

# Boko Haram Conflict Map

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**Summary Description:** Nigeria's greatest conflict in the 21st century, the struggle against Boko Haram, emerged amid great political dissent and poverty in northeastern Nigeria. While originally fueled by anti-Western sentiment and opposition to Nigeria's corrupt governance, the insurgency group evolved to become a terrorist group that indiscriminately kills all people who do not follow their model of Islam. For nearly a decade, Boko Haram has implemented mass bombings, kidnappings, and scores of other abuses. As of March 2018, the conflict has caused over 55,000 deaths throughout Nigeria, with the highest concentration in the northeastern state of Borno (Campbell 2018). The Nigerian government's brutal response to the first violent outbreak of Boko Haram in 2009 established a foundation of poor communication between the two groups and a persistent avoidance of the legitimate concerns held by members of the insurgency group. The government has further exacerbated the conflict by committing substantial war crimes against both Boko Haram suspects and Nigerian civilians (Amnesty 2014). While the government is nearing victory with the help of a military alliance comprised of neighboring countries, the future of Nigeria is clouded by the scores of ghastly human rights abuses committed by both Boko Haram and the government. Along with a war-torn population, devastated communities, and ravaged farmlands, the government must also face weighty decisions on how to handle the masses of surrendering Boko Haram insurgents to prevent such atrocities from happening again. Using Lederach's conflict transformation lens, the tragedy of Boko Haram can be used as a catalyst to remake Nigerian governance with the help of the international community, using an array of conflict management techniques, so that the nation can stride forward with a more just foundation necessary for long-lasting peace.

**History:** Boko Haram is widely believed to have been officially founded in 2002 (CNN Library 2018), amidst Nigeria's tumultuous political transition to democracy, which began in 1999.

While the constitution was established as a federal system like that of the United States, it gave less power to individual states, especially regarding the federal police and economic budgets (Matfess 2017, 3). The discontent from many northeastern states regarding this lack of power helped fuel public attraction to Boko Haram's founder, Mohammed Yusuf. Yusuf was a radical and controversial cleric who preached against Western education and opposed the Nigerian government (Matfess 2017, 1). The group was quickly noted by government authorities for its use of hate speech and accumulation of weapons between 2002 and 2009. However, Boko Haram did not cement its identity as a militant group until Abubakar Shekau rose as the new leader, following the death of Yusuf during a 2009 uprising. This multi-state uprising was Boko Haram's response to an incident in which its members were arrested by the federal police for disobeying a helmet regulation (CNN Library 2017; Brock 2012). The uprising consisted of burning down police stations and government offices, as well as releasing hundreds of criminals from prisons (Brock 2012). The Nigerian government responded brutally by destroying Boko Haram's operational mosque and killing over 700 members. Yusuf was captured by government forces during this uprising and later killed.

In September 2010, Boko Haram initiated its first attack under Shekau in the state of Bauchi, which resulted in the death of five people and the release of more than 700 inmates (CNN Library 2017). Attacks increased in number and scale the following year, including an infiltration of a car bomb in a United Nations compound, marking a pivotal moment for the militant group (Human Rights Watch 2011). However, internal strife began to puncture the

identity of Boko Haram, with Ansaru's decision to break apart from the larger faction as a splinter group in January 2012 attracting the most attention (CNN Library 2017). Despite waging only one major attack that year, Boko Haram denied media claims that they were amid peace talks with the Nigerian government. A Boko Haram spokesman warned that there would be no peace until the government was ready to embrace Sharia law. President Goodluck Jonathan's offer in April 2013 to explore the possibility of amnesty for Islamist militants was also rejected by Shekau. Following this rejection, security forces from Niger and Chad aided the Nigerian military in fighting Boko Haram in the state of Borno, leaving almost 200 people dead.

In May 2013, President Jonathan Goodluck declared a state of emergency in the states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe and ordered the first military offenses there. These offenses proved ineffective against Boko Haram's continually rising power. 2014 marked the most active year for Boko Haram, culminating in the infamous kidnapping of 276 teenage girls from a boarding school in Borno. This ignited a global #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign (CNN Library 2017). These girls, along with the scores of other abducted females, were forced to serve the group as wives or slaves (BBC News 2016). The militant group was responsible for 6,644 deaths in 2014 alone, more than ISIS's total for the year (Delman 2015).

