**\**This transcript has been modified for the classroom\****

**What is Boko Haram?**Like other radical insurgencies, Boko Haram is fueled by poor governance, political marginalization, and its region's deepening impoverishment. However, I will also maintain that Boko Haram is also shaped by specifically Nigerian circumstances and factors.

Boko Haram may be loosely translated to mean "Western education is forbidden." That is an outsider term that they themselves never use. Instead, they call themselves "the people committed to the removal of innovation and jihad." The group's stated goal is to establish God's kingdom on earth and, through the rigid implementation of Islamic law, or sharia, deliver justice for the poor. Boko Haram's rhetorical focus on providing for the poor highlights that it is, among other things, an insurrection of the poor against the rich within an Islamic context. But it has published no concrete plan for economic development or poverty alleviation.

To establish a true Islamic society, the group seeks to [destroy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boko_Haram_insurgency) the secular Nigerian state and root out Western influences. It also seeks to destroy the traditional Islamic establishment in Nigeria, which, Boko Haram argues, has sold out to the secular state and is therefore no longer Islamic.

**Why was Boko Haram established?**After the reestablishment of civilian government in Nigeria in 1999, led by a Christian president, [Olusegun Obasanjo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Olusegun_Obasanjo), some Nigerians in the north renewed the periodic protests against what they saw as misgovernment, corruption, and exploitation of the poor by Nigeria's political economy controlled by a narrow elite. They chose to withdraw from the world so they would have little contact with the government. In some places, communities as large as 5,000 people set up self-sufficient habitats where they could live according to their religious dictates. These were mostly nonviolent communities, however extreme they might have been in their religious thought and interpretations.

Boko Haram grew out of one such community. In 2002, the charismatic preacher [Mohammed Yusuf](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammed_Yusuf_(Boko_Haram)) established a large community at the Railway Quarter Mosque in Borno state's capital city of Maiduguri. Like other such teachers, his support came from the grassroots. But his followers also included some individuals from the very northern Nigerian Islamic establishment that it would subsequently seek to destroy.

As did other radical reformers, Yusuf rejected modern science and Western education, in part, because they are not anchored in a literalist reading of the [Quran](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quran). In a recorded sermon at a Maiduguri mosque, he asserted that the earth is flat because the Quran and other early texts say nothing about it being round.

**How did Boko Haram turn into a violent movement?**In 2009, Yusuf's community [transformed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_Boko_Haram_uprising) into a violent movement. That year some Boko Haram members confronted the police under very murky circumstances. A fight ensued and several police officers were killed. The reaction was a police and military crackdown on the section of Maiduguri where Yusuf and his community lived. The security services killed an estimated 800 people.

Yusuf was captured by the military and turned over to the police, who almost immediately murdered him. They also murdered several members of his family. The event was covered in real-time by an Al Jazeera video that went viral on Nigerian social media.

After Yusuf's death, his followers reorganized under the leadership of his deputy, Imam [Abubakar Shekau](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abubakar_Shekau). Since 2010, the movement, with partners and accretions, has waged a bloody campaign against the secular state. The Council on Foreign Relations' [Nigeria Security Tracker](http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483) estimates that Boko Haram has killed almost 11,000 people and that there have been 25,000 people killed in the fighting between Boko Haram and the Nigerian state.

Boko Haram singles out for killing soldiers, police, and government officials whenever it can. It also kills Muslims associated with the secular government who, it maintains, are no longer Muslims but infidels who, under sharia, deserve to die. While its killing of Christians has been widely publicized, estimates are that about two-thirds of its victims have been Muslims.

**Why Nigeria?**Despite Nigeria's oil wealth, poverty has been getting worse over the past decade in the Muslim north while parts of the south are booming. The northern textile industry has collapsed, cross-border trade has declined, desertification is displacing cattle herders, and agriculture cannot support the huge increase in population. The social statistics in the north are significantly worse than in the south. One example: female literacy in any language in the north is about 20 percent; in the south it is in the high 80s.

