Mobilisation into and against Boko Haram in North-East Nigeria

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Boko Haram is a jihadi movement that is now infamous for extreme violence and atrocities in northern Nigeria, and, more recently, for cross-border attacks on neighbouring countries. In less than five years a local insurrection against the Nigerian state became one of the deadliest insurgencies in the world. This chapter explores how this situation came about. The label “Boko Haram” refers to the network of people who are participating in this armed struggle (jihad), ostensibly to establish Islamic government in the region. In reality, this is not how Boko Haram are locally perceived, as their doctrine is viewed as flawed and their brutality has alienated them from the Muslim population of northern Nigeria. Their war of plunder and pillage has become progressively more arbitrary and deadly, inflicting widespread suffering and destruction on the population of the region. This has given rise to a regional military response from countries in the Lake Chad Basin and local resistance to counter Boko Haram in the form of youth vigilante groups.

The Boko Haram insurgency has made Borno more insecure than at any time since Rabih Fadl Allah, the Sudanese warlord and slaver who invaded and devastated the Lake Chad Basin from 1893–1900, overrunning and pillaging Borno and destroying Kukawa, the then capital of the Borno Sultanate. The

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predations of Rabih have some parallels with those of Boko Haram, but the context is different. The current crisis has also affected a wider area of what is now northern Nigeria, even though Borno State and contiguous areas of Yobe and northern Adamawa States in the North-East are the worst affected. The sect has carried out large-scale attacks (bombings and shootings) on most of the major cities of the north, including Kano, Maiduguri, Damaturu, Jos, Gombe, Bauchi, Kaduna, Zaria, and the federal capital of Abuja. The Far North region of Cameroon has borne the brunt of Boko Haram's cross-border attacks, but in 2015, border areas of Niger and Chad were also targeted. Therefore, the insurgency is now a regional problem, for which a regional solution is essential.

The conflict started as an uprising against the Nigerian state and its security forces. The genealogy of the present insurgency can be traced back to the Kanamma episode in northern Yobe State in 2004. A group nicknamed “the Nigerian Taliban” had emigrated from the Borno State capital of Maiduguri to establish a self-contained rural Islamic community, but they came into conflict with the local authorities and then launched attacks on police stations in Yobe. It is now known that they were linked to Muhammad Yusuf (1970–2009), the founder of Boko Haram, and that he probably had a role in directing the operation, but he deliberately left the country before they commenced their attacks, going to Saudi Arabia on lesser hajj. The insurrection had to be put down by the military, first in Kanamma in January 2004, and then in the Gwoza Hills in South-East Borno State when surviving militants re-emerged there in September 2004.

The much larger insurrection by Boko Haram began in Bauchi city on 25 July 2009. The next day the sect started attacking targets in Maiduguri and other towns in North-East Nigeria and in Wudil in Kano, but by 1 August the uprising had been crushed by the Nigerian army and police. The original leader of Boko Haram, Muhammad Yusuf, was executed in police custody in Maiduguri on 30 July 2009. The Galtimari Committee, which carried out the Borno State government's official inquiry into the violence, documented that at least 1,118 people were killed in Borno from 27 July to 1 August 2009, with reported fatalities that


4 The “Taliban” abducted some local men in Gwoza to use as guides when they were on the run from the army. The hostages were rescued by the military after a shoot-out with the “Taliban” and I interviewed one of them in Gwoza on 9 September 2012.