evolving processes of reform, both ‘Sufi-oriented’ and ‘Salafi-oriented’, and with either a *siyasa* or a *tarbiyya* orientation. The concepts of the modern and of the nation state, which are at work in Vaughan’s book, also play a key role here, but with different implications. The modern is an object of criticism, a source of inspiration, and an arena in which diverse opportunities – some of which are threatening to previous reformers – unceasingly emerge. The nation state, in contrast, appears as the stable political frame that provides context to reformist messages, even as they connect with the international forces of Islam that spring from places such as Iran, Saudi Arabia or Libya. In Loimeier’s account, the Nigerian story is thus that of a succession of Islamic reform movements, the earliest of which are all Sufi – with a genealogical origin that goes back to the years of the Sokoto Caliphate, in the pre-modern nineteenth century. The reform movement of yesterday becomes the established doctrine of today, which is assailed by new reform movements. Moreover, with the expansive technologies of modernity – from the radio to the CD to the internet – the reach and contents of the reform messages change and adapt, and new agents of reformism arise and often (though not always) displace former leaders. Loimeier does not contend this, but it emerges from his descriptions that older reformism – including the important ‘Salafi-minded’ Yan Izala – was more *tarbiyya*-oriented while the more recent type, culminating with Boko Haram, has tended to be more *siyasa*-oriented. This is the least convincing aspect of a chapter that manages to cover immense ground – sometimes dizzyingly – in a short space, and it is a consequence of Loimeier’s attempt to provide a simple reading grid for a complex reality. Niger is treated as a coda to the Nigerian study, but Loimeier – who never conducted fieldwork there – is on surer footing in the case of Nigeria.

Readers primarily interested in making sense of the Nigerian quandary may skip the other chapters in Loimeier’s book – although they might provide a wider empirical perspective for the issues discussed and analysed in the Nigerian chapter – but they must read the introductory and concluding essays. Taken together, these essays and the chapter on Nigeria provide a solid theoretical and empirical grounding from which to evaluate the claims made by Vaughan, Kendhammer and Thurston.

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doi:10.1017/S0001972019000159

# Amid Boko Haram’s persistence, an increasingly specialized literature emerges

Hilary Matfess, *Women and the War on Boko Haram: wives, weapons, witnesses*. London: Zed Books (pb £14.99 – 978 1 78699 145 4). 2017, 270 pp.

Scott MacEachern, *Searching for Boko Haram: a history of violence in Central Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (hb £21.99 – 978 0 19 049252 6). 2018, 248 pp.

Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa (eds), *The Boko Haram Reader: from Nigerian preachers to the Islamic State*. London: Hurst (pb £25 – 978 1 84904 884 2). 2018, 384 pp.

Starting in 2014, a spate of publications on the Nigerian jihadist group Boko Haram began to appear in the academic press. These included Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos's and Abdul Raufu Mustapha's two edited volumes, Mike Smith's book *Boko Haram: inside Nigeria's unholy war* and Virginia Comolli's *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist insurgency.* More recent efforts include my own *Boko Haram: the history of an African jihadist movement* and Jacob Zenn's edited collection, *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: analyses of Africa's enduring insurgency.* Increasingly, however, a new wave of books is offering specialized treatments of Boko Haram as opposed to aiming for comprehensive analysis. The three books reviewed here form the core of this new, thematically organized literature. Singly and collectively, they demonstrate both the strengths and the weaknesses of emphasizing one dimension of the group over others.

