



The Conflict in Northeast Nigeria – Akin Oyawale

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This issue of NokokoPod covers the conflict in northeastern Nigeria. The podcast for this discussion is available on the Nokoko journal website. This conversation took place on January 16th, with Logan Cochrane in Canada and Dr. Akin Oyawale in the United Kingdom. This version of the PDF has been reviewed by Logan Cochrane and Dr. Akin Oyawale. In addition to the conversation, a set of annotations have been added as footnotes so as to strengthen the value of these publications and enable them to act as a resource for listeners and readers who want to have additional context and/or find additional resources on the topics discussed.

Logan: Welcome to the first NokokoPod issue of 2020. Today, we are joined by Dr. Akin Oyawale in the Department of Politics & International Studies at the University of Warwick.¹ We will be speaking about the conflict in northeast Nigeria. Our guest brings a wealth of knowledge about the topic, including having done his

¹ Dr. Akin Oyawale's academic profile: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/pais/people/oyawale/> and on Twitter @akinoyawale

doctoral work on Boko Haram and the counterterrorism activities of the states in the northeast of Nigeria, which included assessing the impact that these activities had on the citizens throughout the region.² Thank you for giving us your time and speaking with us today.

Dr. Akin: Thank you very much.

Logan: At the end of 2019, we finished the year, and according to many of the UN agencies, it was reported that around 7.1 million people were in need of emergency assistance in the northeast of Nigeria.³ This did not seem to capture many headlines or a lot of attention, despite the significant crisis that was occurring. Could you give us a situation update on how things look at the moment?

Dr. Akin: Thank you very much for the question. I believe that this is a very important issue. But, we should broaden this a little bit to look at what the Nigerian state has been doing, how Boko Haram came to be, the counter-terrorism and terrorism itself, and how they have interacted to produce what we have today. Usually, there is a narrative about Boko Haram emerging around 2002 with Mohammed Yusuf, who evoked young people in northeast Nigeria to join a kind of Islamic study group.⁴ At that time, they were not involved in

² See Oyawale (2018).

³ See, for example:

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock, Statement on the Humanitarian Situation in Borno, North-East Nigeria (25 October 2019), United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations. 2019. Nigeria: Facts and Figures. European Union (updated 12/12/2019).

⁴ A typical example of this rendering, as reported on the BBC:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-49154953/boko-haram-a-decade-of-terror-explained>

violence. It then morphed into what it became through the interactions with the state. The watershed moment was in 2009, when the state believed that Boko Haram was trying to usurp its authority in the region and were challenging the sovereignty of the state. There was a crackdown, which led to thousands of them being arrested or killed, as well as the death of the founding leader, Mohammed Yusuf.⁵ This led to the full-blown armed insurgency that we witnessed, which peaked between 2013 and 2015. What is really important, from what you said, is that there is a dire situation, over 7.1 million people that you mentioned, some people would even put it a little bit higher and some would argue lower. The point is that the displacement and the amount of insecurity that this has produced has not really been paid attention to. That goes with the view that the state itself has of the situation, not just the Nigerian state, but also if you look at states globally and how they interact with, or how they respond to, non-state conflicts. When I am saying states globally, my emphasis is on how the threat is defined. In Nigeria, Boko Haram is defined as a threat to national security. The referent object, when we look at it more closely, is the Nigerian state. That is why much of the discourse of the state and of elite actors in Nigeria is that Boko Haram is threatening Nigeria's territorial integrity. In that sense, the narrative focusing upon the state (re)gaining parts of the population and territory, and that is celebrated as victory. That, however, does not pay attention to the massive lives lost or several other kinds of experiences of insecurity that the people that you mentioned actually witness. We still have Nigerians across the border, in Cameroon.⁶ We still have Nigerians living in camps who still do not

5 There was an emerging academic literature on this history that developed in the early years after Boko Haram gained international attention: Adesoji (2010), Onuoha (2010), Waldek and Jayasekara (2011), Onuoha (2012), Solomon (2012), Agbiboa (2013).

6 Over 110,000 Nigerians are registered as people of concern by UN HCR in Cameroon (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/cmr>).

have their basic needs catered for.⁷ The state still thinks that it is "winning the war" against Boko Haram. This just means that the state is actually not totally defining the objective, or what it means for people to be secure.

Logan: At this moment, in the beginning of 2020, as these two actors are engaging with one another, what do things currently look like in the northeast?

