrine of *takfir*, and the tradition of *Islamism* (Abdulbasit, 2015). Salafism denotes what is perceived as the original and pure version of Islam as practiced by the "the pious predecessors" (Haykel, 2009, p. 34), namely the first three generations of Islam (Østebø, 2015). Consequently, Salafism opposes all forms of Islamic religious innovations and emphasizes adherence to its espoused purest and authentic interpretation of the Quran and the Hadith. *Salafist Jihadism* is a distinct form of Salafism which embraces the use of violence and rebellion as a means to establish an Islamic state. The theological justification for the use of violence by *Salafi Jihadists* is the doctrine of *takfir* which defends the declaration of Muslims who do not practice the purest Salafi doctrines as apostates (Abdulbasit, 2015).

*Islamism* is a totalitarian ideology that seeks to model Islamic religious tradition to gain absolute supremacy through violence or other means (Solomon, 2013). Proponents of Islamism aspire to capture political influence to dogmatically enforce their faith on their subjects. They abhor socio-political Westernization and believe in the adequacy of Islam as a model for a sound socio-political system (Kuru & Kuru, 2008). Islamism is inspired by the Quranic phrase which holds that "anyone who is not governed by what Allah has revealed is among the transgressors" (Forest, 2012, p. 76). Boko Haram's Salafi jihadism ideology and the violent rejection of Western influence is therefore not a construct of its founder, but rather part of an "evolutionary philosophical ascent" (Abdulbasit, 2015, p. 187) among some northern Nigerian Muslims.

## **Fundamental Causes of the Boko Haram Insurgency**

### **Religious Factors**

While pre-colonial and colonial religious developments in Nigeria laid the foundation for the formation of Boko Haram, post-colonial religious tensions further motivated opposition to secularism and reinforced the rise of the sect. It is worth noting that after gaining independence in 1960, ethnicity and secession struggle became the major cause of unrest in Nigeria (Falola, 1998). The declaration of the Republic of Biafra by the Eastern region and the resulting civil war of 1967-70, represents the most notable example (Ekwe-Ekwe, 1990). Religious opposition to the secular Nigerian state came to the forefront after 1975

in the buildup to the brief restoration of civilian rule. The proposition by the Constitution Drafting Committee to describe Nigeria as “one and indivisible sovereign Republic, secular, democratic, and social” (Rufai, 2013, p. 43) was heavily opposed by the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, the umbrella body that coordinates and advances the interests of Islam and Muslims in Nigeria. The Council argued that Nigeria could not be described as a secular state since that excludes the recognition of important religious moral standards and values (Clarke, 1982). Rather, it advocated for the incorporation of Sharia into the Nigerian code of law and the introduction of a Sharia Court of Appeal into the federal constitution of the country. However, the Christian politicians, mostly from the south, opposed the proposal recognizing it as unconstitutional and a concerted attempt by the Muslim majority to Islamize Nigeria (Rufai, 2013). The religious contention within this period centered on whether Nigeria should become a secular state, or an Islamic state ruled by Sharia. This, however, took a violent turn in the 1980s and 1990s (Falola, 1998).

Several religious extremist organizations in the North engaged in militant activities aimed at reforming the Nigerian political structure by re-establishing a caliphate governed by Sharia law. They included the violent *Maitatsine* movement, a radical Islamist group founded in the 1970s by Cameroonian exiled preacher, Muhammad Marwa; and the Shia-inclined Islamic Movement of Nigeria established by Ibrahim Zakzaky (Gray & Adeakin, 2019). There were also non-violent but conservative activities by the Yan Izala movement. Common to these groups was their persistent attempt to impose Islamic religious ideology on a secular, independent Nigeria (Ibrahim, 1997).

The call to reject the democratic and secular Nigerian state again remains the central goal of Boko Haram’s insurgency. Solomon (2015) noted that Mohammed Yusuf, in his preaching, made clear the religious underpinnings of the emergence of Boko Haram when he noted that:

We want to re-emphasize that our main objective is the restoration of the Sharia Legal System in line with the teachings of the Holy Qur’an. We want the Nigerian Constitution to be abrogated and Democracy suspended, and a full-fledged Islamic State established. We want to emphasize that trouble started in this part of the world when the white men came, colonized our land, chased away the Emirs and righteous leaders and then replaced the system with Western Legislative, Judicial and Executive procedures. They also changed our pattern of learning and

upbringing to the detriment of moral teachings; that were exactly what prompted the establishment of our organization. (p. 90)

While this indicates an inevitably strong connection between religion and the emergence of Boko Haram, Mohammed Yusuf also linked his group's ideology to the deplorable socioeconomic and political conditions in Nigeria. Although he did not promise that Boko Haram would make any improvements in these circumstances, such rhetoric attracted more sympathizers to his cause.

