



# Interrogating Boko Haram Studies: Where *art* the evidence?

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This essay investigates the problems and challenges of Boko Haram studies locally and globally, with wider implications and contributions to the debates on critical terrorism studies. It investigates the pattern, direction, trends, and dimensionality of Boko Haram Studies – who is researching the subject, where are they located, the sources of the data on the subject, as well as the implications of these realities on knowledge production in general. The author highlights the collaborative efforts by the African Leadership Centre and the NEEM Foundation to address some of these deficits.

Most critical theories on political violence look at the methodologies, theories, legislations, politics, and industries built around terrorism. *Critical Terrorism Studies at Ten: Contributions, Cases and Future-Challenges*<sup>2</sup> includes a range of literature on these issues. There are those who advocate *de-exceptionalising* terrorism as a distinct form of political violence.<sup>3</sup> The literature often overlooks the issues of data quality, availability, and relevance in terrorism research, particularly in studies about Boko Haram. Related to the aforementioned issues are the epistemology, quality, and characteristics of the data used in the framing of terrorist studies by

scholars in the global south, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite its conventional categorisation as a low-intensity conflict, activities by Boko Haram have attained such notoriety that the group is now considered among some of the most dangerous in the world. This has made the organisation a dominant subject of focus among conflict and security scholars and media reports in Nigeria and Africa. From 2009 till date, there has been a steep rise in publications by Nigerian academics on Boko Haram themes and topics. This is reflected in the two major indexed databases of scholarly publications – Scopus and Web of Science. Fig. 1 below contains a line chart showing publication production trends on the theme in the two databases relative to records of Boko Haram attacks in the same time frame of reference (2009-2021). A query of Scopus abstracts, keywords, and titles from 2009 to November 20, 2021, generated a result of 504 journal articles published on Boko Haram globally. There were 416 Boko Haram articles indexed in the Web of Science database.

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<sup>2</sup> Jackson, R., Toros, H., Jarvis, L., & Heath-Kelly, C. (Eds.) (2020). *Critical terrorism studies at ten: Contributions, cases and future challenges*. Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> Schädel, A., & Giessmann, H. J. (2020). De-Exceptionalizing the Terrorist Phenomenon: Lessons and Concepts from Conflict Prevention and Transformation. In Schmid, Alex P. (Ed.), *Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness* (75-108). ICCT, DOI: 10.19165/2020.6.01

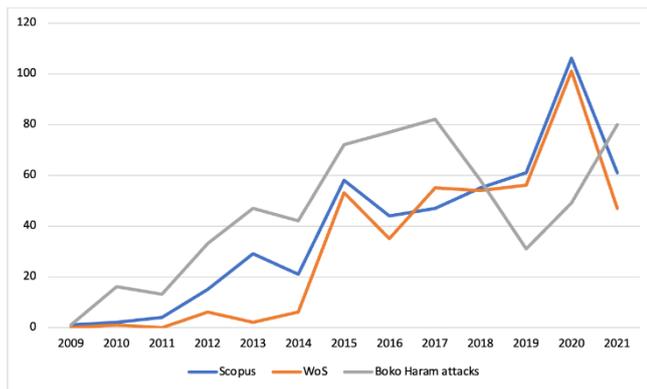


Fig. 1. Line Chart of Journal articles on “Boko Haram” in Scopus and Web of Science relative to Boko Haram attacks between 2009 and 2021 (November 20).<sup>4</sup>

A careful look at the trend in the line chart shows a relative corresponding relationship between the articles produced and the number of Boko Haram attacks. Although this might be coincidental, care must be taken not to infer causation or correlation between these factors. However, it is not out of place to opine that the ascendancy of the group’s attacks is probably commensurate with the rise in scholarly interest in the subject. This is plausible given that most of the most cited articles in the group are by authors from Nigeria.

From the chart, publications gradually increased between 2009 and 2010, then dipped between 2010 and 2011; there was an increase between 2011-2013. This trend is noticeable in the number of Boko Haram attacks within the specified years. There was a dip in the trend of publications on the subject in 2013 and a rise between 2014 and 2015 (the year of the Chibok girls’ abduction and the #BringBackOurGirls campaigns). The same is true for the trend line of Boko Haram attacks. On the one hand, this pattern similarity between scholarly publications and events partly demonstrates a research pattern that is responsive to real social issues and events; on the other hand, it probably reflects publication opportunism. This is too difficult to judge since social science studies are mainly about events in people’s lives.

