Jamestown Foundation's Jacob Zenn on Boko Haram

DAN BYMAN: Hello. I’m Dan Byman, the lead faculty member for this class. In the discussion boards, a number of you indicated a strong interest in Africa, and in learning more about Boko Haram, in particular. This is a group that is not well-known by many in the United States, and we’re thrilled that today we have Jacob Zenn, who is an expert on common violent extremism in Nigeria, and an expert on Boko Haram, here to join us. Among his many accomplishments, I will note that Jacob is an alum of Georgetown University.

So, Jacob, let’s begin. Where did Boko Haram come from?

JACOB ZENN: Well, most people would trace the start of Boko Haram to 2002. But I really think it emerges out of the Saudi Arabia-Iranian split. And I know that’s taking it far from Nigeria, but essentially after the Iranian revolution in 1979, many Nigerians were influenced by what happened in Iran.

At that time, Saudi Arabia, to offset Iranian influence in Nigeria, began supporting Salafists institutions in Nigeria, which successfully offset the influence of Iran. Among those Salafist institutions, various sects began to emerge that deviated from even what we would call traditional or mainstream Salafism. And one of those groups is what became Boko Haram in 2002.

And really from 2002 to 2009, Boko Haram was engaged in Dawa, or preaching, encouraging its followers to abandon Western education, Western civilization, English language. And this was rejected actually, by most organizations, and it came to a point where this Boko Haram group cannot exist any further in Nigeria without confronting the state. And there was a major clash in 2009 with the government.

And after that, Boko Haram shifted to the jihad, which is why Boko Haram’s real name is Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’Awati Wal-Jihad, or preaching, and Jihad. And since 2009, it’s been an all-out confrontation militarily with the Nigerian government and its religious rivals.

DAN BYMAN: Let me pick up on the name. It’s usually described very simply as Boko Haram in the Western press. What does that mean? You just indicated that might not be the best name for it. So tell me about how to think about this group.

JACOB ZENN: In fact, Boko Haram has said time and time again, that our name is not Boko Haram. And if you call us Boko Haram, we will kill you. Sometimes what you see is that people claim to be members of Boko Haram and try to negotiate with the government, but once they say, I come from Boko Haram, you know that they’re false. Any real Boko Haram member will
call it Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad.

However, Boko Haram is a name that locals called Boko Haram as early as 2002 because it means something along the lines of books or Western education are prohibited, or haram. And that is what local people perceived this group to be about. And originally it didn't even really have a name. The leader was Mohammed Yusuf. He called his followers the Yusufyya. Some people called it Ahl ah Sunnah wal-Jama'ah. And others called it the Nigerian Taliban.

But Boko Haram is the name that has stuck, both locally and internationally. And it refers to the perception that this group is against Western education, and rightfully so.

DAN BYMAN: Is that what it's really about-- Western education? What does this group want?

JACOB ZENN: I think Western education is an oversimplification when we talk about, it doesn't want that. In fact, what I think Boko Haram really wants-- when it talks about wanting an Islamic state, which is what it says-- is a return to the pre-colonial era. Because Boko Haram exists in mostly Borno state of northeastern Nigeria, which before the colonial era was part of a very large empire that expanded to all the way to southern Libya.

It was with the redrawing of borders that this great Kanem-Bornu Empire was split into Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and northeastern Nigeria. And what happened to the people of Borno was that the political power shifted from their area to Abuja in Nigeria. Economic power gradually shifted to the ports in Lagos, especially with the oil industry. Religious power shifted to the northwestern elites in areas like Sokoto, where there used to be another caliphate. And Borno was left with not much political power, not many economic resources, especially when you look at ecology.

So what I see their leaders as saying is, let's go back to how was 150 years ago when Arabic was the main language and religious scholars were prized, and we had a great empire. Let's try to recreate that. Of course, this is not a modernist movement, and going into the past has a lot of contradictions. And this is what other religious and political leaders point out about the fatal flaw in the Boko Haram ideology.

DAN BYMAN: So how does Boko Haram try to get what it wants? What are its strategies? What are its tactics?

JACOB ZENN: Well, initially its strategy was to preach and explain to people what it was about. And it was able to attract people, ranging from university students to poor beggar students on the streets, called Almajiri, or migrant students, who only learn religious studies, and therefore are potentially vulnerable to a group like Boko Haram, which claims a religious purification model.

However today, Boko Haram is really strictly a violent group that will stop at nothing to achieve its goals of recreating that sort of 19th century and pre-19th century caliphate. And it uses
methods, most recently as kidnapping hundreds of young boys, and saying that they must join the group, or else if they do not, then they are deserving of being killed because they're rejecting the jihad, which is right.