2015 opened with the most bloody multi-day raid initiated by Boko Haram yet, with as many as 2,000 people possibly dead. Suicide bombings carried out by three girls over a period of two days in 2015 forced a trend of using women and children as carriers of suicide bombs. The spread of the insurgency to Benin, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon caused the respective governments to join with Nigeria to create the Multi-National Joint Task Force to fight against

the militant group. The Nigerian army also made advances in recapturing villages and a stronghold within the Sambisa Forest (CNN Library 2017).

2016 saw additional progress by Nigerian authorities as Boko Haram began returning a number of the kidnapped schoolgirls, which continued into 2017. Over two thousand Boko Haram suspects were put on trial in October 2017, but concerns from the international community on due process remained high. Despite dispersed attacks throughout the last two years (CNN Library 2017), current Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari opened 2018 with optimistic news that Boko Haram is “gradually drawing to an end” (Opejobi 2018).

**Context: Geographical Boundaries:** The conflict began in the northeastern state of Borno but quickly expanded to neighboring states such as Yobe and Adamawa, where the group is the strongest and where the government has called a state of emergency (Wilson 2018). The conflict has largely remained confined to this area over the years (CNN Library 2018), with some scattered attacks in central Nigeria and the capital Abuja (Wilson 2018). It has also crossed the borders into the Lake Chad basin area, namely Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.

**Demographics:** Nigeria’s population includes over 250 ethnic groups belonging to many different religions. The Hausa and Fulani are the majority ethnic group and are located in the north. The second largest group is the Yoruba in the southwest region. The Kanuri ethnic group, which most Boko Haram members belong to, comprises about 4% of the population. Historically the Kanuri have clashed with the more powerful majority in the region, the Hausa and Fulani (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid 2015, 8). Ethnic tensions in Nigeria are exacerbated by the almost evenly split religious divide between Sunni Muslims in the north and Christians in the south.

**Political Structures, Relations, and Jurisdictions:** The Western influence that was brought with

British colonization resulted in significant backlash against Western values and an Islamist fundamentalism subsequently emerged in the north, much before Boko Haram. Political tensions grew as the independent northern states were not allowed to impose loose Sharia law once Nigeria gained independence in 1960, having to wait until 1999 (Genocide Watch 2014). After independence, Nigeria has also experienced many secession attempts and disillusionment on behalf of various groups. While northern elites had remained in control of the government after independence, since 1999 this dominance has shifted more to the south. Because of Nigeria's diversity, the political system has been based on power-sharing for the past 15 years. Political offices are to be distributed across six geopolitical zones, and high-level positions such as President and Vice-President must shift between north and south every other election (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid 2015, 10-14).

*Communication Networks, Patterns, and Decision-Making Methods:* Boko Haram is organized as a cell-like structure with a defined organizational hierarchy only at the top. It is a "dynamic and decentralized organization" with autonomous cells that each have a different task and are assigned to a different geological region. Though mostly independent, the cells often come together to launch major attacks against the state. The core leadership comes from the Shura Council, which is composed of a representative from each of the cells and functions as Boko Haram's head council and most powerful decision making organ (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid 2017, 32). As for communication with the government, Boko Haram has rejected negotiations with them and has rejected claims of a truce and the release of prisoners (Cassman 2016). The government has in turn communicated through militarily destroying the group's leadership and networks, though this strategy has not been completely successful thus far.

*Parties: Primary:* The two primary parties in this conflict are Boko Haram and the Nigerian government. Boko Haram rejects any form of Western influence and secularism, and employs an extreme ideology called “Takfiri” that allows for members to declare other Muslims infidels and target them for death if they do not pledge allegiance to Boko Haram (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid 2017, 30). The current leader, Abubakar Shekau, has transformed the way Boko Haram operates. Shekau has adopted tactics of international terrorist groups, including the use of IEDs, suicide bombings, kidnapping, armed assaults, guerilla warfare, bank robbing, and weapons and human trafficking (Pate 2014, 18-24). The Nigerian government is the main opposition to Boko Haram. Muhammadu Buhari is the current President of Nigeria, and also serves as the head of the Nigerian Armed Forces which has been the primary vehicle for the Nigerian government’s response. The government has given the military unchecked power to deal with this crisis, which has led to numerous human rights abuses against civilians including indiscriminate arrests and extra-judicial killings. The government’s high level of corruption has also disrupted resources intended to fight Boko Haram (Smith 2014).

