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WHY BOKO HARAM IN NIGERIA FIGHTS WESTERN EDUCATION

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PROCEEDINGS

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

Boko Haram is a terrorist group that has killed tens of thousands of people in Nigeria, displaced millions, and infamously kidnapped nearly 300 school girls in 2014. Many of them remain missing. The name, Boko Haram, translates literally as western education is forbidden.

In this episode the author of a new paper on Boko Haram talks about her research and findings on this dangerous militant group. Madiha Afzal, a David M. Rubenstein Fellow in Foreign Policy at Brookings is the author of “‘From Western Education is Forbidden’ to the World’s Deadliest Terrorist Group: Education and Boko Haram in Nigeria”. She is interviewed by Michael O’Hanlon, a Senior Fellow and Director of Research in Foreign Policy at Brookings.

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And now, on with the interview. Here’s Michael O’Hanlon with Madiha Afzal.

O’HANLON: Thanks, Fred.

And, Madiha Afzal, my good friend, it’s really a pleasure and privilege to be talking with you today about Nigeria. So thanks for the opportunity.

AFZAL: Thanks, Mike. It’s great to be talking to you.

O'HANLON: So I want to get into the paper obviously, and we'll do that in a little bit more detail in a second, but first, maybe, if you could just summarize the big idea of the paper. And then I want to help listeners understand a little bit about your background and your expertise and how you got some of the ideas for this research from field work you had done in Pakistan, which of course is closer to your original field of expertise and where you wrote your great recent book.

So before we get into some of that background about you and the methodologies you've developed over the years, why don't you just give us a sentence or two to summarize the topic and the main finding of the work on Nigeria that we're focusing on today.

AFZAL: Sure. So the main topic is looking at the link between education and Boko Haram in Nigeria. And the top line finding, if you will, is that education is fundamental to Boko Haram's ideology. I mean Boko Haram literally translates to Western education is forbidden. And it was really fundamental to how they recruited, how they appeal to the population. And the rise of Boko Haram was not in a vacuum. It really exploited grievances that already existed in Nigeria's north, which is mostly Muslim, which is poor, has really poor educational outcomes, especially relative to its south. These grievances were already there and they were against the Nigerian state, the post-colonial, federally imposed, Westernized system of education. And Boko Haram capitalized on grievances that already existed and used them to then recruit and to appeal to the population in which it operated and became such a force.

O'HANLON: And this is mostly northeast Nigeria, right? Not just the north in general but the northeast in particular? Is that the region you studied and also did your field research in?

AFZAL: Yes. So I did my field research actually in Abuja, but we were able to bring people from the northeast down to meet with me. It is actually just not feasible, even at this point in time, to go to the northeast for many researchers, just because of security concerns. But Boko Haram certainly did operate in Nigeria's northeast. The grievances are sort of fundamental to the whole northern region. It arose in the northeast at least partly because the founder was from the northeast, Mohammed Yusuf. He lived in Borno State and that's where he established his base. And the town that he established his base in called Maiduguri.

O'HANLON: Great. We'll come back to Yusuf and Boko Haram in a few minutes. But first I wanted to give the listeners a chance to know a little bit more about you and also the way in which you got into this line of work. So your background is about Pakistan and from Pakistan. Could you just say a word about that and then say a word about the main findings of your excellent book in Pakistan, which came out I think about three years ago now?

AFZAL: So I am originally from Pakistan. I grew up mainly there, though a little bit all over. So I grew up in Canada and in the U.S. as well. And my bulk of my post (inaudible) life, if you will, were spent doing research of the roots of extremism in Pakistan. Essentially I am an economist by training, so I was doing research at the very intersection of political economy and development in South Asia, mainly in

Pakistan, a little bit in India as well. And it was right about the time where it became impossible to ignore the rise of terrorism and extremism in Pakistan. So around 2007 is when I was finishing up my Ph.D. At sort of the very cusp of me going out on the job market, this one major event happened, which made me realize that this is what I needed to focus on, and that was the assassination of Benizar Bhutto in December of 2007. And she was killed by the Taliban.

