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# The Theory and Reality of Boko Haram

CO-EXISTENCE

Throughout its six-year campaign, the ideology of Boko Haram, the Nigerian jihadi group, has remained remarkably consistent. A new Brookings Institution [report by Alex Thurston, an Islam and politics academic at Georgetown University, \(\[http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2016/01/boko-haram-ideology-thurston/brookings-analysis-paper\\\_alex-thurston\\\_final\\\_web.pdf\]\(http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2016/01/boko-haram-ideology-thurston/brookings-analysis-paper\_alex-thurston\_final\_web.pdf\)\)](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2016/01/boko-haram-ideology-thurston/brookings-analysis-paper_alex-thurston_final_web.pdf) builds on existing analysis of Boko Haram's origins and jihadi campaign, and his own insightful investigation of primary sources, to understand this ideology. Meanwhile, a recent [two-part report by journalists \(<http://allafrica.com/stories/201510260151.html>\)](http://allafrica.com/stories/201510260151.html) Ogala Emmanuel and Ibanga Isine at Nigeria's *Premium Times* newspaper provides an on-the-ground examination that complements Thurston's research.

Three main points come out of Thurston's investigation of Boko Haram (<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/backgrounder/what-boko-haram>) propaganda and ideological literature. The first is the group's dual core focus on religious exclusivism - manifested violently as it strives to eliminate all 'deviant' or 'inferior' ideas, institutions, individuals, and groups - and its self-perception as the victim of organised, sustained state persecution. Emmanuel and Isine saw proof of this violence throughout their travels. The second point is that Boko Haram (<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/glossary/boko-haram>) arose from a miasma of intra-Muslim, and specifically intra-Salafi, debates and competition, which have created a plurality of Islamic interpretations and deeply driven cleavages among Muslims. The third is that Boko Haram is not an "ever-expanding juggernaut," despite its pledge of allegiance in April last year to ISIS - a ploy largely aimed at snubbing Nigeria's government ahead of elections and keeping the group relevant in an ever-changing global jihadi mosaic.

Boko Haram makes consistent references to victimhood.

Boko Haram's chaotic and amorphous violence remains primarily focused on eliminating rivals or alternative religious ideologies and political influences, and avenging itself against the Nigerian state. The most frequent recipient of this vengeance is the military, which

the group blames for persecuting and brutalising its members and families.

Thurston finds consistent references to humiliation and victimhood in Boko Haram's rhetoric and the teachings of former leader Mohammed Yusuf and incumbent Abubakar Shekau. The latter not only emphasises defeating the Nigerian state, and now also surrounding states, and replacing them with a vaguely articulated 'Islamic state,' but humiliating them. A recurring theme in Boko Haram's propaganda is the erosion of the legitimacy of the state and traditional leadership. To do this, Boko Haram capitalised on a real decline in the legitimacy of Muslim scholars and leaders (such as the Sultan of Sokoto, the emir of Kano, and the Shehu of Borno) since the 1970s, according to Thurston. In the decades that followed this created a thriving marketplace of ideas on the nature of Islam and the relationship it should have with the state. Boko Haram twisted this to suit their own aims.

Boko Haram arose out of this miasma of intra-Muslim conversations and competition for audiences and ideas. As Thurston phrases it, "Boko Haram arose from intra-Muslim competition as well as from narratives of grievance against the state and Christians." Combatting Boko Haram in the long-term, therefore, requires open and difficult conversations in an inclusive space, Thurston recommends. This is especially the case as Nigeria (<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/country-profiles/nigeria>)'s neighbours are engaged in similar conversations. The vulnerabilities Nigeria faces are echoed in the arguments and cleavages taking place throughout the Lake Chad Basin.

Much of Boko Haram's violence seems improvised, even chaotic.

Thurston's investigation of Boko Haram plays out through the work of Ogala Emmanuel and Ibanga Isine (<http://allafrica.com/stories/201601181137.html%20>), two *Premium Times* reporters who travelled last year in areas formerly occupied by the group. Their reporting on the destruction of villages and towns, and the testimonies of local residents they collected, provide more personal, on-the-ground, examples to support Thurston's research. He emphasises the group's determination to destroy state control and symbols in Nigeria; Emmanuel and Isine found that religious or state targets, including places of worship and state symbols

(libraries, schools, and state buildings), were largely destroyed and community leaders killed in the places they visited in Adamawa state. English-language road signs were painted over to obscure the English.

This strategic targetting was matched by seemingly random acts of violence. In some villages, every building was burned while other villages were left largely unscathed. In others only a selection of building were targetted. Further, the group made little effort to impose a form of governance on areas it controlled. Instead, it focused on eliminating all alternative forms of religion, culture, and governance. Everyone who remained within the group's control was forced to convert to Islam. Residents recalled being forced to recite the Quran as Boko Haram sought to indoctrinate residents. Those who refused were killed. Women and girls (<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/opinion/who-are-boko-harams-female-suicide-bombers>) were captured, raped, and 'married' to fighters. Boys as young as eight and young men were taken away to training camps in the bush. Families reported that on their return the boys were armed, exhibiting heightened violent tendencies, and some attacked their own families.

As Thurston noted in his analysis of the group's ideology, "much of Boko Haram's violence seems improvised," even chaotic. This contrasts with ISIS (<http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/backgrounder/what-isis>). Though brutal, the groups tactics have been described as relatively professional by military personnel involved in the fight against it in Syria and Iraq. While ISIS acts much more like an organised army, Boko Haram remains undisciplined, decentralised, and seemingly largely unstructured. At the end of his report, however, Thurston posits an alarming possibility, that "Boko Haram's brutality could at some point repulse even the Islamic State."



Two recent reports, one academic and one journalistic, give valuable insight into the ideology of Nigeria's Islamist insurgency.

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