### **Political Factors**

Trends in Nigeria's political system contributed immensely towards the outbreak of the Boko Haram insurgency. The politicization of Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity represents the first notable political factor in the rise of Boko Haram. Politics in Nigeria is highly fragmented along regional, ethnic, and religious lines, mainly between the Muslim dominated North and Christian dominated South (Aghedo & Osumah, 2012). This fragmentation characterized the country's political development during the colonial era mainly due to the artificial amalgamation of ethnically, religiously, and linguistically different groups into a single Nigeria by the British in 1914. Major political parties formed during Nigeria's decolonization period of the 1950s were the Northern People's Congress (NPC) in the Muslim and Hausa-Fulani dominated Northern region of the country, the Action Group (AG) in the predominantly Yoruba Western region, and the National Council of Nigerian and the Cameroons (NCNC) in the primarily Igbo Eastern region (Siollun, 2009).

After independence in 1960, these ethno-regional political differences degenerated into regional tensions and fierce politically motivated violence during the First Republic (1960–66) (Agbibo, 2013). These hostilities added to the persistent economic decline and increasing corruption, consequently precipitating Nigeria's first and second military coups in 1966, the secession of the country's eastern region in 1967, the declaration of the Republic of Biafra which represented the location of the country's oil industry, and the violent civil war that killed over 2 million Nigerians (de St. Jorre, 2012; Ekwe-Ekwe, 1990; Faluyi et al., 2019; Thomas & Falola, 2020). The inability of successive military leaders to address Nigeria's excessive ethno-regional nationalism plunged the country into a series of coups with intermittent civilian rule until the return to democracy in 1999 (Siollun, 2009).

Elite politicians continue to exploit ethnic and religious sentiments to secure power, and in the process, they engage social groups to help them amass popular support and intimidate their opponents. (Faluyi et al., 2019). However, where the demands of such groups are not met by the politicians they helped, they emerge as stiff opposition to the political system and the state. It is against the backdrop of such divisive politics that Boko Haram emerged. Senator Ali Modu Sherrif, a member of the All Nigeria Peoples' Party (ANPP) and a former governor of Borno state, is believed to have engaged members of Boko Haram in his private militia called *Ecomog Boys* towards his election in 2003. He is also believed to have supported the group both financially and with ammunition during its formative years (Iyekekpolo, 2016, p. 2221). However, following his inability to implement strict Sharia law throughout Borno state, as demanded by Boko Haram, the disappointed group began resorting to extremist measures to seek the implementation of its demand, while opposing the entire political system. Mohammed Yusuf encouraged the rejection of the secular Nigerian state, which is based on Western democracy, while admonishing his followers to get ready for a jihad (Iyekekpolo, 2020). A subsequent confrontation between members of Boko Haram and Operation Flush Joint Task Force established by Borno's Governor Sheriff in 2009 ultimately contributed to transforming the group into an insurgency (Mustapha, 2014). As William Reno notes, insurgent groups are a reflection of the very political system from which they emerged (Reno, 2011).

Another role played by politics in Nigeria towards the emergence of the Boko Haram insurgency is the endemic corruption among elite politicians. Politics in Nigeria is marred by corruption, embezzlement, and misappropriation of state resources by the political elites, a situation which has deteriorated the relationship between the citizens and the state (Sule & Othman, 2015). In the 2019 Corruption Perception Index by Transparency International, Nigeria was ranked 146<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries globally (Transparency International, 2019). In 2006, it was estimated that some \$380 billion of oil revenue had been stolen from the government or wasted since the country's independence in 1960. In 2016, Nigeria's minister of information reported that about \$9 billion were lost to corruption during the erstwhile President Goodluck Jonathan's administration, as well as some \$2.1 billion stolen from funds earmarked for the fight against Boko Haram (Thurston, 2018). It was in opposition to these political irregularities that Boko Haram emerged to challenge to the Nigerian state, seeking to overthrow the country's democracy and institute strict Sharia law. Mohammed Yusuf was an open critic of the endemic corruption and bad governance that have bedeviled Nigeria's political landscape, especially the North (Meagher, 2014). His message resonated with the youth and unemployed who recognized him as a positive

influence and supported his movement. Although Yusuf's objective for Boko Haram was not to merely fight corruption, he exploited the profundity of the socioeconomic grievances emanating from the corrupt nature of Nigeria's political system to project his ideology and objectives. This earned him a broader support base in the pursuit of his extremist and ambitious objective of establishing an Islamic caliphate.