And essentially because terrorism became a problem that was inescapable, you know, my energies from then on were focused on trying to understand what the root of terrorism and extremism were. And I focused initially on looking at the question quantitatively. You know, using survey data, looking at public opinion surveys to kind of understand people's attitudes towards extremism and terrorism and how they related to things that economists were interested in, right. So education, income, social demographics. And very soon it became apparent that the relationship that I was observing between education and extremism in the data needed a deeper explanation and that had to come from field work. What are students studying in school, what do their textbooks teach them, what are the methods of schooling.

So then I set up a research program where I did a lot of field work in schools and universities in Pakistan. So this is around the year 2013, '14, '15. And, honestly, when I was doing research at that time, we would go out and interview students and sit in on classes in a school, me and couple of RAs that I had. And we would hear that there had been a terrorist attack, a bomb had gone off in the neighborhood adjacent to where we were in the City of Lahore. Things in Pakistan have changed in

terms of the terrorism problem since then, but that's sort of the time where I was doing this research and then my book came out in 2018. And I am happy to talk about some of the findings there.

O'HANLON: "Pakistan Under Siege", right? I don't want to spend too much time on Pakistan because, of course, I know people want to talk and you want to talk about Nigeria, but correct me if I'm wrong, in taking away two big lessons from the Pakistan book, which I think then set you up for the Nigeria work. And one very interesting finding was that Pakistanis are not really pro extremism in general anymore. And perhaps it's partly because extremism has, especially, five, eight, ten years ago, taken such a toll on Pakistani society itself with the Pakistani Taliban and other groups really causing not only violence and mayhem and carnage, but even a threat to the basic stability of the state. So that was, from an American point of view, despite the sadness and tragedy that produced that change, that was a welcome change in Pakistani thinking, and that's sort of the good news.

But the bad news is that more education did not necessarily make people less interested in extremism and you saw a little bit of a worrisome — almost like a second phase of Coronavirus — a little bit of a worrisome budding of greater sympathy for extremism among some of the more educated people who perhaps had maybe learned through their studies some of the injustices that had been perpetrated against Pakistan by India, in their interpretation, or by the United States, in their interpretation, and also may have felt frustration about a lack of opportunity, despite all the academic achievement that they had attained. And so ironically perhaps, for

an American trying to make sense of this, there was a greater receptivity to extremism among somewhat more educated Pakistanis than among somewhat less educated.

Are those two general findings more or less correct? Would you want to modify or correct me or embellish a little bit before we move back to Nigeria?

AFZAL: Sure. Those are two really important points that you brought up. I think one is exactly that, Pakistanis, their views on extremism and their levels of extremism essentially decreased as they experienced more terrorism. And so they turned against it. Overall if you look at the data, people don't appear to have a lot of sympathy for terrorist groups, but then when you start to look at their narrative, things start getting very worrisome. And that's why it's really important to look beyond the data at narratives. So that's the first major finding I would highlight.

And in terms of education, absolutely. So while essentially you don't see education unambiguously improve views or make people less extremist, and especially around the secondary school level, you see that education worsens views on some aspects, especially views towards the United States, favorability for the Taliban even goes up a little bit. And my explanation for those, having done field work and interviews in Pakistan in schools, as well as having read the textbooks, is that the textbooks essentially set up a framework of the world which is biased and one sided. They're expected to be memorized by rote. And these students then, when they look at terrorist propaganda or when they encounter terrorist propaganda, they find it very hard to counter it. And that's why they have more sympathy for terrorist

groups at that point in time.

Moving beyond that, though, the university level improves views. So there is some good news, even with education, but you have to move past the hump, if you will, of secondary schooling.

O'HANLON: Interesting.

So now why don't we transition back to Nigeria and maybe, to the extent that you can, explain how much of what you found about Boko Haram is similar to what you had found about Pakistan and how much is different. I just really like — I appreciate and value the comparison given your expertise. These are also both very important countries, each about 200 million people, both top 6 or 7 in the world in population, both really the bellwether in many ways for a lot of what's going on in their broader regions, and obviously in the case of Pakistan, nuclear arms as well, but in the case of Nigeria, by far and away, Africa's most populous country and also the place where Christianity and Islam really intersect in a more vivid way almost than anywhere else on the African continent.