Similarly, they're kidnapping a bunch of women who presumably are becoming forced marriages. And presumably their children will be forced to be part of this Boko Haram group. And this is what is the Chibok kidnapping, which made the media. But it has also combined with Al Qaeda and Islamic maghreb elements, particularly Nigerian members, who formed a faction of Boko Haram called Ansaru, or Ansaril Muslimina fi Biladis Sudan, are supporters of the Muslims in black Africa.

And this group has brought kidnapping to Nigeria and Cameroon, which has got them millions of dollars for the group. In addition to the way that it steals money when it raids communities, the way that it steals weapons when it raids barracks, steals cows, robs banks, in addition to other funding sources.

DAN BYMAN: In terms of how it opposes the Nigerian government or fights its enemies, obviously the kidnapping's got a lot of attention. You've mentioned some of the efforts to raise money through various illicit means. Are there tactics and methods we should be talking about that aren't getting attention here?

JACOB ZENN: I think one of the tactics that may not get as much attention as it should, is the way that Boko Haram finds infiltrators within the government. One way that it does this is through maybe government members who sympathize. But increasingly I think what you see is Boko Haram sending text messages to government officials, or pamphlets going door-to-door warning that if you do not let us cross the border with our weapons, we will kill you or your family.

And I think this is one way that Boko Haram has been able to infiltrate the government to carry out some of its major attacks, particularly on prisons, heavily guarded military barracks, or even facilities like the UN headquarters. So I think that's something to be concerned about, in addition to the kidnappings, which I think are also a major concern because this is how the group is now getting millions of dollars.

DAN BYMAN: You mentioned that the Ansaru are linked to Al-Qaeda, the Islamic maghreb. Should we be thinking about Boko Haram as part of Al-Qaeda?

JACOB ZENN: I think, I actually think there should be a very subtle, fine line between what is insurgency in Nigeria, and what I would call terrorism in Nigeria. Boko Haram is somewhat of a grassroots movement, for these reasons I mentioned about recreating the caliphate, that looked out and has gotten weapons from Libya, for example, through AQIM, Al Qaeda Islamic maghreb networks.

But really at the end of the day, I think there are deep-seated grievances in northeast Nigeria,
which have fed Boko Haram. So while it will take help from any militant group that it can, there are some underlying grievances. But what has happened in mostly in northwestern Nigeria in states like Kaduna, where the Muslim Christian communities meet, or the capital Abuja is largely terrorism. And this is mostly where we've seen sporadic but very high impact bombings that are very typical of the Al-Qaeda mold-- suicide bombings, vehicle bombings.

And this, I think, is where we can talk about AQIM outside movement blending into Nigeria, as AQ has tried to do in other contexts. But Boko Haram is somewhat separate. It's more of a local movement that has attracted what it has been able to from abroad to strengthen its insurgency there.

DAN BYMAN: Looking at the nature in government, they seem remarkably ineffective actually in fighting Boko Haram. This problem seems to have grown despite the wealth of Nigeria. What are the problems that the government has had? Why hasn't it been able to stop Boko Haram?

JACOB ZENN: I think there are a number of things that Nigeria could do better. For one, is messaging. There are often mixed messages coming from the government about them crushing Boko Haram in a few months, to freeing the school girls from Chibok, and I think this creates some confusion amongst the public about how they should unite around this. I think this lack of consistency has not been particularly helpful.

And sometimes the government may be speaking to an international audience, and sometimes to a domestic audience, and people don't know who the messages are for. In addition, there needs to be greater regional coordination. Boko Haram is shifting between Borno state Nigeria to Cameroon, coming back, funneling weapons through Chad. And until Nigeria can leverage its regional influence to create at least a sub-regional if not full West African commitment towards tackling Boko Haram, then the group will continue to exploit these cleavages between states in the region.

And in addition, it's important for Nigeria to improve its understanding of the sociocultural environment in civil military relations to prevent those people who are caught, such as innocent bystanders in the fighting, from them then joining the insurgency if they perceive the government force to be disproportionate. So these are some areas that the government is likely going to continue to work on and needs to improve.

DAN BYMAN: Looking to the United States, or more broadly, the international community, are there ways that outside governments could help?

JACOB ZENN: I think there are some key ways. For one, to the extent that Boko Haram has benefited from funding from groups like AQIM, as well as potential sponsors, religiously motivated sponsors, or ideologically motivated sponsors, from Africa, the Persian Gulf, or elsewhere, I do think international intelligence on funding, laundering could help Nigeria to better cut Boko Haram's links to sponsors from abroad. I think that's probably the most crucial way.
And then, you know, a country like the U.S. that has been experiencing counterinsurgency for over a decade, likely has some important lessons that Nigeria could learn from the insurgency that Nigeria is experiencing now, that can be imparted in a mutually-beneficial fashion. In addition to potential technologies, such as satellite imaging to detect where Boko Haram camps are. And that's really for the military people to discuss among each other.

DAN BYMAN: Jacob, thank you very much.

JACOB ZENN: It was my pleasure to discuss this important pressing issue with you today.