Dr. Akin: There have been victories declared. There have been several times that the Nigerian state, represented by the President, has declared a kind of "victory" against Boko Haram.⁸ The point is, as I mentioned, it is about the objective. The "victory" does not speak about millions of people that are displaced, or what will happen to them afterwards, or what will happen to these communities. The point is, Boko Haram is still there because as a terrorist group they are willing to engage in a battle of attrition, for several years, even decades, if possible. The state itself has been pursuing a very simple victory. As it currently stands, there are still hit and run guerrilla tactics, suicide bombings across the country and there are still several areas of violence. These are spreading and some people would say it is a transnational problem (I will come to that later, because I challenge that concept). We are talking about pockets of violence in Chad, pockets of violence in Niger, pockets of violence in Cameroon, and several other areas where violence is on-going. The state would want us to believe something else, that they are "winning".

⁷ According to UNHCR, more than 2 million people have been internally displaced (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/nigeriasituation>).

⁸ President Buhari said, in December of 2015, that Boko Haram was 'technically defeated' (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35173618>).

Logan: In the in the war of ideas, if you like, for the people themselves who are living and working and learning throughout the region of northeast Nigeria, how are they engaging with the messaging that they are receiving, both from the states and from other actors in society?

Dr. Akin: That is a very interesting question. I will try to contextualize this properly from the research I did. My research was the first primary research that tried to engage in a kind of bottom-up evaluation or assessment of terrorism and counterterrorism. My assumption was based on the fact that it was impossible to understand the ontology of both Boko Haram and the state independently, rather than seeing them as relational, as interconnected, and then looking at that through the inter-subjective meanings that people create. I spoke with IDPs,⁹ in IDP camps, across northern Nigeria. The argument from most of them is that these two actors are actually battling it out for themselves, for their interests, and they cannot trust either of those actors. Neither of these actors is actually trustworthy from their perspective. They also felt that neither of them had the moral high ground to be able to gain access to their community. For them, based on this bottom-up view of these actors, they felt that neither could be trusted and instead they developed distrust.

Logan: With a lack of trust, there is great uncertainty of what the future looks like. I imagine for the smaller, rural or remote communities, there is uncertainty about who will exert control or express themselves in forms of violence or otherwise. How are people navigating their own lives amidst all that uncertainty?

Dr. Akin: That is a very good point. When I was discussing with people about this point, I discovered that there were two main

⁹ Internally displaced persons

interpretative repertoires. When people found out that they could not rely on these two dominant actors within their communities, people have come up alternative imagined communities.¹⁰ For example, one of those imagined communities that I discovered in my research was the ethnic community. A lot of people believe that their ethnic communities provided ontological security and that that was the community they could depend upon. The other community was the religious community. They believed that if the state could not provide anything for them, and Boko Haram could also not provide for them, then it is possible for them to rally around an imagined community based on religious identity. This was what they could believe in, and there were many religious aspects of their views and beliefs that they could only trust their own religious community and also ethnic community.

Logan: Maybe that is a good moment to reflect on the deeper history. These identities, ethnic or religious, are not new, nor are they static, but they certainly bring forth a much deeper history that existed before this conflict. Could you elaborate on the role of the deeper history of the northeast and its relation to what we have seen over the last ten years?

Dr. Akin: If somebody is to look at the northeast, for example, the northeast is not unique in terms of what it claims or the experiences of people there. If we go back in history, we should not just pay attention recent events, because many of the approaches that have actually been adopted to research Boko Haram have been ahistorical. If you want to go back in history, for example by 200 years, we will discover that this area was different in terms of how it looked. Many communities actually transcended what we have today as national boundaries. When we talk about the Kanem-Bornu

¹⁰ For more on 'imagined communities', see Anderson (1983).

Empire,¹¹ which a lot of people mention when we talk about empires or the dominant empires in sub-Saharan Africa, this Empire straddled what is today parts of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. A lot of people share particular identities, linguistic ties, and cultural ties across these boundaries. Although Islam was dominant in this Empire, it was not as fervent as in the Sokoto Caliphate¹² that came afterward, towards the 19th century (which was somehow defeated in the 20th century by the invasion of the British and the French. The land was unified into the Northern Protectorate of Nigeria and eventually was amalgamated in 1914 into the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria). If we go back to that time, or prior to that time, we can still see some of those traces of identities, which means that where Boko Haram struggles now, its region or realm of influence, is not actually transnational if we go back in history. It is an area that has traditionally been a part of an empire.