An examination of the studies conducted on the group shows some interesting facts which resonate with the broader social science research and studies on the continent. From the analysis of the results of Boko Haram studies as indexed by Scopus between 2009 and 2021, the leading authors on the subject are Nigerians (See Fig. 2). This is unsurprising since Nigeria is the

primary location of Boko Haram activities. Nearly all those who researched this group are not from the communities, and they are most likely alien to the customs, language, religion, and traditions of members of the group and their victims. The top institutional affiliations on the subject between 2009 and 2021 are primarily based in Southern Nigeria or outside of Nigeria. The voices of scholars, native and resident, from the affected region of Boko Haram are barely noticeable. Local scholars are better suited to understand the complexities of their given experiences and social area against the background of their familiarity with the culture, language and worldview that impacted the emergence of different groups within their communities. Their contributions could have immeasurably benefited the broader Boko Haram narratives and discourses.

Between 2011 and 2021, Boko Haram attacks have led to over 58,000 deaths in the northeast region of Nigeria.<sup>5</sup> The insurgency caused the displacement of nearly 2.4 million people in the Lake Chad Basin.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore surprising that over 43 institutions of higher learning and research in the region are virtually missing in research studies on the group and its impacts. As revealed in the analysed data, institutions in the entire northern region of Nigeria, where the activities of Boko Haram are more prevalent, have very little representation in Boko Haram studies. The most productive Nigerian institutions on Boko Haram studies are based outside of the region.

Although the authors of these works are predominantly from Nigerian universities (see Fig. 2), none of these institutions houses a robust data repository on Boko Haram. Most of the popular databases used by local researchers on the subject are managed and funded fully or partially by institutions outside the country. Databases such as ACLED, Global Terrorism Database, Nigeria Watch, and Nigeria Security Tracker are mainly tallying portals of conflict events, activities, and attacks by terror groups (including Boko Haram). There is, therefore, a need for more open-access platforms where local researchers can access, archive, and store primary and secondary research data as well as local knowledge materials on the subject. These systems should also make provision for some soft analytical materials with local significance in the forms of policy briefs, infographic charts, etc., for the media and policymakers.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.elsevier.com/products/scopus>

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1197570/deaths-caused-by-boko-haram-in-nigeria/>

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/nigeria-emergency.html>

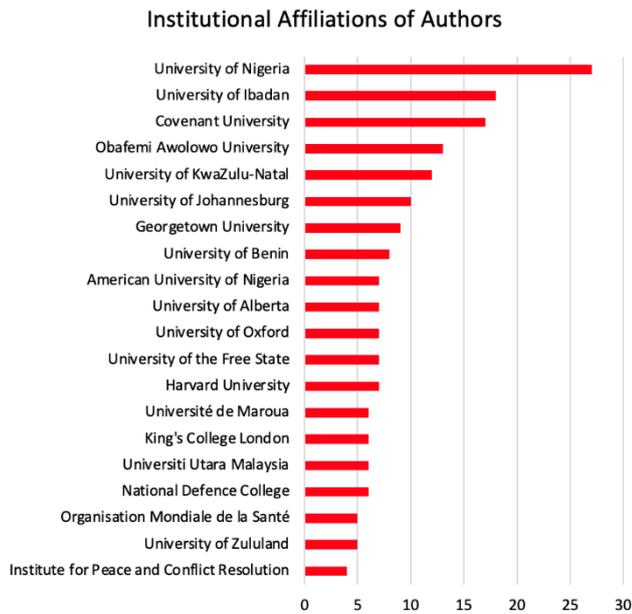


Fig. 2: Top 20 institutional affiliations of authors (Scopus)

The most cited paper on the subject (according to Scopus) is an early open-access article by Abimbola Adesoji, which historicises and documents the emergence of Boko Haram as well as its link to Islamic revivalism and fundamentalism in Nigeria.<sup>7</sup> It is one of the earliest studies of the group, published in 2010. The novelty and the background pretext helped to introduce and unpack a new group to the outside world. The author was perhaps one of those who identified and introduced economic factors as a contributor to the emergence of this group. Following this pattern, Roman Loimeier offers a historical perspective, tracing the social, political generational dynamics of the movement against the backdrop of the 'larger field of northern Nigerian radial Islam'.<sup>8</sup> A relatively earlier work by Freedom Onuoha also examined the historical

development of the group, highlighting the impact and implication of the group's activities. The work was largely explanatory, in line with most of the early published works.<sup>9</sup> Other works prescribed how the Nigerian state should respond to the activities of the sect.<sup>10,11</sup>