The final political factor of note in explaining the emergence of Boko Haram's insurgency is the counterproductive conflict management strategies by Nigeria's political authorities. Throughout the socio-political history of Nigeria, inter and intra religious violence, mainly between Muslims and Christians and among Muslims, are a reoccurring phenomenon. Eminent among these include the Maitatsine crisis in 1980, the 1982 violent clashes between Muslims and Christians in Kano, the 1992 interreligious violence in Kaduna state, the February and May 2000 riots in Kaduna, and the November 2002 "Miss World riots" also in Kaduna (Falola, 1998; Human Rights Watch, 2003). These clashes were driven by exceptionally complex variables and required critical examination and effective resolution strategies, but the Nigerian government's reaction was merely to condemn the agitators and encourage Nigerians to seek peace. This has resulted in festering grievances among Christians and Muslims in these communities (Thurston, 2018). Many Muslims argue that after such clashes, the state authorities detain Muslims connected to the violence for a longer time, while the Christians remained free. Such feeling of victimization and oppression among northern Muslims has undermined their confidence in the Nigerian government's capacity to avoid strife and effectively hold the perpetrators accountable (Thurston, 2018). Boko Haram, therefore, presents itself as the victim of state aggression and the voice for the largely oppressed Muslims. In a video recorded in 2009 and made public a couple of years later, Mohammed Yusuf expressed discontent with the perceived anti-Muslim rhetoric of both the Nigerian Federal Government and the Borno State Government. In what Yusuf called "Open Letter to the Federal Government of Nigeria," he argued that "the Government of Nigeria has not been built to do justice...it has been built to attack Islam and kill Muslims" (Bakur, 2011, 9:07). Yusuf further stated that Muslims were unfairly punished for the violent clashes between them and Christians in the 1980s and 1990s (Bakur, 2011, 9:27). To members of Boko Haram, the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf in 2009 by the Nigerian Police Force further indicated the state's victimization of and discrimination against Muslims. Abubakar Shekau, in his 2012 message to President Jonathan, acknowledged the killing of the sect's leader as a deliberate assault brought not only against the group, but also on the Muslim community in general (Thurston, 2018). Boko

Haram, therefore, sees its atrocities as a way of avenging the death of their leader and contesting the endemic victimization of Muslims in Nigeria.

### **Socioeconomic Factors**

Another significant reason for the emergence of Boko Haram and its resort to violence is socioeconomic marginalization. However, the relationship between socioeconomic factors and the Boko Haram insurgency remains highly contested. In an interview with CNN, former President Goodluck Jonathan noted that Boko Haram is neither the result of misrule nor poverty but rather a local terror group (CNN, 2013). The ruling party also ruled out poverty as a cause of Boko Haram's insurgency, as most of the victims are equally poor (Umoru, 2013). Similarly, the President of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Pastor Ayo Orisejafor, also notes that Boko Haram is propelled by a religious ideology and not poverty (Olatunji, 2014).

Contrary to the above assertions are findings by the 15-member committee set up by the Kano State Governor, Rabi'u Kwankwaso, to investigate the factors causing unrest in the city following the 2012 Boko Haram attacks, which killed at least 185 people. The committee found that poor governance, poverty, and unregulated migration were the causes of the crisis (AFP, 2012). Similarly, the governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria and emir of Kano from 2014 to 2020, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, noted that the absence of job opportunities and poor standard of living is directly responsible for the insecurity and terrorism in the region (Mustapha, 2014). A critical analysis of the socioeconomic conditions of the northeastern geopolitical zone indicates that its deteriorating state has been an important contributor to the rise and sustenance of the Boko Haram insurgency.

The average living standard in Nigeria has been consistently low, despite its natural resource wealth, the continuous inflow of oil revenue, and its place as the largest economy in Africa (World Bank, 2019). A majority of Nigerians cannot meet basic human and socio-economic needs such as access to food, quality education, effective healthcare service delivery, pipe-borne water, proper shelter, and employment opportunities (Varin, 2016). Such conditions remain worse in the north where poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy are lamentably high. In 2010, 69 percent of Nigeria's population, equivalent to 112 million Nigerians, were defined as poor with the southeast and southwest geopolitical zones having poverty rates of 67.0 percent and 59.1 percent respectively. The northeast, the epicenter of Boko Haram's insurgency, and northwest geopolitical zones had poverty rates of 76.3 percent and 77.7 percent respectively, making the northern

zone the poorest part of the country (National Bureau of Statistics, 2012). The northeast also had the highest unemployment rates in Nigeria. With a national unemployment rate of 23.9 percent in 2011, Borno state had an unemployment rate of 27.7 percent; Bauchi, 41.4 percent; Gombe, 38.7 percent; and Yobe state, 35.6 percent. Comparatively, in the south, Lagos in the same year, had an unemployment rate of 8.3 percent; Osun state, 3 percent; Abia state, 11.2 percent; and Anambra state, 12.2 percent (Ojochenemi et al., 2015).