Hilary Matfess's *Women and the War on Boko Haram* illuminates gendered aspects of the insurgency and the responses to it. The book also provides some of the most well-developed, three-dimensional portraits of Boko Haram members and former members yet found in print. In terms of sourcing, Matfess's main strength is that she conducted fieldwork in north-eastern Nigeria (particularly Maiduguri), where she spoke with political elites, foreign aid workers, civilian vigilantes, and women, including former (and, in some cases, perhaps still active) female Boko Haram members. After three background chapters – one on Boko Haram, one on the political background to the insurgency, and one on women's lives in northern Nigeria – the book's three core chapters discuss women's roles in the crisis. Of these chapters, the best is Chapter 5, 'Women at war: wives and weapons in the insurgency', where the reader encounters detailed narratives of women's participation in the movement or other interactions with it. Sections such as 'Aisha's least bad option' (pp. 106–7) give a sense of real people making difficult decisions, providing a helpful antidote to the often-caricatured portrayals of Boko Haram and of 'violent extremism' generally.

Scott MacEachern's *Searching for Boko Haram* takes the reader into northern Cameroon and far into the past. Drawing on more than thirty years of anthropological and archaeological fieldwork in Cameroon and Nigeria, the book moves across millennia. One standout chapter (Chapter 5) discusses banditry and smuggling along the border between north-eastern Nigeria and northern Cameroon, weaving in anecdotes from the author's past archaeological fieldwork and synthesizing a great deal of literature, especially on northern Cameroon, that has previously been underused by researchers who work on Boko Haram. Throughout the book, MacEachern draws parallels – partly illuminating, but also, as discussed below, partly flawed – between Boko Haram and earlier, notorious figures from a century ago in this region, notably Rabih al-Zubayr and Hamman Yaji.

Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa's *The Boko Haram Reader*, with substantial contributions by David Cook, provides the only sourcebook of Boko Haram statements and propaganda yet available. Given the meticulous and wide-ranging nature of the book, it may also be the only such volume to ever appear in English. Chronologically organized and supplemented with brief commentaries, the book presents translated excerpts (and a few abridged English originals) of key Boko Haram documents and videos. These materials range from the founder's manifesto to Boko Haram's correspondence with foreign jihadists to doctrinal disputes between different Boko Haram leaders under the shadow of the Islamic State's distant gaze. Although some of these sources are well known among researchers, others have been rescued from obscurity, such as several early videos featuring the group's founder, Muhammad Yusuf.

In addition to their many strengths, all of these books have weaknesses – although these are more implicit than explicit in the case of the sourcebook.

First, and in different ways, each book flirts with a kind of determinism about Boko Haram. In Matfess's book, gender dynamics sometimes become not just the topic of the analysis but the fundamental cause of Boko Haram's violence. What does it really mean, for example, to say that 'Nigerian communities are primed for violence by the economic, political and social marginalisation of women that occurs on a daily, systemic basis' (p. 45)? Building on comparative political science, Matfess comes close to arguing that Boko Haram resulted from what she suggests are deep-rooted northern Nigerian pathologies regarding women. Why, then, did the movement arise in north-eastern Nigeria and not in another, nearby locale where the status of women is similar? What are the exact causal mechanisms that lead from societal oppression of women to the formation of armed groups?

MacEachern argues that Boko Haram is 'the latest expression of a set of social phenomena with very deep roots in the Lake Chad Basin, having to do with the opportunities and dangers of the frontier zones that have existed in the region for many centuries' (p. 3, 5). This argument is more sophisticated than some other, earlier writing along these lines (see, for example, John Neville Hare's 2015 piece in *National Geographic*), but it still hints at geographical determinism. Are the people around the Lake Chad Basin doomed to kidnap and enslave one another because of where they live – because of the terrain itself, or because the lands are inherently a 'frontier zone'? As with Matfess's book, much of the argument here rests on a comparative framework that sometimes amounts to a search for the lowest common denominator between Boko Haram and some assumed peer. For Matfess, Boko Haram resembles other contemporary African rebel movements because they all fight states, carry weapons and have strategies for dealing with women (see, for example, pp. 139–44); for MacEachern, Boko Haram resembles past warlords because they proclaim an anti-establishment Islam, carry weapons and kidnap people. These comparisons are important but they risk minimizing some of the features that make Boko Haram distinctive; the turning points in the movement's history had to do with specific personalities and events, and comparative frameworks have limits when it comes to explaining these contingencies.