These early works adopted a more explanatory approach to researching Boko Haram; they provide largely historical contexts and parallels towards an understanding of the group and its emergence. The conclusions reached by some of the works were scarcely derived from primary or secondary data - qualitative or quantitative. Theoretical foregrounding and modelling have barely been attempted; this trend permeates Boko Haram studies, especially by local scholars. For instance, Abeebe Salaam proposed some probable risk factors as responsible for Boko Haram insurgency, advocating that their activities cannot be solely blamed on religious fundamentalism. The factors highlighted include "poverty, endemic corruption, mass illiteracy, socio-political marginalisation and mass unemployment".<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that despite the author mentioning the "Risk factors model" in a section of the paper, no model was identified or used in the work. The work focuses more on the narrative(s) of the group with personal suggestions on how to tackle the group's menace. The work would have been served well if empirical and theoretical instruments supported these to lend credence to the claims made. This work is also largely historical, as acknowledged by the author.

Apart from historical narratives, the bulk of the studies on Boko Haram described activities of the group, its implications and impacts, its relations to other international terror groups and radical extremism, as well as government response and interventions.<sup>13,14,15,16</sup> These theory and methodological deficits have significant influences on the quality of the research undertaken by Nigerian scholars on the group. There

<sup>7</sup> Adesoji, A. (2010). The Boko Haram uprising and Islamic revivalism in Nigeria. *Africa spectrum*, 45(2), 95-108.

<sup>8</sup> Loimeier, R. (2012). Boko Haram: The development of a militant religious movement in Nigeria. *Africa spectrum*, 47(2-3), 137-155.

<sup>9</sup> Onuoha, F. C. (2010). The Islamist challenge: Nigeria's Boko Haram crisis explained. *African security review*, 19(2), 54-67.

<sup>10</sup> Adesoji, A. O. (2011). Between Maitatsine and Boko Haram: Islamic fundamentalism and the response of the Nigerian state. *Africa today*, 57(4), 99-119.

<sup>11</sup> Aghedo, I., & Osumah, O. (2012). The Boko Haram uprising: how should Nigeria respond? *Third world quarterly*, 33(5), 853-869.

<sup>12</sup> Salaam, A. O. (2012). Boko Haram: beyond religious fanaticism. *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 7(2), 147-162.

<sup>13</sup> Agbiboa, D. (2013). The ongoing campaign of terror in Nigeria: Boko Haram versus the state. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 2(3).

<sup>14</sup> Alao, A. (2013). Islamic radicalisation and violent extremism in Nigeria. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 13(2), 127-147.

<sup>15</sup> Idowu, A. A. (2013). Security laws and challenges in Nigeria: The Boko Haram insurgency. *Journal of Applied Security Research*, 8(1), 118-134.

<sup>16</sup> Onapajo, H., Uzodike, U. O., & Whetho, A. (2012). Boko Haram terrorism in Nigeria: The international dimension. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 19(3), 337-357.

are few theorisation, conceptualisation, and data-driven studies on Boko Haram. The article by Suranjan Weeraratne was among the first to theorise the group clearly.<sup>17</sup> There are pockets of research in the collection of Boko Haram studies by Nigerian scholars, including the work of Abiodun Alao, which dwells extensively on comprehensive focus group discussions of religious radicalisation and violence with participants cutting across some capital cities in Nigeria, including Lagos, Ibadan/Ife, Abuja, Jos, Kano, and Maiduguri.<sup>18</sup> However, these were done in 2008, prior to the emergence of the Boko Haram Group.

Existing articles and works on Boko Haram are more narrative in nature. The irreproducibility of the studies and the opacity of the research methods raise a big question mark on the validity of some of the claims. Although historical studies are relevant to the social sciences, the veracity and verifiability of some of the positions advanced by such studies will most assuredly rely on data. Therefore, to address the reproducibility crisis bedevilling Boko Haram studies, there is a need to push for more evidenced-based studies that can guarantee reliability rather than relying solely on the subjective interpretation of scholars who project their opinion, and very often, far away from the events sites. Although this is not limited to qualitative studies, as there are cases of p-hacking, and data fabrications in quantitative research too.<sup>19</sup>

The gulf between data and Boko Haram studies must be reconciled. This lapse may not be deliberate, given the paucity or near absence of search databases on terrorism. In general, governmental institutions have poor reporting instruments and policies thereby making data access difficult.<sup>20,21</sup> Primary data could have bridged the gap left by secondary data inaccessibility, but accessing data on Boko Haram or gathering primary data is challenging. Furthermore, where available, some of the data are not reliable.

