



Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency

By Virginia Comolli

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Northern and central Nigeria are engulfed in a violent insurgency campaign waged by Jama'atu Ahlis Sunnah Lidda'awati w'al Jihad, a.k.a. 'Boko Haram', and more recently, its splinter group 'Ansaru'. From its inception an inward-looking, almost parochial, movement, Boko Haram, and even more so Ansaru, have now showed clear signs of regionalization, expanding their operations across West Africa and forging links with al-Qaeda affiliated groups. Boko Haram's stated aim is to Islamize Africa's most populous country but, like earlier Nigerian Islamist groups, of which there is a long tradition in the Sahel, the discontent prompting young Nigerians and other young West African Muslims to join the insurgency is rooted in more than just religious orthodoxy and cannot be disentangled from their economic, social and political marginalization.

In spite of talks about dialogue and amnesty for those prepared to renounce violence, the Federal Government's response has been a militarized one, resulting in the largest deployment of the Nigerian armed forces since the end of the Civil War. But what is the real magnitude of the threat? What can foreign partners do to support Abuja? How effective is the current government's strategy in tackling the insurgency? And, more importantly, are the root causes of the insurgency being addressed and the foundations for a durable peace being established?

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Editorial Review

Review

"Virginia Comolli's book, lucid and well informed, has to be considered the standard work on Boko Haram, a movement of fast-growing importance." -- Stephen Ellis, Desmond Tutu Professor, Free University, Amsterdam and author of *External Mission: The ANC in Exile, 1960-1990*

"In a book that combines detailed research with rigorous analysis, Virginia Comolli traces the origins and evolution of Boko Haram as a local, regional and transnational security threat, conveying in clear and accessible terms the complexities of this poorly understood phenomenon. This is an important book for anyone concerned about Africa, jihadism or international security challenges in general." -- Nigel Inkster, Director of Transnational Threats and Political Risk, IISS, and former Director of Operations and Intelligence for the British Secret Intelligence Service

"Virginia Comolli's book will be invaluable to policy makers confronting the challenge of Boko Haram. Her approach is comprehensive and critical. Her exposition of the theological roots of Boko Haram and their northern Nigerian setting provides a new and more sophisticated level of analysis of where the movement comes from and where it is going." -- John Campbell, Ralph Bunche Senior Fellow for Africa Policy Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), New York, and former US Ambassador to Nigeria

"Virginia Comolli's book is a must-read for anyone seeking to understand Nigeria or militant Islam in Africa. Grounded in the political history of the country and in local social, ethnic, economic, and ideational context, Virginia's analysis debunks facile stereotypes about Boko Haram and the pan-jihadi threat in Africa and dissects the multiple causes of the insurgency, its shape, and evolution. Of high policy relevance, the book persuasively shows how long-term as well as current policies of the Nigerian government generated many of the root causes of the discontent of Nigeria's north and worsened the insurgency." -- Vanda Felbab-Brown, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and author of *Aspiration and Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State-building in Afghanistan*

"Boko Haram is one of the fastest evolving Islamist militant movements in the world today. In the span of just a few years, it has transformed itself from a localised group active in a remote corner of Nigeria into a full-fledged insurgency threatening not only to Africa's most populous country and its biggest economy, but also the security of the subregion. Virginia Comolli's book offers both policymakers and analysts a comprehensive introduction to an increasingly important, but poorly understood, phenomenon, one rooted in cultural history and religious belief as well political, economic, and social marginalization and the failure of governance. Even those who will find themselves at disagreement with some of the author's conclusions will nevertheless find her meticulous exposition an invaluable resource." -- J. Peter Pham, Director of the Africa Center, Atlantic Council, and Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of the Middle East and Africa*

"Boko Haram: simply the latest in Nigeria's many millenarian movements, or something new? Virginia Comolli offers unique insight into the Islamist movements origins, while providing answers to other key questions: Why has the Nigerian army has performed so poorly against this threat, and how might Boko Haram be defeated" -- Greg Mills, Director of the Brenthurst Foundation, Johannesburg, and author of *Why States Recover: Changing Walking Societies into Winning Nations, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe*

About the Author

Virginia Comolli is the Research Fellow for Security and Development at The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London.

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