Logan: Transnational only in the colonial sense of borders.

Dr. Akin: Yes. The nationalistic mentality of borders that we use to define principles, movement and action.

Logan: That is very interesting. Other than the two main actors that we have mentioned thus far, the state counterinsurgency efforts and Boko Haram, could you elaborate on other domestic actors within Nigeria that are engaging in the region or in the politics of the conflict?

11 This Empire is said to have begun in the 8th century and continued until the turn of the 20th century. For some historical reading, see: Migeod (1923), Cohen and Turner (1971), Stenning (1994). A similar historical argument is made by Adibe (2012).

12 An empire in West Africa, functioning from 1804 to 1903. For some historical readings, see: Adeleye (1971), Chafe (1994), Bivins (2007).

Dr. Akin: Currently, Nigeria itself as an actor has partners. When I talk about this, I try to conceptualize it as Nigeria and its partners and Boko Haram and its partners (people now believe that Boko Haram has split; with a splinter group of the Islamic State's West Africa Province, ISWAP, which is led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the eldest surviving son of Mohammed Yusuf, who was killed in 2009, as well as Boko Haram that is led by Abubakar Shekau; people also believe that ISIS has its elements and there are other groups that might have had alliances with it). In terms of Nigeria and its partners, we are talking about members of the Multinational Joint Task Force (Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria), which was founded for another purpose regarding banditry in the Lake Chad Basin but has evolved and its mandate was expanded to Boko Haram. In January 2015, the Joint Task Force base headquarters in Baga, Nigeria, was attacked, thereafter it expanded efforts in combating Boko Haram. In some other countries further north, in Chad and Niger, the French Government has some presence. The U.S. has some sort of military presence in Chad, Niger and the Sahel more broadly. We also have the African Union as well. There are state and non-state actors. There are also charitable organizations involved in their own ways in trying to support communities in the regions. There are many, many actors involved.

Logan: On the last actor that you mentioned, international NGOs, there has been some critical reflections - I am thinking Yemen and Syria - where in a situation where the actors are state and non-state, often permission to operate is granted by the state.¹³ In some instances, we have seen that international NGOs, in being guided to where they can and cannot work or being told where is safe

¹³ This question has a long history, probably most famously from the NGO community as emanating from an earlier conflict in Nigeria, in Biafra in the 1960s. Two Red Cross doctors, frustrated by their experience of this question, would go on to found Doctors Without Borders, one of the largest INGOs today.

or not safe, there are sometimes used as tools of the state. Do you see any of these dynamics playing out in the northeast?

Dr. Akin: Actually, yes. There is an ongoing situation, although I think it has been resolved slightly now, in Nigeria. Some INGOs were actually suspended. I can remember that Action Against Hunger and Mercy Corps were considered to be aiding and abetting Boko Haram in the northeast and were suspended.¹⁴ Although I am not certain about this, I think they have been reinstated.¹⁵ The state itself viewed them as being sympathetic to Boko Haram.

Logan: You mentioned the French and the US military involvement, in the political realm and in the international space, are there actors that have significant influence over what happens in Nigerian politics and its response in the northeast?

Dr. Akin: Yes, and also no. The governance situation in Nigeria has actually evolved. Under the previous government of Goodluck Jonathan¹⁶ it was quite different because at that time Barack Obama was the President of the U.S. and there was a disagreement over the human rights record and then the U.S. backed out of many arms deals and refused to sell arms to Nigeria because of its record. However, when General Muhammadu Buhari¹⁷ was elected there was interest in the Nigerian situation, but that situation has also gone somewhat sour. There are several arrangements, not just the U.S., but the U.K. as well, the European Union. Also, there are (or were)

14 For some reporting on this, see: <https://allafrica.com/stories/201910040245.html>

15 The suspension was lifted, for reported on this, see: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-security/nigeria-lifts-suspension-of-two-aid-groups-in-northeast-minister-idUSKBN1XA16L>

16 Goodluck Jonathan was President from 2010 to 2015.

17 Muhammadu Buhari became President in 2015 and holds that position until this time.

South African private military companies that were involved. Much of this involvement is not explicit in the Nigerian situation, it is not overt. It is quite covert involvement.

Logan: Based on your experience in the region, are the roles of these external actors, whether formal government involvements or these South African private sector entities, do they have a significant presence, or do they remain minor in relation to the state itself?