*Secondary:* There are several secondary parties that have a large stake in the conflict. Ansaru, or the Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Lands, is a splinter group of Boko Haram that was formed in 2012 in opposition to the tactics of Shekau, especially the killings of Muslim civilians (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid 2017, 31). Although in name they have tried to separate themselves from Boko Haram, in reality they continue to support Boko Haram by serving as the international wing and external operations unit for Boko Haram. Thus, they are invested in seeing Boko Haram emerge victorious. Multiple foreign actors also have a stake in the resolution of the conflict. The United States and British governments have provided counter-terrorism

expertise to the Nigerian government, and both China and Colombia have sent the Nigerian government intelligence. The African countries of Chad, Nigeria, Benin, Niger and Cameroon formed the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to combat Boko Haram once they spread into those countries' territory. This military force comprises of 8,700 troops from all five countries and has launched several counter-offenses against Boko Haram targets (Abatan, Sawadogo, and William 2016, 1-13). Traditional village leaders and other customary institutions play a major role in conflict resolution in the northern states. While these leaders have lost influence in conflict management due to their perceived involvement in politics and have not been able to craft a unified response, they nonetheless want the conflict resolved for the wellbeing of their village members and tribal structures (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid 2017, 40).

*Third Parties:* The primary third parties are other international Jihadist organizations. al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the regional al-Qaeda branch that operates in North Africa, has provided material support and training to Boko Haram fighters (Simcox 2014). Some Boko Haram fighters have also pledged allegiance to and fought alongside ISIS, another terrorist group originating out of Iraq and Syria. All of these global Islamic groups would like to see victory for Boko Haram, as it would further support their missions of establishing a global Islamic caliphate. The United Nations, as the world's premier conflict resolution organization, has continually monitored the conflict and provides operational support to parties involved in fighting Boko Haram. The UN has raised hundreds of millions of dollars that have been pledged towards rebuilding and peace efforts. The UN Refugee Agency has also provided funding and infrastructural support to countries that host refugees displaced due to the Boko Haram conflict, of which there are more than two-hundred thousand (Suifon 2017, 1-5).



**Issues: *Facts-based:*** Nigeria lacks a sense of national unity due to its religious makeup and ethnic diversity, making the country fertile for the rise of insurgency groups (Iyekekpolo 2018). About half of the country's population is Muslim and half is Christian, with a small fraction of indigenous faiths, which has created severe religious tensions. (Sergie and Johnson 2015). The political elites in the national government are Christian and mostly belong to the Yoruba ethnic group, whereas Boko Haram is mostly composed of Muslims from the Kanuri ethnic group. Few Muslims outside of this ethnic group support Boko Haram, which has led to division as well as skewed perception by outsiders, who might lump all Muslims together as supporting Boko Haram (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid 2017, 5).

*Values-based:* Differences in deep-rooted religious and political values drive Boko Haram's identity. Boko Haram began as a religious movement that evolved into a militant group (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid 2017, 4). The group believes that Sharia law should prevail over democracy in Nigeria on a national level (Sergie and Johnson 2015). They associate themselves with other jihadist movements which all share the same goal of establishing a global caliphate. They are also anti-Western, especially against Western educational values that have been introduced into Nigerian society. In contrast, government elites have a Western leaning outlook, including secularism which was made law by the British in 1960 during Nigerian independence (Iyekekpolo 2018, 6). These differences in values between the two parties help create rigid identities which further drive them apart. Differences in belief around how government, whether on a community or national scale, should be organized and around what ideology continue to plague the conflict (Iyekekpolo 2018).

*Interests-based:* Economic inequality, uneven political representation, and power are the underlying issues in the conflict. The northern region of Nigeria is plagued by poverty and unemployment more sharply than in the southern. While Muslim political elites in the north get a large share of the country's oil revenues, little of that is transferred to the population (Sergie and Johnson 2015). Poor Muslim communities of northern Nigeria do not see their ideals being reflected accurately in the extremely corrupt government. They lack power and representation on both the local and national level which made it easier for Boko Haram to take advantage of this population. To make matters worse, Jonathan Goodluck came into the presidency after the former Muslim president from the north, Umaru Yaradua, died three years into his term, cutting the eight years that a northern president was to remain in the power and increasing polarity between northern and southern politicians (Iyekekpolo 2018). Boko Haram takes advantage of polarity and seeks to gain power by undermining the legitimacy of the government and military forces, who want to maintain their hold on power.

*Nonrealistic:* Conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government has been augmented by their equally unrealistic goals and high levels of violence. Corruption of the government and police brutality pushed Boko Haram over the edge, causing them to use terrorist tactics. Violent tactics are met with violent tactics, causing Boko Haram to become considered a terrorist group while the Nigerian government stands amidst human rights violations. Both groups lose legitimacy this way, and cause the treatment of the problem to be surface-level. A geographical government vacuum created by lack of unity amongst communities and leaders in northeast region of Nigeria has created an environment specifically vulnerable to extremism but mostly recruitment by Boko Haram (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid 2017, 5).