Further disparity between the north and south can be observed in Nigeria's educational sector. The deplorable state of education in the northern region has cumulated in a high rate of illiteracy among its populace making it not only the poorest region in Nigeria, but also the region with the worst literacy level. In 2012, Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital located in the south, had a literacy rate of 92 percent whereas Kano, the north's commercial capital and Nigeria's second-biggest city, had a literacy rate of 49 percent. Similarly, northwestern Sokoto state had a very low literacy rate of 10 percent compared to the national average of 53 percent. In the northeastern state of Borno, the hotbed of the Boko Haram insurgency, the literacy rate was under 15 percent (Hoffman, 2014). A survey by the Northern Education Initiative (NEI) revealed that the northeastern region has the highest percentage of children between the ages of 6-16 who have no access to education. Borno state had 72 percent of such children, making it the state with the poorest access to basic education (Edeh, 2011).

A similar survey on the Basic Education and Living Conditions of Orphans and Vulnerable Children by the Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Development of Bauchi State and NEI, also revealed that some 65.5 percent of girls in Nigeria's northeastern region lack access to basic education. Only 49 percent of boys and 37.1 percent of girls in the region had access to basic education (Edeh, 2013). According to the survey, there were over 17.5 million orphans and vulnerable children in Nigeria, and they form a large percentage of *Almajirai*. *Almajirai* are Qur'anic school pupils who study the Quran under the guidance of a Qur'anic teacher (Mallam) who compels them to beg for food and financial assistance on the streets. As a result, they are extremely vulnerable to being indoctrinated and eventually recruited by violent extremist groups such as Boko Haram (Aluaigba, 2009; Edeh, 2013). Wole Soyinka (2012), the Nobel laureate, argued that the *Almajiris*:

have been deliberately bred, nurtured, sheltered, rendered pliant, obedient to only one line of command, ready to be unleashed at the rest of society.... From knives and machetes, bows and poisoned arrows they

have graduated to AK-47s, homemade bombs, and explosive-packed vehicles. (Soyinka, para.7)

The deteriorated state of education in Nigeria's northern region is traceable to the implementation of the colonial indirect rule system. Because the British colonial administrators were not committed to introducing Western-style education in the region, their policies concerning Western education and religion in the Muslim dominated northern Nigeria stemmed from the ideological orientation that the region's culture and religion was discrete and must be protected from the corrupt influence of modernity. The British colonial administrators, therefore, trained northern Nigerian elites in a way that encouraged Muslim aristocracy with a very conservative mindset towards Western civilization. Christian missionaries were blocked from the northern territory for fear of undermining the Muslim aristocracy (Barnes, 2009). The emirs, who were also strong defenders of Islamic education, discouraged Western education due to their fear that it would destroy the Islamic culture and style of learning and replace it with Christianity which they consider heresy (Anugwom, 2019). This limited northerners' access to Western-style education, a system of education which had already been well established in the south by Christian missionaries (Falola, 1999).

The socioeconomic frustration created in the northeastern region due to the entrenched poverty, unemployment, and inequality created an opportunity for Boko Haram to step into that void as a rival to the authority of the state and an instrument for change. Kashim Shettima, a former Governor of Borno state, emphasized during an interview with Ochereome Nnanna (2012) that:

over a period of thirty years, the ruling establishment abandoned the common people ... Nobody bothered about their education and health, and nobody cared how they made their living ... This was the ready-made situation that the late leader of Boko Haram sect, Mohammed Yusuf, capitalized on. He started organizing the youth, procuring for motorcycles for their transport business, helping them set up small businesses, assisting them to get married at little cost and generally creating... an alternative society. (paras. 80–10)

Overall, the rise and sustenance of the Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria must be understood as the result of the interplay between Islamic religious doctrinal fragmentation and radicalization, and sociopolitical complexities within the region. The increasingly intolerant, radical, and disruptive approach to intra-Muslim doctrinal disputes in the region laid the

foundation for social disorder. However, bad governance, elite manipulation of the political system, weak state institutions, and extreme socioeconomic marginalization, created the opportunity for Boko Haram members to resort to violence as a means to defend their religion and to seek a change in the social order.