The danger of reductionism holds true, in a different way, for *The Boko Haram Reader* as well. The *Reader* itself is a sound piece of work, but I am concerned about the wider uses – or, to use a neologism, the weaponization – that the compilers are making of it. Kassim, the most vocal of the editors in terms of this weaponization, has been particularly aggressive in arguing that the main implication and only plausible interpretation of these primary source texts is that Boko Haram has long had very strong connections with other jihadist movements, particularly al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Kassim has suggested on Twitter that scholars who have a different view of Boko Haram 'attempt to delegitimize the usefulness of [Boko Haram] primary sources', just as he implies that Boko Haram's own statements are the only real 'primary sources' relevant for understanding the group.

In fact, other scholars have been providing detailed, alternative analyses of Boko Haram's propaganda, statements and correspondence since 2012, starting with an anonymously published article in the *Journal of Religion in Africa* and continuing with contributions such as Kyari Mohammed's chapter in the abovementioned volume edited by Pérouse de Montclos. Moreover, in my view, some of the movement's key sources do not support the idea of strong contacts between Boko Haram and al-Qaeda prior to 2009, and do not support the idea that Boko Haram was hyper-connected to al-Qaeda between 2009 and its pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015. Moreover, Kassim's narrow definition of 'primary sources' discounts the kind of fieldwork done by authors such as Matfess and MacEachern; surely interviews with people who have belonged to or interacted with Boko Haram are primary sources too.

Problematically, Kassim's approach aligns with a wider kind of 'jihadology' popular in the US, Europe, Israel, Russia and elsewhere, where analysts proffer uncritical readings of jihadist sources as the key to understanding and defeating jihadism. Jihadology is an approach that emphasizes 'doctrine, tactics, propaganda and members' over efforts to place jihadist movements into their political and social contexts. As Darryl Li has written in his 'A jihadism anti-primer', it becomes 'a secularized form of demonology [that stems] from a place of horror that shuts down serious thinking about politics'. Jihadology relies heavily on jihadists' self-presentation and is implicitly hostile to attempts at critical source analysis, particularly if those techniques undermine the image of jihadists as masters of conspiracy and conquest.

The *Reader*, then, is on one level an effort to compile texts and let the reader judge their implications for herself or himself, and it will hopefully be used this way. Yet, on another level, it is a step towards portraying Boko Haram as a one-dimensional manifestation of global jihadism and an incipient threat to the US. David Cook, from an early point in Boko Haram's evolution, explicitly made this argument, writing in his 2011 paper 'Boko Haram: a prognosis' that 'the pattern of Boko Haram's attacks, and threats of attacks, focuses more and more on interests that touch US economic concerns in the region [i.e. sub-Saharan Africa]; the group has not avoided both contact with globalists (in Somalia, presumably) and citing the United States specifically as an eventual target' (p. 3).[1] The politics behind the *Reader*, then, are hard to ignore.

The study of Boko Haram is advancing, and yet there remains something elusive about the movement itself. Perhaps it is the difficulty involved in hearing directly from the group's fighters – their perspectives come to us only indirectly, either through propaganda, as with the *Reader*; or through the voices of defectors, as with Matfess or with the quantitative studies by Mercy Corps, the United Nations Development Programme and others; or through the experiences of the societies around them, as MacEachern relates. Even as studies of Boko Haram become more sophisticated, the propensity to mistake the part for the whole sometimes means that the movement itself retreats out of sight, and the study of Boko Haram merely orbits the group rather than comprehends it.

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doi:10.1017/S0001972019000160

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Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: the history of an African jihadist movement*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press (hb US$29.95 – 978 0 691 17224 8). 2017, 352 pp.

Attention paid to Boko Haram, the terrorist insurgency in the Lake Chad Basin responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people and the displacement of millions more, often overreaches, veering into the sensationalist or speculative. Particularly since the organization pledged *bayat* (allegiance) to the Islamic

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[1] See <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/boko-haram-a-prognosis/>.