Dr. Akin: In the case of Nigeria, I would say they remain quite minor. There were influences in the past, in 2015 and 2016, but that has reduced significantly. However, in the other countries, especially in the Francophone countries, there is a very significant influence of France. There is Operation Barkhane in the Sahel,¹⁸ and several other regional operations, which even the U.S. is involved in. That is not very present in Nigeria at the moment. We can still find that involvement in Niger and some parts of Cameroon as well and also in Chad. Some of the operations are clandestine operations, and usually classified. There was an incident when some U.S. operators were killed in Niger,¹⁹ it was only then that American citizens got to know that they actually had some personnel in the region, which was not well known at that time.

Logan: On the other side, Boko Haram and its partners, as you described it, what are the partners that align with Boko Haram?

Dr. Akin: A lot of the alliances that people have suggested are speculative. A lot of people argue that there is this global jihadi

18 Operation Barkhane began in 2014 and continues. France has a force of 4,500 based in Chad.

19 This became a significant story in the American media, which came to be called the Tongo Tongo Ambush. It occurred on October 4th, 2017. Nigerian and American soldiers were attacked outside of the community of Tongo Tongo in Niger.

movement, and in that sense, they argue that Boko Haram has alliances with, for example, Al Shabab, al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and with several other groups across the world. At the same time, it is hard to say which is which. There was an official declaration by Boko Haram, when it expressed its allegiance for ISIS, at that time.²⁰ That was when there was a new partnership and there was ISIL in West Africa, which we now call ISAWP, which a lot of people believe is the splinter group from the old Boko Haram that is led by al-Barnawi. It is quite hard to know. Most of it is speculated. The argument is that they do have partners in terms of the evidence witnessed. For example, in the improved IEDs²¹ and the improved videos and several other aspects of the group that is actually significantly improved in the last couple of years.

Logan: In terms of the future directions, as you have you have followed this conflict quite closely, what do you expect to see, or hope to see, based on history and current action, in the coming years?

Dr. Akin: It is hard to see where this will go, and I will avoid making predictions. For now, the state itself has not really addressed the problem from a different perspective. The perspective so far, and it is not just the state, it is also researchers that actually reiterate some of the interests of the state, is a very narrow view of what the territory is in the national context. In that sense, there is a view that Boko Haram is a national security threat, rather than seeing Boko Haram as something more, as seeing it as threatening, first and foremost, the lives of people in the northeast. If that were to be the

20 In 2015 it was reported that Boko Haram, then led by Abubakar Shekau. However, it was later reported that Islamic State had "replaced" Abubakar Shekau with Abu Musab al-Barnawi. Abubakar Shekau said he had not been replaced.

21 Improved Explosive Devices

primary reference, for example, the individual or the community, then I think the state could then have a different kind of understanding of what the goals are. As it is now, there are no very clear goals about what will be considered success, or not. The state is still trying, battling Boko Haram, which is good, but at the same time, what happens to the people who have been displaced? Who caters for their needs? Even if you broadened the question to the entire Nigeria, it is not just in the northeast. There are serious situations that require some more attention, if it is moved away from the concept of national security. For example, disease is one. If you look at malaria, it kills more people than terrorism in Nigeria, more than Boko Haram would kill.²² In one year, malaria would kill more people than Boko Haram has killed since the beginning of the insurgency.²³ However, because this is not considered a national security threat, the state does not pay attention to it. But at the end of the day, that is another Nigerian death. That is another situation of insecurity, that is created for communities and people. If you look at road accidents, for example, these kill more people than insurgency or even state action, yearly.²⁴ Because there is this very narrow, parsimonious view of security as involving the state, that is targeting territorial integrity and also national security. In that sense, there is this displacement of what the state should be doing and then there is this humongous budget earmarked for fighting terrorism through counter-terrorism. Which, if well used, probably terrorism or counter-terrorism activity would not be required, assuming these communities

22 Of the over 400,000 deaths due to malaria around the world in 2018, the World Health Organization reports that 25% occurred in Nigeria (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/malaria>).

23 It is estimated that the conflict in the northeast of Nigeria has resulted in the loss of 30,000 lives. This is less than a third of lost lives in a single year due to malaria in Nigeria.

24 According to the World Health Organization, in the 2017, road traffic accident deaths resulted in 37,562 fatalities.

were being properly catered for. The government needs to pay attention to other aspects of security, not just this very narrow, militaristic threat, which they view as threatening the national interest or the existence of Nigeria.

