



Boko Haram: An Interview with Alexander Thurston

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Leading scholar of Islam and politics, Alexander Thurston, discusses the history and evolution of the insurgency group Boko Haram.

This interview was originally conducted for the [Remote Warfare Programme](#).

Q. *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*, your new book, offers a comprehensive history of one of the world's deadliest jihadist groups. Who are Boko Haram and what are the origins of this group?

Boko Haram originated in north-eastern Nigeria in the 1990s or early 2000s as a preaching movement that denounced Western-style education (boko) as illicit (haram) for Muslims. The movement also denounced secular government and democracy. From the beginning, some hardliners in Boko Haram's orbit were interested in global jihadism, but the founder Muhammad Yusuf (1970-2009) wavered between quietism, political preaching, and jihadism until the last years of his life, when he gravitated more toward the jihadist position. After a mass uprising in 2009, Yusuf was killed, and leadership passed to his hard-line deputy Abubakar Shekau. Since the failure of the 2009 uprising, Boko Haram has been an underground jihadist movement.

Q. What are the group's goals?

Officially, the group seeks to overthrow the Nigerian state and the neighboring states of Niger, Cameroon, and Chad, and replace them with an Islamic state according to the group's definition of Islam. Unofficially, the group often seems concerned with its own survival and with its ability to win followers and build control among primarily rural populations in northeastern Nigeria and surrounding areas.

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Q. The group's ideology is commonly described as Salafi-Jihadist. Where does Boko Haram's ideology sit compared to Salafism more generally and how do Boko Haram's beliefs differ from what has been described as the "global jihadist movement"?

Theologically, Boko Haram has a very narrow and violent definition of Salafism. The movement rejects Salafis who participate in mainstream politics and it even rejects Salafis who avoid politics altogether. For Boko Haram, being Muslim demands active confrontation with any secular state that attempts to rule over the territory where one lives – Boko Haram dismisses most other Muslims as unbelievers. In terms of the global jihadist movement, Boko Haram has an unusually strong emphasis on rejecting Western-style education. Additionally, when it controls territory, Boko Haram has proven more predatory than some of its peer movements in Africa, such as al-Shabab in Somalia. Finally, despite Boko Haram's ties to the Islamic State (and its earlier, loose ties to al-Qa'ida and to al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb), Boko Haram's behavior and strategies are largely driven by local developments.

Q. How have the group's strategy and tactics evolved over the years?

Boko Haram began as a preaching movement, with a wing that was more interested in violent confrontation with the state. The mainstream of Boko Haram, however, sought to subsist and grow under Nigerian government rule until the 2009 uprising. Then, from approximately 2010-2013, Boko Haram primarily focused on terrorism, especially in northeastern Nigeria but also targeting sites like Nigeria's capital Abuja.

After the rise of civilian vigilante forces hampered Boko Haram's ability to operate in the cities of the northeast, Boko Haram turned to a strategy of

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building control in rural areas. This strategy culminated with Boko Haram's seizure of massive territory in northeastern Nigeria in 2014-2015. That seizure prompted a regional military intervention, primarily led by Chad and Niger, which forced Boko Haram out of most of its territory and back underground. Since then, Boko Haram has once again concentrated on terrorism, especially suicide bombings and raids in northeastern Nigeria. Also, out of revenge against neighboring states, Boko Haram conducts terrorism in southeastern Niger, northern Cameroon, and occasionally in Chad.

In August 2016, Boko Haram had a factional split, leaving some of its fighters under the command of Shekau (who continued to adopt an extremely harsh posture towards all civilians, even Muslims) and some of its fighters under the command of the Islamic State's new designated "governor" for West Africa, Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi (who is likely a son of Muhammad Yusuf, Boko Haram's founder). Al-Barnawi's group is more conciliatory toward civilians, which in a way makes them more dangerous than Shekau's group, given al-Barnawi's potential to build new political alliances and win over new constituencies in the northeast. Al-Barnawi's attacks have focused on the Nigerian military.

Q. How have the Nigerian government, its regional allies and the international community responded to Boko Haram's rise and how effective have the countermeasures been?

Nigeria's government has deployed a heavy-handed, largely military approach that has contributed to extending and exacerbating the conflict. Since 2015, there has been a more regional approach involving Chad, Niger, and Cameroon (and to a much lesser extent, Benin). Western powers (especially France, the UK, and the US) have supported this regional approach, which is handled through the framework of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF). Nigerian

and regional counterterrorism strategies have been effective at reducing Boko Haram's ability to control territory, but they have not succeeded in stamping out the group (despite repeated declarations of victory by the Nigerian government).

Q. Is it time to negotiate with Boko Haram?

Both the Goodluck Jonathan administration (2010-2015) and the Muhammadu Buhari administration (2015-present) have made efforts to open dialogue with Boko Haram. The Buhari administration successfully negotiated for the release of two groups of the schoolgirls kidnapped at Chibok in 2014. In my view, it would be worth pursuing further negotiations, especially with the aim of securing a ceasefire in exchange for a partial amnesty/surrender program. Of course, such negotiation efforts could be very difficult and time-consuming, but the present situation is abominable for many people in the Lake Chad region.



About the interviewee

***Alex Thurston** is a scholar of Islam and politics. He joined the African Studies Program at Georgetown University in Fall 2014, offering courses on religion, politics, and security. He holds a Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Northwestern University (2013), and an M.A. in Arab Studies from Georgetown University (2009). In 2013-2014, he was an International Affairs Fellow with the Council on Foreign Relations.*

His first book, [Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching, and Politics](#), was published by Cambridge University Press in 2016; it examines the lives, activism, and

intellectual production of Nigerian Muslims who graduated from Saudi Arabia's Islamic University of Medina. His second book, [Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement](#), was published by Princeton University Press in 2017. Other publications have appeared in [African Affairs](#), the [Journal of the American Academy of Religion](#), [Islamic Africa](#), and the [Journal of Religion in Africa](#). He has conducted field research in Nigeria, Senegal, and Mauritania.

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101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
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