### **Regionalization of the Boko Haram Insurgency**

As noted earlier, although Boko Haram originated from northeastern Nigeria, its violence and related insecurity are not confined to this region. In his inaugural speech on May 29, 2015, Nigeria's President, Muhammadu Buhari, noted that "Boko Haram is a typical example of small fires causing large fires" (Comolli, 2015, p. 109). Due to division of the Kanem-Borno Empire among the countries in the Lake Chad Basin as a result of Western colonialism, the people within the Basin have a common history, language and culture. With these preexisting conditions in place, it is therefore worth noting that, right from its inception, Boko Haram had the tendency of being both a local and transnational movement, as the charismatic preaching of Mohammed Yusuf further attracted followers from Niger, Cameroon, and Chad (Comolli, 2017). Notwithstanding, several factors within the Basin have made it conducive for Boko Haram to establish havens and further expand its violence.

Like Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger have limited government control, porous borders, and weak state institutions in their remote border regions making these places highly impoverished and susceptible to organized crime and illicit cross-border economic activities, including arms and drug trafficking (Uwakwe & Miapyen, 2018). These countries are also plagued by high levels of elite corruption, poor governance, and mismanagement of state resources (Mahmood & Ani, 2018). The endemic poverty, inequality, and marginalization created by these situations have predisposed many people to extremist exploitation. Boko Haram has taken advantage of the void to extend its activities to these marginalized regions in these countries (Ndahi, 2017). In Cameroon's Far North Province, the hotbed of Boko Haram's insurgency, over 74 percent of the people live below the poverty line, compared to a national average of 37.5 percent. The region has the lowest school enrolment rate, 46 percent, compared to a national average of 84.1 percent. Consequently, more than 75 percent of the youth are underemployed (International Crisis Group, 2016).

Boko Haram also exploits the existing cultural, ethnic, and Islamic religious ties among the countries in the Basin (Comolli, 2017). While pre-colonial states such

as Kanem-Bornu, Bagirmi, Wadai, and Mandara declined as a result of colonialism, Maiduguri, the capital of Nigeria's Borno state, remains the only symbolic relic. As a result, Maiduguri and Borno state in general are made up of people and cultures from these previous kingdoms in the Basin (Jumare, 1993). Such historical and cultural affinities have enabled Boko Haram to establish strong social cohesion, loyalty, and solidarity, thereby attracting support and sympathy for its cause. This explains the easy escalation of the group's violence in the Lake Chad Basin and why, despite the existence of other armed groups throughout Nigeria, the Boko Haram insurgency is confined to the country's northeast which is different from the rest of northern Nigeria but similar to parts of Cameroon and Chad.

The drying up of Lake Chad has also played a pivotal role in the rapid expansion of Boko Haram's influence in the area. The lake, which forms the boundary between Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, holds great strategic relevance to these countries. It is a source of fish, freshwater, and a fertile basin for agricultural and pastoral purposes for over 30 million people (Salkida, 2012). Of its active basin of 984,455 km<sup>2</sup>, 36% belong to Chad; 17% to Niger; 22% to the Central Africa Republic; 19% to Nigeria; and 6% to Cameroon (Office of the Auditor-General for the Federation of Nigeria, 2015). Due to uncontrolled human use of the water and the impacts of climate change, the lake has shrunk dramatically over time. According to the United Nations Environment Programme, over the last 60 years, the size of the lake has decreased by about 90 percent. With a total surface area of 26,000 square kilometers in 1963, its total surface area as of 2018 was less than 1,500 square kilometers, a situation the program refers to as an "ecological disaster" (United Nations Environment Programme, 2018, para. 3). With agriculture as the dominant economic activity in the Basin, the drying up of Lake Chad has had devastating effects on livelihoods. The continuous crop failure, livestock deaths, collapsed fishing activities, and increased soil salinity, have cumulated into high unemployment and increasing poverty, rendering residents in the Basin prey to radicalization (Coghlan, 2015; United Nations Environment Programme, 2009; Coghlan, 2015). While the connection between extreme environmental conditions and insurgency remains controversial, the situation in the Lake Chad Basin suggests that poverty triggered by the disappearance of Lake Chad has created an opportunity for Boko Haram to recruit followers. The group offers material rewards to incentivize the desperate and unemployed to join its cause (Ndahi, 2017). During a forum of Lake Chad governors in Maiduguri, Mamman Nuhu, the executive secretary of Lake Chad Basin Development Commission, emphasized that "the whole of the Boko Haram problem has its roots in the drying of the lake, which has left

millions with no means of livelihood” (Africa Research Bulletin, 2018, p. 3). In support of this argument, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, the UN Secretary-General’s special envoy to West Africa and the Sahel, notes that the disappearance of Lake Chad constitutes one of the main causes of poverty and a key driver of unemployment within the area, hence making it a fertile recruitment ground for extremist organizations like Boko Haram (Africa Research Bulletin, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