**Dynamics: *Precipitating/Triggering Events:*** While Yusuf’s original preaching was not centered on violence, his increasingly militant sermons and stockpiling of weapons caught the concern of the uneasy Nigerian government (Mendelson 2017; Brock 2012). However, rather than acknowledge the legitimate frustrations of Boko Haram members, including the government’s corruption and failure to protect its citizens from poverty amid extreme economic inequality, the government chose to brutally suppress Boko Haram’s first insurgency. Yusuf’s death in captivity also sparked outcry by followers, resulting in the rise of Boko Haram as a terrorist group.

*Issue Emergence, Transformation, Proliferation:* Under Shekau’s leadership, the group emerged with a renewed vengeance sustained by the deaths of those killed in the prior year’s uprising. Yusuf became a martyr for Boko Haram, highlighting the growing importance of religious ideology. Yusuf’s former preaching for the creation of a more “just” state constructed by a “pure” adherence to Islam became the concrete aim for the Islamist group, with members now believing that they were embarking on a glorious holy path. The group’s ideology was thus transformed—the heart of the problem was no longer the brazen neglect and fraudulency of Nigeria’s leaders, but the greater evil lingering throughout the country due to the failure of non-Boko Haram followers to worship Islam in the “correct way.”

*Polarization:* While Boko Haram initially targeted the state directly through centering its attacks on government offices, prisons, and police headquarters, it increasingly widened its targets to include anyone that did not adhere to its precise form of Islam, including other Muslims (Mendelson 2017, 16:41). This prevented Boko Haram from gaining support from the global Jihadi community as their ideology was thought to be too extreme, with the exception of al-Qaeda (Counter Extremism Project 2018). Affiliation with al-Qaeda further polarized Boko

Haram from the government. The abduction of 276 teenage girls in 2014 and the subsequent international social media campaign served to turn the international community against Boko Haram in unprecedented heights (Mendelson 2017). The Nigerian government also contributed to the polarization with human rights violations committed throughout their counterattacks.

*Spiraling:* With the weakening of Boko Haram, Shekau has made what officials consider a desperate move by pledging allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, more popularly known as ISIS (Mendelson 2017, 21:45). The alliance began to crumble, however, as “fundamental disagreements over ideology [and] tactics” coalesced into ISIS’s appointment of Abu Musab al-Barnawi, son of Boko Haram founder Yusuf, as the new leader of Boko Haram. The ordination was rejected by Shekau, further dividing the insurgency group (Siollun 2018).

*Stereotyping and Mirror-Imaging:* Boko Haram leaders characterize their members as righteous holy warriors, convinced that in death, it would be them who would enter Heaven while their opponents would be restricted (Mendelson 2017). On the other hand, under the leadership of both the former and current Nigerian presidents, the government has committed numerous human rights abuses under the excuse that they are justifiable in the greater fight against Boko Haram, which further propels the anger and frustrations of Boko Haram members. While this military conflict is drawing to an end, the damage inflicted by both the insurgency group and the government through mirror-imaging will take much to heal.

**Alternative Routes to Solutions:** While the size and scope of the conflict has been dramatically reduced, Boko Haram continues to pose a threat to the Nigerian government and civilian populations ten years after the conflict began. The Nigerian government’s strategy has been zero-sum thus far, focusing only on a military response. Since Boko Haram continues to terrorize

civilian populations, the Nigerian government's main objective is to completely eradicate Boko Haram. The government has been successful thus far in limiting Boko Haram's capability to launch large-scale attacks and hold territory. The Nigerian government is close to accomplishing their goal, and many intelligence analysts predict the government could eliminate the group within a couple of years. However, their strategy fails to address underlying key elements of the conflict such as providing local security (Asfura-Heim and McQuaid 2017, 45).

The government has minimally attempted alternative routes to solving the conflict, such as establishing a reintegration program for Boko Haram defectors. However, their main strategy of killing Boko Haram members fails to prevent another militant group from forming or a later Boko Haram resurrection. The appropriate government response to resolve this conflict should involve measures that seek to not only end the violence but address the root underlying causes as to why members joined Boko Haram in the first place, such as intense social dynamics and economic inequality. High-ranking Nigerian government officials should take workshops on conflict transformation so these officials will start to view the conflict through a transformational lens. The conflict transformation process seeks to view conflict as a window of opportunity to respond to underlying symptoms and transform societies to create lasting, positive social change and peace (Lederach 2015). Viewing the conflict through this lens would be beneficial because it would enable representation in the peace process by all segments of society affected by the conflict, including Boko Haram members themselves, so the cycle of violence could end.

