Book Reviews

Mike Smith

BOKO HARAM: Inside Nigeria's Unholy War, London: I.B. TAURIS & Co, 2015,
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It is common knowledge that the study of so-called Islamist terrorist organisations gained momentum following 9/11. The academic literature is, thus, full of definitions regarding terrorism that have resulted from the increasing attacks and from the evolving tactics of radical extremist groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, and AQIM. The world has, nevertheless, not become that familiar with the Nigerian-based Islamist extremist group called the Jama'atu Ahlus Sunnah Lid Da'awati Wal Jihad, or the People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad, known as Boko Haram, until 2014. Boko Haram literally means "Western Education is forbidden or sinful" (p. 12).

Smith, being a foreign correspondent for the Agence France-Presse news agency, wrote a book on the contemporary Islamist insurgency. This book presents a critical and comprehensive analysis of Boko Haram, retracing its footsteps from its very foundation. During the three years he spent in West Africa, he was able to visit various cities in Nigeria, thereby becoming able to learn more about the group by means of interviewing security forces.

What the book emphasises is that regional and ethnic divisions are very complex issues stemming from Nigeria's own historical background. The study claims that the history of Nigeria has had an effect on the country's economic and political situation. Indeed, Smith underscores that it is impossible to delineate modern-day Nigeria without comprehending its regional and ethnic politics.

Smith argues that the behaviors of Nigeria's government and security forces help one understand why this insurgency group has never been stopped (p. 15). Even though the government and military seem eager to prevent this group's committing attacks in the future, the Nigerian people lack faith in both the government and the military. Hence, this lack of faith causes one to interrogate the reason why Boko Haram has been able to increase their attacks.

For instance, after the extrajudicial killing of the group's founder, Muhammad Yusuf, the current leader of the group, Shekau, took a more radical and violent turn. Indeed, because of the Nigerian military's reaction, the group vowed to take revenge for the 2009 security crackdown by destabilising the Nigerian state in order to replace it with a Sharia-based state. It is a conspicuous fact that, throughout the chapters of the book, Smith claims that Boko Haram has waged war, not only on the government and its military forces, but also on the nation's civilians as well by means of deploying suicide bombers.

Each of Smith's book's chapters rely on the local people's experiences of Boko Haram. Each chapter is also connected with the historical background of the situation. For example, even though Yusuf rose up against Nigeria's corrupt government and security forces, Shekau, in comparison, used YouTube and other video-based media to a much greater extent with the aim of instilling fear into the people's hearts and minds.

Another crucial point the book argues for is that, when it comes to hindering the extremist group's attacks, the situation is much more complex for the government due to the colonial histories of Nigeria and its neighbors. In particular, after the kidnapping of nearly 300 girls from their schools in Chibok, north-eastern Nigeria, in 2014, European countries started taking action by trying to rescue the girls from the hands of insurgent groups. It took so long for the families to hear from their girls, though, that this situation gave European countries leverage to utilise their hegemonic positions over their former colonies.

It can be claimed that the abductions of these girls acted as a watershed moment for the country itself because it split the local people into two groups: pro-government and anti-government. After the abductions, a mass movement started among the Nigerians, with pro- and anti-government protests being promulgated across the region. This issue is basically related to the mismanagement and misbehavior of the country's armed forces. Smith underscores that, besides the actions of the insurgent group, there have been some allegations that the country's police forces utilise torture and rape as well (p. 205). In essence, that is why the government and the military should restore the people's faith in them in order to regain its reliability when trying to impede this extremist group.

So, given the factors mentioned above, it will be very unlikely that Nigeria will be able to fight Boko Haram in earnest until the government and its military forces regain their reputation in the region. However, what is clear about the so-called Islamist extremist group is that, hopefully, the situation will backfire for the extremist group if the government precipitates its policy regarding

how to best deal with them and cements the idea of cooperation amongst the local people against those extremists.

It is imperative to bear in mind that the government's actions cannot be examined fairly without also taking into consideration the political, economic, and social ramifications of the country's history. This book, however, delivers a short-term analysis for its readers. What is missing from this study is the evaluation of this group's main driver—viz. the Salafi-Jihadi ideology—for that ideology is used to legitimise the attacks, not only against Christians but against Muslims alike. Even though the Salafists are not violent *de facto*, the theological doctrines of Jihadi-Salafism within the context of Boko Haram is an essential component of the group because its objectives and tactics are influenced by that ideology.

Nevertheless, academicians, politicians, and, generally, all who are interested in African affairs would benefit from reading this book because this study enables one to compare whether the way extremist groups carry out their attacks differ from country to country, as well as the way governments subjugate crises. Another strength the book has is that the writer was able to examine the Nigerian people themselves, talking with them in person in an effort to understand their thoughts properly instead of simply applying a conceptual framework and adjusting it to Nigeria.

Smith's contribution to academic literature derives from his interviewing the Nigerian people and being there in person in a conspicuous manner. Even though there is a burgeoning literature on jihadist movements, his book is unique in some ways because of its focusing on the less-known extremist group, Boko Haram.

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