Rather than emanating from a single cause, the Boko Haram insurgency is the result of the combination of overlapping factors with each complementing the other. At the heart of these factors is deep-seated intra-Muslim doctrinal fragmentation and the violent and disruptive way these divisions have been pursued in Nigeria’s northeastern region over the years. However, the contentious political and socioeconomic conditions in Nigeria provided the enabling environment for these differing radical religious interpretations to find resonance among the overwhelmingly disadvantaged youth who recognize religion as a means of seeking redress for the inadequacies in society. With the already existing cultural, religious, and ethnic ties between northeastern Nigeria and the people around Lake Chad, the Boko Haram insurgency has escalated rapidly into the neighboring states in the Lake Chad Basin. Beside these pre-existing affinities, further exacerbating the transnational tenacity of Boko Haram, are the similarities in socioeconomic and political conditions across the countries of the Lake Chad Basin, the porous international borders between them, and the persistent vanishing of Lake Chad.

## References

- Abdulbasit, K. (2015). Defining and understanding the religious philosophy of jihādī-Salafism and the ideology of Boko Haram. *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 16(2–3), 173–200.
- Africa Research Bulletin. (2018). Lake Chad: Climate change linked to extremism. *Political, Social and Cultural Series*, 55(5).  
<https://onlinelibrary-wileycom.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1467-825X.2018.08251.x>
- AFP. (2012, February 15). *Poverty fueling unrest in Kano, says report*. Vanguard. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/02/poverty-fueling-unrest-in-kano-says-report/>
- Agbibo, D. E. (2013). Ethno-religious conflicts and the elusive quest for national identity in Nigeria. *Journal of Black Studies*, 44(1), 3–30.
- Aghedo, I., & Osumah, O. (2012). The Boko Haram uprising: How should Nigeria respond? *Third world quarterly*, 33(5), 853–869.
- Aluaigba, M. T. (2009). Circumventing or superimposing poverty on the African child? The Almajiri syndrome in Northern Nigeria. *Childhood in Africa*, 1(1), 19–24.
- Amara, R. B. (2020). *The Izala movement in Nigeria: Genesis, fragmentation and revival*. Göttingen University Press.
- Anugwom, E. E. (2019). *The Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria: Perspectives from within*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Barnes, A. E. (2009). *Making headway: The introduction of Western civilization in colonial northern Nigeria*. University Rochester Press.
- Bakur, M. (2011, February 17). *Waazin skekh muhannad yusuf 1* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f89PvcpWSRg>
- Blanchard, L. P. (2016). *Nigeria's Boko Haram: Frequently asked questions*. Congressional Research Service.

- Clarke, P. B. (1982). *West Africa and Islam: A study of religious development from the 8th to the 20th Century*. Edward Arnold Publishers.
- CNN. (2013, March 23). *CNN's Christiane Amanpour's interview with Nigeria's President Goodluck Jonathan* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/oLH8ICHL0iI>
- Coghlan, A. (2015, January 21). *Did shrinking Lake Chad help Boko Haram grow?* New Scientist. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn26829-did-shrinkinglake-chad-help-boko-haram-grow/>
- Comolli, V. (2015). The regional problem of Boko Haram. *Survival*, 57(4), 109–117.
- Comolli, V. (2017, October). *The evolution and impact of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin*. Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN). <https://odihpn.org/magazine/the-evolution-and-impact-of-boko-haram-in-the-lake-chad-basin/>
- Council on Foreign Relations. (2020). *Boko Haram in Nigeria*. Global Conflict Tracker 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/boko-haram-nigeria>
- de St. Jorre, J. (2012). *The brothers' war: Biafra and Nigeria*. Faber & Faber.
- Edeh, S. (2011, July 6). Media, govt, donor agencies unite on education for orphans. Vanguard. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2011/07/media-govt-donor-agencies-unite-on-education-for-orphans/>
- Edeh, S. (2013, July 2). *65% of girls in N-East lack basic education*. Vanguard. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/07/65-of-girls-in-n-east-lack-basic-education/>
- Ekhomu, O. (2019). *Boko Haram: Security considerations and the rise of an insurgency*. CRC Press.
- Ekwe-Ekwe, H. (1990). *Conflict and intervention in Africa: Nigeria, Angola, Zaire*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Falola, T. (1998). *Violence in Nigeria: The crisis of religious politics and secular ideologies*. University Rochester Press.