So I'm intrigued by which parallels you would draw and where you see sharp differences, now moving the narrative back to Nigeria.

AFZAL: Yes, absolutely. And I think one of the key reasons that I moved to Nigeria from my work on Pakistan is that beyond the substantive findings of the work on Pakistan, the relationship between education and extremism is not something that we can just generalize across different contexts. I think key generalizable findings from Pakistan work is that you really need to look at the

context of the education system and extremism to understand the relationship between education and extremism in different contexts. And especially when you look at Nigeria, it is so compelling to look at the education system and how it related to Boko Haram, because it is in the very title of Boko Haram. The name says western education is forbidden. So it's almost by definition something that needs to be studied.

And, Mike, as you pointed out very eloquently, I mean I think the size of these countries and the levels of violence I think, if one thinks about Boko Haram and the continuing levels of violence. Even as recently as a couple of weeks ago, Boko Haram soldiers killed 90 Chadian soldiers. And so the extent of the violence just really makes it a compelling question and place to study this relationship.

Coming to the actual comparison of the education extremism result, if one looks at the quantitative results, you can actually see some very, very similar patterns. And I'll talk about why they emerge, but the first thing I did when I looked at this work was actually do the quantitative analysis, just because (inaudible) was coming up and the views of Boko Haram, the questions that I look at in the political opinion surveys are simple favorability questions. Do you have favorable views towards Boko Haram or not essentially. And what I was finding is that the favorability is driven almost entirely by Nigeria's northern geopolitical zone, so the northeast, northwest, and north central regions. And within those, if you start breaking up views by education level, again you see some of the same results that you see in Pakistan, which are that at the junior secondary school level, which is

grades 7 to 9 in Nigeria, very similar to the secondary school level in Pakistan, the junior secondary school level you actually see increased favorability for Boko Haram relative to the other levels of education. So, again, that kind of inverted U. There's evidence of that.

And my argument — and I came to that conclusion — but my argument is that there is some experience with the education system, having gone into the education system, that makes people in Nigeria — Nigeria's north in particular — heighten their grievances against that education system. And that's why the ideology of Boko Haram then appeals specifically to them.

O'HANLON: So, if I remember correctly from your paper, and I think I do because I just reviewed it again and it's an excellent paper, very readable. So congratulations. Some of the reasons have to do with, first of all, the sense that the north has been, in its own perception, not as favored by the Nigerian state, whether during colonial times or in the half century since, and the south, or the more Christian areas, have benefitted more from classic education and certainly from the modern Nigerian state, and therefore anything that smacks of federal policy, including an education, is going to be a little bit anathema. And then on top of that, you see at the personal level a lack of individual economic opportunity, including even for people who are well educated. So more degrees don't necessarily mean more opportunity and therefore resentments, which have already begun at this broader north versus south, Muslim versus Christian level, are then exacerbated by individual economic experience and opportunity.

Is that a fair beginning of your summary of your conclusions?

AFZAL: Yes, absolutely. I think essentially the grievances — and as I mentioned at the outset, these grievance already existed. All that Mohammed Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, and the group at large did was essentially capitalize on and operationalize these grievances.

So the first part is that Nigeria's post-Colonial, 1960 onward, federally imposed system of education was a Western system of education. But Nigeria's north pre-1960 did not have a Westernized system of education. The south did during Colonial times and so the south was already way ahead in terms of experience with that system. The north did not have the system. They, in many cases, still had Islamic schools in the Hausa language, not in English. And once the system was imposed, the grievances began and then the grievances have several levels or layers to them, if you will.

The first is that they're just seen as not representative of the north, sort of ideologically representative of the north. You know, some of the people I interviewed said for the north the textbooks seem like they're from a different culture, they don't reflect the north. And then the second is that that system of education is seen as the reason why the north has poor educational outcomes, which does make sense because it was imposed on a population that did not have any experience with it before 1960, whereas the south already had experience with it.