Further, faith matters. Nigeria is divided more or less evenly between Islam and Christianity. Twelve of the 36 states, all in the north, have full or partial Sharia or Islamic law. From a Western perspective, Nigerians, both Christians and Muslims, are highly religious. Almost everybody in what Westerners would regard as secular circumstances uses a faith vocabulary. Causation of events, big or small, public or private, is routinely ascribed to divine intervention or the willful lack thereof.

Christians and Muslims in Nigeria commonly reject as ungodly the Western concept of separation of the religious and secular spheres of life. Christians are somewhat more tolerant of Western-style secularism than Muslims are. But recent legislation criminalizing gays and gay activity was highly popular among both Christians and Muslims. Boko Haram insurgents and other protest movements draw on this deep-seated religiosity. In the north there is no vocabulary of social protest other than the Islamic.

**Who is Abubakar Shekau?**Little is known about the biography of Abubakar Shekau, usually identified from his videos as the most prominent Boko Haram leader. Estimates of his age run from 35 to 45. It is unclear whether he was born in Nigeria or in Niger. He has multiple wives, including widows of Mohammed Yusuf. He mostly communicates with the general public through video clips. In them he usually speaks Hausa, Arabic, and Kanuri, the last is the language of his ethnic group. In one of his videos, however, he speaks educated English. Recordings of his pre-2009 sermons given at Maiduguri mosques indicate that he is a persuasive speaker with excellent classical Arabic and well versed in Islamic scholarship.

The police claimed to have killed him in 2009, at the same time they murdered Mohammed Yusuf. Since then, the authorities have claimed to have killed him in various shootouts. Each time, however, Shekau has released another video, and his spokesmen have issued more than 30 statements to the Nigerian press. Nevertheless, no outsider has actually seen him since 2009.

Shekau seems to understand the propaganda value of violence. In one of his videos, he said, "I enjoy killing anyone that God commands me to kill, the way I enjoy killing chickens and rams." Boko Haram videotapes its beheadings and posts them on the web.

Shekau utterly rejects democracy as fundamentally anti-Islamic. In another video, Shekau states that, "The concept of government of the people, by the people, for the people cannot continue to exist. It shall soon, very soon, be replaced by government of Allah, by Allah, for Allah."

In common with other radicals in northern Nigeria, who are not necessarily violent, Shekau sees the modern secular state as usurping the place of God and requiring the worship of its citizens. He cites as examples the oath of allegiance and the [national anthem](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arise,_O_Compatriots). If a Muslim violates the central premise that there is no God but God, he is an infidel and an idol worshipper, the state in this case being the idol, and the penalty for idol worship under sharia is death. This is true for those Muslims who participate in state activities, such as attendance at secular schools. So Muslim students at secular schools merit death if male or sale into slavery if female, which is what Shekau has said was the fate of the [Chibok schoolgirls](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chibok_schoolgirls_kidnapping).

It is important here to stress that Shekau is not a [9/11](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_11_attacks) [Osama bin Laden](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Osama_bin_Laden) figure, directing Boko Haram centralized attacks from a cave. Shekau's authority over Boko Haram elements, beyond the original followers of Mohammed Yusuf, appears absent or incomplete. Other jihadist groups, as well as offshoots or splinters of Boko Haram, have appeared in several places across northern Nigeria that do not appear to be under his command and control, even if they use his rhetoric and share his goals. Criminal gangs also put themselves under the Boko Haram umbrella, but obviously not its authority.

**How much support does Boko Haram and other radical jihadist groups have?**   
The government line is that they have none. Nevertheless, estimates of Boko Haram fighters range from 5,000 to 50,000, and the persistence of the jihadist insurgency since 2009 indicates to me that it has some popular support. Moreover, I would like to suggest that the harsh counterterrorism policies of the Abuja government drives some popular support for, or acquiescence to, Boko Haram.

President Goodluck Jonathan [as of March 2015] has declared a state of emergency in the three northern states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. The army, the state security service, and the police have been consolidated into a joint task force, normally referred to as the JTF. The goal is to destroy Boko Haram. The JTF in some places is assisted by irregular vigilantes, called the Civilian JTF. They are not under military discipline.

There are flows of refugees and internally displaced persons fleeing Boko Haram, but also fleeing the security services. As many as 10,000 refugees have crossed into Niger, others have fled to Cameroon, and still others have stayed in Nigeria but went to other parts of the country. A credible estimate is that there are 1,500,000 internally displaced persons in northern Nigeria.