- Falola, T. (1999). *The history of Nigeria*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Faluyi, O. T., Khan, S., & Akinola, A. O. (2019). *Boko Haram's terrorism and the Nigerian state*. Springer Nature.
- Felter, C. (2018, August 8). *Nigeria's battle with Boko Haram*. Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/nigerias-battle-boko-haram>
- Forest, J. J. (2012). *Confronting the terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria*. The JSOU Press.
- Gray, S., & Adeakin, I. (2019). Nigeria's Shi'a Islamic movement and evolving Islamist threat landscape: Old, new and future generators of radicalization. *African Security*, 12(2), 174–199.
- Haykel, B. (2009). On the nature of Salafi thought and action. In R. Meijer (Ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's new religious movement* (pp. 33–57). Oxford University Press.
- Hoffman, L. K. (2014, July 7). *Who speaks for the North? Politics and influence in Northern Nigeria*. Chatham House. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2014/07/who-speaks-north-politics-and-influence-northern-nigeria>
- Human Rights Watch. (2003). *Nigeria: The "Miss World Riots": Continued impunity for killings in Kaduna*. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/nigeria0703/>
- Ibrahim, O. F. (1997). Religion and politics: A view from the North. In L. Diamond, A. K. Greene, & O. Oyediran (Eds.), *Transition without end: Nigerian politics and civil society under Babangida* (pp. 509–534). Vantage Publishers.
- International Crisis Group. (2016, November 16). *Cameroon: Confronting Boko Haram*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/cameroon-confronting-boko-haram>
- International Crisis Group. (2019, May 16). *Facing the challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/273-facing-challenge-islamic-state-west-africa-province>

- Iyekekpolo, W. O. (2016). Boko Haram: Understanding the Context. *Third World Quarterly*, 37(12), 2211-2228.
- Iyekekpolo, W. O. (2020). Political elites and the rise of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32(4), 749–767.
- Jumare, M. M. (1993). Nigeria Chad border disputes: Background causes and setting. *Nigeria Journal of International Affairs*, 19(2), 81–99.
- Kane, O. (2003). *Muslim modernity in postcolonial Nigeria: a study of the society for the removal of innovation and reinstatement of tradition*. Brill.
- Kuru, Z. A., & Kuru, A. T. (2008). Apolitical interpretation of Islam: Said Nursi's faith-based activism in comparison with political Islamism and Sufism. *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 19(1), 99–111.
- Loimeier, R. (2012). Boko Haram: The development of a militant religious movement in Nigeria. *Africa Spectrum*, 47(2-3), 137–155.
- Mahmood, O. S., & Ani, N. C. (2018, July 6). *Responses to Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region: Policies, cooperation and livelihoods*. Institute for Security Studies. <https://issafrica.org/research/books-and-other-publications/responses-to-boko-haram-in-the-lake-chad-region-policies-cooperation-and-livelihoods>
- Meagher, K. (2014). *Beyond terror: Addressing the Boko Haram challenge in Nigeria*. Norwegian Peace Building Resource Center. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Beyond%20terror.pdf>
- Mbah, P., Nwangwu, C., & Edeh, H. C. (2017). Elite politics and the emergence of Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. *Trames: A Journal of the Humanities & Social Sciences*, 21(2), 173–190.
- Mustapha, A. R. (2014). Understanding Boko Haram. In A. M. Raufu (Ed.), *Sects & social disorder: Muslim identities & conflict in Northern Nigeria* (pp. 147–198). James Curry.

- National Bureau of Statistics. (2012). *Nigeria Poverty Profile 2010*.  
<https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/pdfuploads/Nigeria%20Poverty%20Profile%202010.pdf>
- Ndahi, M. (2017, March 6). *Nigeria, Lake Chad region porous borders pose threats to security, lives*. Vanguard.  
<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2017/03/nigeria-lake-chad-region-porous-borders-pose-threats-security-lives/>
- Nnanna, O. (2012, February 27). *An encounter with Gov Shettima of Borno*. Vanguard. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/02/an-encounter-with-gov-shettima-of-borno/>
- Office of the Auditor-General for the Federation of Nigeria. (2015). *Environmental audit on the drying up of the Lake Chad*. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.  
<https://www.giz.de/de/downloads/giz2015-en-joint-environmental-audit-report-lake-chad.pdf>
- Ojochenemi, D. J., Asuelime, L. E., & Onapajo, H. (2015). *Boko Haram: The socio-economic drivers*. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Olatunji, D. (2014, July 25). *Religious leaders can end Boko Haram, not Jonathan -Oritsejafor*. Vanguard.  
<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/07/religious-leaders-can-end-boko-haram-not-jonathan-oritsejafor/>
- Omeni, A. (2019). *Insurgency and war in Nigeria: Regional fracture and the fight against Boko Haram*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Onuoha, F. (2014a). Boko Haram and the evolving Salafi Jihadist threat in Nigeria. In M. A. Pérouse de Montclos (Ed.), *Boko Haram: Islamism, politics, security and the state in Nigeria* (pp. 158-191). Leiden: African Studies Centre.
- Onuoha, F. C. (2014b). *Why do youth join Boko Haram?* United States Institute of Peace. [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR348-Why\\_do\\_Youth\\_Join\\_Boko\\_Haram.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR348-Why_do_Youth_Join_Boko_Haram.pdf)