The place of data and theory in social research cannot be overstated. Beyond the need for more robust scientific knowledge of the group, policy and civil society

interventions suffer from insufficient data and analytical tools. While insecurity is the most obvious impact of Boko Haram activities in the affected region, there are other impacts that are under-investigated. This includes the psychological impacts of the activities of the group on displaced persons who are victims of the crime that need to be investigated. It is not enough to study the activities of the group, their impacts on the state and the displacement of citizens without emplacing studies that will investigate and possibly benefit their victims. Victims of Boko Haram activities are rarely studied; most of the studies are about the group. The psychological impacts of the group's activities on the social and economic well-being of their victims are worth investigating.

NEEM Foundation contributed to addressing the data gaps through their Counselling on Wheels (CoW) programme between 2017 and 2019. NEEM is a Nigerian not-for-profit, non-governmental organisation established in 2017 to provide psychosocial services, mental health interventions, and peacebuilding initiatives combined with interdisciplinary research in communities affected by the Boko Haram conflict with the longer-term aim of preventing and countering radicalisation and violent extremism.<sup>22</sup> During the programme period, NEEM researchers and counsellors collected pre-intervention and post-intervention data alongside demographic data. They used psychometric questionnaires developed in-house or adapted from existing instruments including a Vulnerability to Violent Extremism Scale (VVES). A final data sample of 3,091 participants in 13 communities affected by the Boko Haram conflict across Northeast Nigeria was surveyed. This work by NEEM is a major data-focused, analytical and intervention project by a group working in Northern Nigeria and directed by Nigerians on the group and the impacts of their activities on their victims.

To solve the problem of data archive, analysis and accessibility for open research, NEEM entered a partnership with the African Leadership Center (ALC) at King's College London in 2019. This partnership helped address this problem and researchers can

<sup>17</sup> Weeraratne, S. (2017). Theorizing the expansion of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 29(4), 610-634.

<sup>18</sup> See (Alao, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Miyakawa, T. (2020). No Raw Data, No Science: Another Possible Source of the Reproducibility Crisis. *Molecular Brain* 13(24), 1-6.

<sup>20</sup> See Lacking data, many African governments make policy in the dark [https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-](https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/05/07/lacking-data-many-african-governments-make-policy-in-the-dark)

[africa/2020/05/07/lacking-data-many-african-governments-make-policy-in-the-dark](https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/05/07/lacking-data-many-african-governments-make-policy-in-the-dark)

<sup>21</sup> See Poor data hurts African countries' ability to make good policy decisions <https://qz.com/africa/762729/poor-data-is-hurting-african-countries-ability-to-make-good-policy-decisions/>

<sup>22</sup> See Counselling on Wheels Programme Evaluation Report <https://library.neemfoundation.org.ng/reports/counselling-on-wheels-programme-evaluation-report/>

request anonymised data from the NEEM foundation research programme through the Data Laboratory of the ALC.<sup>23</sup> NEEM Foundation also partnered with the ALC and the Centre for Global Mental Health at King's College London on an evaluation report of the Counselling on Wheel (CoW) Programme, assessing the research procedures, scales, processes, and frameworks of the study. This is an open research initiative that should be encouraged to guarantee the validity and, to some extent, encourage replicability of research on the subject.<sup>24</sup> This collaboration exemplifies the vital role of academic institutions and local NGOs in researching complex socio-political issues. Through this partnership, a comprehensive academic study was conducted examining the interplay between socioeconomic factors and the insurgency in North-eastern Nigeria attributed to Boko Haram. The study reveals that although poverty can heighten susceptibility to violent extremism, the dynamics of engagement with these extremist groups vary significantly across different demographics, particularly among women and youth. It notes that specific youth groups demonstrate a lower tendency towards violence, highlighting the nuanced interaction between structural factors and individual propensities in conflict zones.

## 2. CONCLUSION

To conclude this commentary, more collaborative initiatives like the NEEM-ALC partnership must be encouraged to support data-driven, on-the-spot fieldwork conflict research. These kinds of work will advance the reliability of findings and claims - a very important feature of credible research. Data and analysis rooted in theories are what differentiates social science research from conjectural essay writing in scholarly language. Researchers, particularly those from the affected region, must adopt this data approach as their contributions are essential since they live, associate, and understand the people who are directly affected by the conflicts. A lot of them share cultural similarities with the Boko Haram operatives. Their insights will provide more credibility to the studies of the group.

<sup>23</sup> To request for the data visit the website of the ALC Data Lab: <https://alcafricandatalab.com/node/136>

<sup>24</sup> See NEEM Foundation Counselling on Wheels Programme Evaluation Report

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