

BOOK REVIEW

Jacob Kurtzer. *Out of Sight: Northeast Nigeria's Humanitarian Crisis*. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Humanitarian Agenda; Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020. vi + 44 pp. \$54 Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-5381-4017-8.

Jacob Kurtzer's *Out of Sight: Northeast Nigeria's Humanitarian Crisis* analyzes the multifaceted and protracted humanitarian crisis in the northeastern Nigerian states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. The report addresses various issues, including the impacts of insurgency, governmental policies, access challenges, and the inadequacies of humanitarian responses. As an academic and policy-oriented text, it provides significant insights into the interplay between security, governance, and humanitarian action. It is divided into three sections: "Introduction and Background," "Humanitarian Needs and Access Challenges," and "Nigerian Government Response in the Northeast."

Kurtzer sets the stage by presenting the devastating effects of a decade-long insurgency by Boko Haram and the Islamic State–West Africa Province (ISWAP), which has left nearly eight million people in dire humanitarian need. He critiques the Nigerian government's strategy of denying resources and access to areas outside of garrison towns, arguing that this approach has limited the effectiveness of humanitarian agencies and exacerbated suffering. The report highlights how despite substantial humanitarian funding from the United States, European Union, and other donors, humanitarian needs persist in the region due to a "lack of intentionality and prioritization in how funds are spent" (6).

One of the report's key strengths is its critique of the "garrison town" and "super camp" strategies employed by the Nigerian military (14). Kurtzer rightly questions the efficacy and ethical implications of forcing civilians into these concentrated areas, which are poorly resourced, insecure, and susceptible to corruption. The report convincingly argues that the government's strategy has left over a million civilians in remote areas without essential assistance, violating international humanitarian law. The analysis of how this approach pushes some civilians to prefer life under ISWAP control—where access to healthcare, freedom of movement, and economic activities are more feasible—is particularly striking and thought-provoking.


Another highlight is the section on the relationship between Nigerian military control and humanitarian operations. With the help of many illustrative maps and pictures, Kurtzer's discussion of the overlap between military strategy and the operational challenges humanitarian actors face is insightful, as he outlines how bureaucratic impediments, military restrictions, and forced compliance have reduced the neutrality and effectiveness of aid delivery. For

example, he cited how the 2019 suspension of Action Contre la Faim (ACF)/Action Against Hunger and Mercy Corps by the military impacted urgent services for nearly 400,000 people in the region, which the Nigerian government reversed after “substantial outcry from the international community” (22).

Despite its many contributions to highlighting the humanitarian situation in Nigeria, the report falls short in critically engaging with the root causes of the Nigerian government’s heavy-handed approaches towards the international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). For instance, Kurtzer consistently describes the Nigerian military’s and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission’s accusations against the international NGOs as “baseless claims of misappropriation or diversion against NGOs” and “unfounded concerns about corruption and support to insurgents” (21). Similarly, the report did not engage with any of the government’s humanitarian plans and efforts, such as the Buhari Plan for Rebuilding the North East and the Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery & Resilience of the Boko Haram-affected Areas of the Lake Chad Basin of the Lake Chad Basin Commission. The report also dwells more on the situation in Borno state, with little discussion of the situation in other conflict-affected states—Yobe and Adamawa. The report’s limited engagement with the perspectives of government officials and ordinary civilians from the region also restricts a more nuanced understanding of the human dimension of the crisis, as Kurtzer only conducted interviews “with humanitarian organizations, civil society representatives, donors, and members of the media in Lagos and Abuja” (vi).

Kurtzer’s recommendations, which urge the United States and other donors to prioritize civilian protection in security assistance and press the Nigerian government to permit humanitarian access to vulnerable groups, are predictable given USAID’s funding of the report. However, these suggestions echo a neo-colonial approach, where US involvement in Africa often translates to imposing policy directives on African countries with an expectation of unquestioned compliance. With the ongoing discussion on localizing aid, the report might have examined how the US and other international actors can support grassroots or local NGOs in complementing or challenging the existing top-down approaches.

Overall, *Out of Sight* is a valuable contribution to understanding the humanitarian crisis in northeast Nigeria. While its analysis of the conflict dynamics offers valuable insights on how military strategies and competing agendas between the government and humanitarian agencies impeded humanitarian action, the report’s limited focus on the perspectives of Abuja and Lagos-based humanitarian actors limited a deeper exploration of the structural and systemic issues that sustain the crisis. Despite the limitations, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners interested in African conflict studies, humanitarian action, and governance will find this report a thought-provoking analysis that raises critical questions about the interplay between security, state policies, and humanitarian needs.

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