A significant reduction in corruption by the government is needed in order to foster trust that is currently lacking. If civilians see that the money the government pledges to help combat the conflict is not going to where it is supposed to go, they have no reason to believe the

government is seriously committed to finding a solution or are working in their interest.

Additionally, the human rights abuses that the government has committed in the name of security need to come to an end. This only further erodes trust between the government and public and is a serious hindrance to cooperation. The government of Nigeria must acknowledge their actions to help heal the trauma they have caused in many communities. The international community must also put more pressure on the Nigerian government to abide by international human rights laws. The government has claimed to have negotiated with Boko Haram, but it would be beneficial if these negotiations were expanded to a larger scale, with the public continuously informed with concrete updates on their progress. If they are done in the presence of civil society with assistance by the international community, they could be more enforceable and successful. The government should also utilize traditional village leaders and other customary institutions in these negotiations as they have been successful conflict management regulators in the past.

One action that should fit into their larger conflict management strategy is establishing reconciliation dialogues. The religious cleavage is seriously deep between the Christians and the Muslims, so dialogues that seek reconciliation could help bridge the gap between these communities. These dialogues would also hopefully establish conflict-resolution mechanisms the communities can use to help alleviate conflict in the future. The current reintegration program, Operation Safe Corridor, should also be expanded and given more funding by the Nigerian government and international community. They should create reintegration programs for victims of Boko Haram as well since support for survivors is equally, if not more important, for rebuilding broken communities. Investments in the national economy and education as well as

working to close the inequality gap would serve to ease underlying economic frustrations that contributed to the conflict, a major root cause currently ignored by the government.

Another potential action the government should take is to grant more regional autonomy to the northeastern states. Many of these communities feel dissatisfied with and underrepresented in the national government, so although granting more autonomy to them could deepen the divide between the north and south, it has more potential to ease political frustration. However, it would be important to establish mechanisms that would ensure equality for all citizens under the law regardless of what state they live in, and the government must work to actively enforce what they create. The Nigerian government must develop a coherent strategy that focuses on not just ending the conflict, but transforming it to make positive, lasting impacts on society.

**Conflict Regulation Potential:** *Internal Limiting Factors:* The high levels of violence and destruction in the conflict has the potential to wear down the drive of both parties to continue fighting as these extreme conditions are not sustainable in the long run. Boko Haram needs a constituency to recruit from, and the government needs to maintain the size of the state to remain in power. These needs could cause the parties to search for a solution. However, Boko Haram hasn't had a problem with sacrificing its own people, so it's hard to tell when a tipping point will be reached. The increasing factionalization within Boko Haram could also limit their capacity for organized violence and therefore can help de-escalate the conflict.

*External Limiting Factors:* Boko Haram has been under watch by the international community due to the extreme violence incurred and especially due to the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. The Nigerian government has also been under international scrutiny for not handling the conflict effectively and for alleged human rights violations. The international community by way of

entities like the UN and dominant powers such as the US has the potential to play a role in mitigating the conflict and carrying out a solution. Additionally, because Boko Haram has spilled over Nigeria's northeastern borders, the surrounding states have a large stake in the conflict and could also work to negotiate and uphold a solution.

*Interested or neutral third parties:* To help resolve the immense conflict involving Boko Haram and Nigeria's government, the international community will have to play a role as the third side. An international human rights watchdog group could be assigned to monitor the Nigerian government as a whistleblower, ensuring that money is being used by government officials for their designated purposes only. A representative from the UN can mediate the beginning dialogues between members of the Nigerian government and Boko Haram. Local nongovernmental organizations can also play a significant role in addressing the needs of survivors, such as counseling and economic recovery.

*Techniques of conflict management:* The initial talks mediated by the UN representative should aim to lead to an agreement accepted by both the Nigerian government and Boko Haram, granting the needs of each side by focusing on their common interests of political, economic, and religious security. A committee of members from both sides should be created after an agreement is made to ensure that the agreement is upheld. Furthermore, the agreement should be broken down into concrete aims, so that large general requirements such as anti-government corruption can be quantifiable. Concrete action such as delivering government expense reports to the committee monthly, to make sure money is going where it is designated for, can be implemented. In viewing the Boko Haram conflict with a conflict transformation lens, these



techniques of conflict management can be used to ensure that the new structures are more just and enduring.

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