



**Virginia Comolli.** *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency.* London: Hurst & Company, 2018. Maps. 208 pp. \$19.50, paper, ISBN 978-1-84904-661-9.

**Reviewed by** Michael Cserkits (University of Vienna)

**Published on** H-Africa (September, 2021)

**Commissioned by** Dawne Y. Curry (University of Nebraska-Lincoln)

In her current work about the genesis and development of Boko Haram, Virginia Comolli presents a comprehensive look at a complex problem aimed to design lasting ramifications and solutions. Unfortunately, the book does not provide the latter. The author makes two assumptions regarding the context: First, and most striking, she looks at the problem from a designated (but unspoken) securitization perspective. Second, she assumes a security-development nexus in Nigeria, with Boko Haram viewed more as a symptom rather than a cause, which perfectly fits most postcolonial (and neo-imperial) discourses. She takes her presuppositions for granted. But Comolli also presents a clear statement regarding her caveats in dealing with a terroristic group, especially the sensitivity of the topic and the connected area of anonymity of her informants, at the expense that in most parts of the book the reader simply has to believe her authority with no chance to reproduce her conclusions.

Following the introduction, the author turns to the "Just War" aspect in the struggle against Boko Haram, a fact that would—if stringently declined—alter the whole setting of securitization. Unfortunately, the "Just War" aspect is mentioned only once in the book and therefore irritates the reader more than serves as an alternative approach in dealing with Boko Haram. Further, in

her overview of Islamic movements in her discussion of western Africa, some of her conclusions are too simple, like the statement that more radical elements had been introduced in the area by the Wahhabi influence from El Hadji Jibril bin Umar. Critique on this explanation was already issued by Robert Launey in 1992 but was not incorporated by Comolli, a setback, as Launey's source can be considered valuable for her research.[1] More obvious is the misinterpretation of a possible comparison of Sufism and Wahhabism, which are according to contemporary Islamic theology studies (like Rüdiger Lohlker's *Die Salafisten: Der Aufstand der Frommen, Saudi-Arabien und der Islam* [2017]), totally incomparable. On the other hand, the representation and argumentation line regarding the other, mostly political, roots and relationships as well as dependencies of Islam in Nigeria are solid and easy to understand. The first third of the book is inconsistent in terms of quality. Especially in the political and historical analyses, thoroughly researched and well-written parts will capture the reader, alone by the way this information is presented. But then some swift changes in Comolli's argumentation lose the essence of the chapters, leaving the "what now?" question unanswered.

The author—throughout the whole book—misuses the terms "operational" and "tactical"

level, or at least offers the reader no reasonable explanation of her understanding of the terms. Within the military, the "operational level" is clearly defined as the level above the tactical level that organizes and coordinates different services (land, air, sea, special forces, space, and cyber) and is in constant cooperation/collaboration with the military-strategic and tactical level. How far Boko Haram possesses such a level is not comprehensible. Most of her argumentation comes from two to three academic sources, with Roman Loimeier, who published an article about this topic in 2012, being the most often cited on several pages.[2] This is, in my opinion, the weakest part of the book, as it feels more like a content summary than original work.

The author does offer a good description of the origins of Boko Haram but unfortunately leaves us with no meta-theory (for example, alternative societal models or semi-state-building approaches) and stays on a pure descriptive level without delving into theoretical analysis. Therefore, her solid description of the initial drive of Boko Haram as a semi-social organization and an alternative source of stability is left untackled. Her statements about suicide bombers as the method par excellence of an asymmetric thread are not comprehensibly explained. Suicide bombing is but just one of the many tools asymmetric warfare has to deal with, beside the fact that on an abstract level all wars are more or less asymmetric (as the word just states that one side has significantly less or more power than the other). The author has fallen into the "asymmetric trap" that most scholars not familiar with the military and its terminology do. Her misuse of military terms is clearly seen on page 106 when she labels RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades) as sophisticated weapons, which they are not, as their use needs no proper training or knowledge. Such minor setbacks may not be significant for the academic scholar, but they make the informed military reader—or those with a background to judge Comolli's facts in a more proper manner—uncomfortable when going

over well-researched parts of the book and then stumble over exaggerations that could have been prevented with a little more digging into the matter.

My overall impression of the book is that it is responsibly researched and written but the target audience is not the academic scholar who is looking for new approaches or results but rather the interested policymaker or non-academic reader who is looking for a condensed and compressed work about Boko Haram. Her initial stated goal, to design lasting and comprehensive solutions, is not reached. She often mentions but does not explain cultural, ethnic, and religious ties between Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria in terms of Boko Haram's abuses in these given contexts. Her conclusion, that the military per se is not a good tool to work among civilians, is not understandable either, as experiences from counterinsurgencies, their failures, backlashes, and restructuring have been available since the 2004 invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. To sum up, Comolli has done thorough research on the policy level and in certain aspects in the historical field, but her book leaves us with no clear answer or new approaches in how to deal with Boko Haram. A more specific discussion with a detailed focus on Nigeria can be found in Edlyne Anugwom's work, *The Boko Harm Insurgence in Nigeria: Perspectives from Within* (2019).

#### Notes

[1]. Robert Launey, *Beyond the Stream: Islam and Society in a West African Town* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 82.

[2]. Roman Loimeier, "Boko Haram: The Development of a Militant Religious Movement in Nigeria," *Afrika Spectrum* 47, nos. 2-3 (2012): 137-56.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-africa>

**Citation:** Michael Cserkits. Review of Comolli, Virginia. *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. September, 2021.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56689>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.