

A Review of: “The Boko Haram Reader” by Abdulbasit Kassim, Michael Nwankpa and David Cook¹²

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The name “Boko Haram” is synonymous with terror, horror, pain, and agony, at least to people who do not believe in the group’s ideology. The mention of Boko Haram often sends shivers down the spines of most people, especially those who have been affected directly or indirectly by the actions of the group. Boko Haram has been a social movement since the 1990s. However, it emerged in 2002 with its charismatic leader, Mohammed Yusif, who started preaching messages from the Quran and the Sunna in cities in northern Nigeria through the establishment of Islamic schools and centres. The radical approach to his teachings, with Salafist-jihadist undertones, successfully influenced his followers. Subsequently, he was arrested and died in police custody. The death of Mohammed Yusif gave birth to Africa’s deadliest terrorist group, known as Boko Haram, which translates as “Western education is forbidden”. The actual name of the group is Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (The Sunni Group for Preaching and Fighting, abbreviated as JASDJ).

Abubakar Shekau succeeded Mohammed Yusif, and he led the group religiously in its Salafist-jihadist campaign to unleash terror and cause huge casualties among both security forces and civilians. Within 12 years, Boko Haram metamorphosed from a small social movement to a Salafist-jihadist movement to an established Islamist state. In March 2017, the group declared itself an affiliate and branch of the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIL and ISIS), becoming its West African Province. Currently, the group refers to itself as the Islamic State of West African Province (ISWAP). The propaganda videos and audio, interviews and texts, tactics, strategy, ruthlessness, and the influence of the group have attracted a huge literature on their activities because of the high interest of academics, practitioners, and politicians who want to understand the group and what they seek to achieve. The book “The Boko Haram Reader” has done exactly that. “The Boko Haram Reader” is a masterpiece about Boko Haram, and it aims to get its readers closer to understanding it. The book covers hours of teachings, preaching, sermons, lectures, debates, and texts of Boko Haram which have been transcribed and translated from either Arabic, Hausa, or Kanuri into English.

Part one of the book is subtitled “The Nigerian Preachers” (2006–2008). The authors

¹ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59569/jceas.2022.2.1.91>

² Kassim, Abdulbasit, Nwankpa, Michael, and Cook, David, *The Boko Haram Reader*, Hurst & Company, London, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-8490-4884-2.

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describe how the history of the Muslim religion has evolved in Nigeria. It also discusses how some northern Muslim elites and imams have always wished for an Islamic state in Nigeria and the subsequent resistance by the Christian south. The adoption of the sharia in Zamfara state in 1990 was welcome news as other northern states soon adopted it. However, the long-term implications and the opportunity for youth radicalisation were least expected. The position of Mohammed Yusif on the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria put him in an influential position and it facilitated his radicalisation campaign. According to Yusif, Islam is based on three perspectives on knowledge: knowledge that conforms to the Quran and the Sunna; knowledge that contradicts the Quran and the Sunna; or knowledge that neither confirms nor contradicts the Quran or Sunna. Everything that conforms must be accepted, those that contradict must be rejected, and everyone has the freedom to either accept or reject those that neither contradict nor conform. Western education, technological innovation, working for the government, and democracy were described as an abomination and forbidden. Democratic systems and government are not subservient to Allah and, therefore, they are often referred to as "infidel illegitimate systems".

"Reaching the Verdict" (2008–2009) is part two of the book. The focus of Yusif during this period was jihad and violence, which is reflected in his teachings and even in the teachings of his lieutenants such as Abubakar Shekau and Mamman Nur. His messages were full of vengeance, rebellion, anger, frustration, threats, and incitements. The group became more violent during this period, partly due to the harsh treatment unleashed on them by the Nigerian security forces during Operations Flush, when the government wanted to exert its control in Maiduguri and most other cities in the north. Boko Haram often releases messages, some of which are directed at individuals, including the Presidents of Nigeria and Chad, warning of retaliation for the attack on Boko Haram members.

Part three, subtitled "Making Nigeria Ungovernable" (2009–2012), highlights the economic implications of the activities of Boko Haram and the strategy and tactics the group uses to unleash its terror. The declaration of war in part two of the book was brought to fruition in part three. The authors argue that the politicisation of sharia law and the passing of a law by the Nigerian Senate to proscribe Boko Haram as a terrorist group worked to the advantage of the group. Following the passage of the laws, the UK, US, EU, and Australia blacklisted the group as an international Salafist-jihadist group. The media frenzy rather brought the group to the limelight and it became attractive to other Salafist-jihadist groups such as AQIM, al Shabab, and al Qaeda, and they started building the necessary alliances and affiliations. The targets of the group included private properties, security forces and their bases, government institutions and religious institutions, with no discrimination against civilians. Their tactics included kidnapping, ambushing, assassinations, hostages, and the use of improvised explosive devices.

Part four is subtitled "Boko Haram State" (2013–2015). The authors focus on Boko Haram's ferocious expansion of its territory (Yobe, Borno, and Adamawa states) and its influence across borders (Niger, Chad, and Cameroon). The group achieved this remarkable success despite the

effort by the joint multinational military offensive comprising Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Benin, and Cameroun. The group continued to insist that they would never negotiate or have any dialogue with the government of Nigeria. They continued to rely on their most lethal weapon (suicide bombing), which was planned in detail and well-executed. During this period, it conducted one of the most daring and deadly day attacks on the Giwa Barracks in Maiduguri to free its members who had been incarcerated. Boko Haram relies on winning the hearts and minds of its followers by using poetry in four broad categories, which include martyrdom, the joy of paradise, recovering lost dignity and freedom, and mobilising and encouraging its fighters. This feature is prominent in most of their messages.

The "West African Islamic State" (2015-2016) is the subtitle of part five of the book. The authors try to analyse the capability of Boko Haram to establish a caliphate as they claim. This was done by comparing the activities, structure, ideologies, tactics, and strategies to those of other similar groups such as ISIS and al Shabab. Emphasis was placed on the political, social, economic, and ideological underpinnings of Boko Haram. The group swore allegiance to the Islamic State and this was a great achievement because it demonstrated the expansion and the push to propagate the Salafist-jihadist ideologies and agenda. Shekau resurfaces after it was rumoured that he was dead. Factions emerged among Boko Haram along the line, with one group in the camp of Shekau and the other with al Barwani. The reasons alluded to by the factions are the leadership of Shekau Abubakar. This was enough evidence that Boko Haram did not practice what they preached.