Logan: There are ideas we hear, and I am interested to hear your reflections on them, that if there was a shift of priorities as you are describing, this might actually address many of the fundamental or root issues of chronic hunger or chronic poverty, a lack of access to basic goods and services and a protection of basic rights. The argument is that if there were investments made in these areas, the kinds of challenges that are emanating from insecurity or uncertainty may no longer be there.

Dr. Akin: Yes. That is a very good point. I have spoken to people who have actually experienced both terrorism and counterterrorism. It is really fascinating and illuminating because until then most people's voices have gone unheard, so many people just did not pay attention to them. It was a very elitist, top-down kind of research. Many people from the northeast would tell you that Boko Haram is not my primary concern. My concern is what I am going to eat tonight. My concern is my child having no school. My concern is this poverty. My concern is that I cannot go back home. I cannot farm. I have also been making this argument about the organization of poverty of people from there. Many people argue that they have been abandoned by the state and that they do not even know what to do. In that sense, the state is not paying attention to, or listening to, these people at all. It is just this very top-down, militaristic and rigid kind of approach to security, which would create the situation that it is proposed to solve.

Logan: We had an interesting discussion with someone at the end of last year on the conflict in Cameroon, which raised a number

of very similar points. I will direct listeners to that, if they wanted to hear how this looks in other places.²⁵ As a final question for you, on some critical reflections on the representation of this conflict. As you watch this from the inside and from the outside, certain events over the last ten or eleven years have gained prominence, being international headlines around the world. Those have been few and far between, but they have occurred. In many cases, there are significant issues that should be covered - at the beginning of this discussion we were speaking about seven million people in need of emergency assistance. As you hear from people and as you return back and you are teaching at Warwick, what are your critical reflections on the representations of this conflict outside of Nigeria?

Dr. Akin: I have paid a lot of attention to how it is represented. I think it has changed over the years. One of the main or dominant representations, drawing on the concept of hegemony, one of these hegemonic representations, is that Boko Haram is anti-Western. In that sense, Boko Haram considers the West to be its number one enemy. Further, then, we need to go there and save these people. For me, I think that is a misrepresentation of what Boko Haram is. The number one victims of Boko Haram are people who actually have never been to school. If it were the case that Boko Haram believes that Western education is a sin. Then those are not the targets, they are not the people engaging in those activities. For example, there was this Chibok case of the abduction of the girls.²⁶ At that time there was this Bring Back Our Girls activity, which was very popular across the world. Which was good, in terms of calling attention to the insecurities of the girls, but at the same time, that took away a lot

25 See: <https://ojs.library.carleton.ca/index.php/nokoko/article/view/2394> (Cochrane and Afungang, 2019).

26 In 2014, 276 female students were abducted, which resulted in international attention and campaigns to "Bring Back Our Girls", with a range of celebrities getting involved in the case.

of interest in so many other aspects. The Chibok girls were a fraction of several thousands of women in Nigeria that had been abducted and are still being abducted to this day. Boko Haram has abducted thousands of women, and it still carries out the massive abduction of women and the abuse of women in northeast Nigeria. People do not pay attention to that. We do not hear about it, as if it did not happen. It is representation of particular pockets of events that captures the international attention. I have argued that the victims of Boko Haram and counterterrorism have to speak. People have to listen to those victims, those IDPs, people living in remote villages in the northeast. These are people who intersubjectively construct their everyday experiences of the state and Boko Haram. When you speak to these people, you discover that they do not even use the binaries of state and non-state actor. For them, "these are just actors that use violence against us". The moral high ground, or the kind of normative dichotomization of state and non-state, does not hold when you go to the grassroots and listen to these people. Rather than speaking for them, I think it is more important to speak to them and hopefully then allowing them to speak for themselves. This could be through engaging with their ideas and with their experiences, in their own vocabulary.

Logan: Thank you. I appreciate that you have taken the time to speak with people rather than speak for them or on their behalf and share that with us today. Any final comments that you would like to make before we close off our first episode of the year?

Dr. Akin: The world has to know that there is quite a lot going on for those people who want their voices to be heard. It would really help if more research or future research can engage directly with people rather than just trying to proffer solutions for as to how Boko Haram can stop. Boko Haram stopping does not solve their

problems. It is very nuanced and a very dynamic situation that needs urgent attention.

Logan: Thank you very much.

Dr. Akin: Thank you.

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