The JTF and the Civilian JTF target young men as members of Boko Haram, too often with no proof. Following Boko Haram attacks, it is common to hear stories of young men being rounded up indiscriminately. Human rights organizations and the Western press, including *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, have documented security service human rights abuses, especially extrajudicial killings. But the Nigerian government consistently asserts that allegations by human rights organizations are untrue and denies that hundreds of prisoners are dying in detention centers. It refuses to investigate credible allegations of human rights abuses.

President [Obama](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barack_Obama) raised human rights abuses with President Goodluck Jonathan when the two met in September. Secretary [Kerry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Kerry) made the same point to President Jonathan last May. These démarches appear to have had no public impact on the Nigerian government or on the behavior of the security services.

**How does Boko Haram relate to ISIS?**Atrocities associated with the [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_State_of_Iraq_and_the_Levant), as well as Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, have focused renewed attention on the relationship—if any—between terrorism and Islam, the faith of some 1.6 billion people, perhaps a quarter of the earth's population. Both ISIS and Boko Haram are coalitions that consist of many different elements. A religious vision is only one dimension. Others include alienated youth, economic depression, bad governance, and predatory states. There are criminal dimensions to both, and political figures use both to advance their particular agendas. But belief colors, if it does not always determine, the direction in which Boko Haram and ISIS move.

[Graeme Wood](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graeme_C.A._Wood) published in the March issue of *The Atlantic* an article entitled "[What ISIS Really Wants](http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/)." Here he is addressing the core associated with[Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Bakr_al-Baghdadi) and his vision of an Islamic state. Wood argues that: "The reality is that the Islamic state is Islamic. Very Islamic." He also argued that: "The religion preached by its most ardent followers derives from coherent, and even learned, interpretations of Islam." He does not argue that ISIS is Islam, but he does argue that it is a particular reading of Islam. Much of his article is concerned with an analysis of the Salafist Sunni theology that is the basis for the outlook of ISIS and Boko Haram. Salafism is characterized by the literal reading of the Quran and the earliest scriptures and the stripping away of later accretions.

Boko Haram also draws on a coherent and learned interpretation of Islamic texts, even if few other Muslims accept their reading. Yet, Boko Haram insists that it represents the only valid form of Islam, a claim that ISIS also makes. With respect to law, punishment, and methods of execution, both ISIS and Boko Haram appear to be much influenced by 7th-century practices and, more recently, [Ibn Taymiyhah](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Taymiyyah), a 13th-century theologian originally from what is now Iraq. He is seen as one of the theological pioneers of Salafism. Boko Haram's Abubakar Shekau also invokes the memory of [Usman dan Fodio](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usman_dan_Fodio), the Salafist reformer who created in 1806 the last emirate empire in northern Nigeria before the British conquest. Hence, Boko Haram and ISIS sound similar, if not identical, and they have expressed mutual admiration. [*Editor's note: Several days after this talk, Boko Haram* [*pledged*](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31784538)*its allegiance to ISIS*.]

But there are significant differences beyond their differing geographies and circumstances. Among them is the emphasis that ISIS places on holding territory as the basis for a universal caliphate. Islam has existed in northern Nigeria for more than 1,000 years. It is difficult to imagine that Boko Haram would accept subordination to a caliphate based in the Middle East. Indeed, Abubakar Shekau has established his own Islamic state.

But its character is different from al‑Baghadi's. When Shekau says that the Nigerian town of Gwoza is part of an Islamic state, he seems to mean that it is no longer part of the secular Nigerian state, but instead is part of the greater Islamic community, without any reference to a caliphate. Al‑Baghadi's vision of a caliphate does appear to motivate certain Europeans and North Americans to go to the Middle East and fight for ISIS. By contrast, Boko Haram attracts no foreign fighters. Both ISIS and Boko Haram are authoritarian and reject compromise. But Boko Haram's leadership and structure appears much more diffuse. ISIS is clearly a Middle Eastern terrorist organization with millenarian goals espoused by some of its leaders, especially al‑Baghadi. Boko Haram more resembles a peasants' revolt that uses Islamic vocabulary and imagery.