- Østebø, T. (2015). African Salafism: religious purity and the politicization of purity. *Islamic Africa*, 6(1-2), 1–29.
- Reno, W. (2011). *Warfare in independent Africa: New approaches to African history*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rufai, S. A. (2013). The politics of Islamic leadership and representation in Nigeria: A historical analytical study on the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA). *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, 8(1), 39–50.
- Salkida, A. (2012). Africa's vanishing Lake Chad. *Africa Renewal*, 26(1), 24–25.
- Siollun, M. (2009). *Oil, politics and violence: Nigeria's military coup culture (1966-1976)*. Algora Publishing.
- Solomon, H. (2013). *Jihad: A South African perspective*. Sun Media.
- Solomon, H. (2015). *Terrorism and counter-terrorism in Africa: Fighting insurgency from Al Shabaab, Ansar Dine and Boko Haram*. Springer.
- Soyinka, W. (2021, January 16). Wole Soyinka on Nigeria's Anti-Christian terror sect Boko Haram. Newsweek. <https://www.newsweek.com/wole-soyinka-nigerias-anti-christian-terror-sect-boko-haram-64153>
- Sule, I. Z. O., & Othman, M. F. (2015). Governance and Boko Haram insurgents in Nigeria: An analysis. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 4(2), 35–44.
- Tar, U. A., & Bala, B. (2019). Introduction: Lake Chad Basin-Africa's emerging regional security complex. In U. Tar & B. Bala (Eds.), *New architecture of regional security in Africa: Perspectives on counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin* (pp. 3–26). Lexington Books.
- Thomas, C. G., & Falola, T. (2020). *Secession and separatist conflicts in postcolonial Africa*. University of Calgary Press.
- Thurston, A. (2016). *Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, preaching, and politics*. Cambridge University Press.

- Thurston, A. (2018). *Boko Haram: The history of an African jihadist movement*. Princeton University Press.
- Transparency International. (2019). *Corruption Perception Index 2019*.  
[https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2019\\_CPI\\_Report\\_EN\\_200331\\_141425.pdf](https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/2019_CPI_Report_EN_200331_141425.pdf)
- Umar, M. S. (2012). The popular discourses of Salafi radicalism and Salafi counter-radicalism in Nigeria: A case study of Boko Haram. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 42(2), 118-144.
- Umoru, H. (2013, January 26). *Poverty, misrule, not responsible for Boko Haram–PDP*. Vanguard.  
<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/01/poverty-misrule-not-responsible-for-boko-haram-pdp/>
- United Nations Environment Programme. (2009). *Lake Chad: Almost gone*.  
<https://www.grida.no/resources/5593>
- United Nations Environment Programme. (2018, February 28). *The tale of a disappearing lake*. <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/tale-disappearing-lake>
- U.S. Congress. (2011). *Boko Haram: Emerging threat to the US homeland*.  
<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-112HPRT71725/pdf/CPRT-112HPRT71725.pdf>
- Uwakwe, B. O., & Miapyen B. S. (2018). Boko Haram and identity reconstruction in Lake Chad Basin region. In P. Frankowski & A. Gruszczak (Eds.), *Cross-disciplinary perspectives on regional and global security* (pp. 141–163). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Varin, C. (2016). *Boko Haram and the war on terror*. Praeger.
- Weismann, I. (2011). Modernity from within: Islamic fundamentalism and Sufism. *Der Islam* 86(1), 142–170.
- World Bank. (2019). *Nigeria: Overview*.  
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/nigeria/overview>

Zenn, J. (2014a). Nigerian al-Qaedaism. *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 16, 99-118.  
<https://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1392/zenn.pdf>

Zenn, J. (2014b). *Exposing and defeating Boko Haram: Why the west must unite to help Nigeria defeat terrorism*. The Bow Group.  
<https://www.bowgroup.org/sites/bowgroup.uat.pleasetest.co.uk/files/Jacob%20Zenn%20Bow%20Group%20Report%20for%202022.7.14.pdf>.

### Author Biography

Gershon Adela is a graduate of the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies (CMSS). His research interests include insurgency warfare in Africa and the Middle East, national and institutional counterinsurgency response mechanisms, and Great Power geopolitics and African Security. He focuses on the counterinsurgency/counterterrorism response frameworks of the African Union (AU), and its sub-regional blocs.

**Email:** gershonadelah@gmail.com



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

© (GERSHON ADELA, 2021)

Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare and Simon Fraser University

Available from: <https://jicw.org/>