And post-1960 the Nigerian state essentially made those people who had experience during the Colonial times with the Islamic education system and could

speaking Hausa and were deemed, you know, literate in that system, it essentially termed them as illiterate and as having no use in the new system. So those who could read the Koran, write Arabic, but couldn't read or write in English, were just completely deemed illiterate. And Muslim scholars had no place in this new system.

The third layer is that because the educational outcomes were poor and this educational system was not really geared towards the north, this system, or this westernized system, was then seen as responsible for the lack of job opportunities, that people even with degrees, or certificates as they're called in Nigeria, even people with degrees could not get jobs just because they had a degree, they had a certificate, but they didn't really have any sort of functional knowledge or skills. And so Yusuf would have a narrative along these lines, basically saying, you know, that person got a degree, has he been able to get a job? Why don't you tear up your certificate, tear up your degree and join Boko Haram and actually have a much better life in the hereafter.

So those are some of the layers of the grievances that Boko Haram was able to exploit.

O'HANLON: Thank you.

So I want to now, as we begin to move towards the end of this conversation — although we have time for a bit more — I want to start to ask you what this means for policy. And maybe before or as you do that you can remind people a little bit — I'll give a couple of the highlights — but where we stand in the broader struggle against Boko Haram, and specifically where Nigeria stands.

And, of course, as I recall, the organization goes back now almost a dozen years. This original founder, Yusuf, was killed several years after, which probably then created opportunities for more resentment on the part of some of his followers against Nigeria. And that led, of course, to the famous school girls kidnapping and other incidents in sort of the mid-2010s, which is when Boko Haram, as I recall was at its peak of lethality. And it's not quite at that same peak anymore, which is the good news, but the bad news is it's a little bit more internationalized and there's spillover effects, as you just mentioned a few minutes ago, in Chad and other countries. And it's certainly nowhere near having been eradicated. And the toll it has taken now is measured in the tens of thousands of fatalities and literally millions of displaced people.

So it sounds to me like it's still a fairly serious policy challenge going forward, not one that we can just assume is on its gradual way out just because it's no longer on the front pages the way it was a few years ago. And, therefore, if you agree with me, that sets up the importance of your findings for policy, because I think you had some very specific recommendations in regard to educational policy as well as broader political and economic reform.

So, do you want to first of all add to anything I just put forth on the historical trend line and where we sort of are with Boko Haram today? Did I get it roughly correct? And then what does that mean for going forward for Nigeria and any friends of Nigeria, including the United States, that may want to be supportive?

AFZAL: I think that's exactly right. The thing about Boko Haram is that in

the early 2000s, you know, that's where Mohammed Yusuf sort of really established his based, he started preaching. He had sort of political buy in from Nigerian politicians. So he initially had a deal essentially with the governor of Borno State who needed Yusuf's help in getting him political support, and Yusuf in turn wanted that governor to implement Sharia more stringently in that state. You know, they fell out the year 2009. That's where the Boko Haram really took a turn for the extreme forms of violence that has espoused since under the leadership of Shekau, the group's leader since then. While the ideology remains the same, Yusuf's and Shekau's tactics were very different. And that's where Boko Haram fell out with Nigeria, the governors and the Nigerian state.

In 2015 — so Boko Haram expanded its hold on territory post-2013 and that went on until about 2015. And actually what is really fascinating is I actually saw support for Boko Haram essentially increase in the two years that it had expanded its reach and increased its control of territory. So 2014 and 2015. That decreased post-2015, and 2015 is exactly when Goodluck Jonathan, who had been the president of Nigeria, was voted out in part because of his lackluster response to Boko Harm and the insurgency, and Muhammadu Buhari, who was a former military dictator, was sworn in. And he engaged in this sort of kinetic military campaign against Boko Haram, which sort of succeeded in driving it to that border region, as you mentioned, the Lake Chad region, internationalizing the (inaudible) there, the border region with Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. And what the Nigerian military did at that time was that it has engaged in sort of kinetic action that is stunning in terms of the human rights

abuses that have been reported. So when it went into villages where Boko Haram had operated in the past, it basically decimated not just those who were suspected of being militants, but everybody. So the human rights abuses are remarkable, though I don't actually see that the northern population has increased its support for Boko Haram after those abuses. One could very well see some negative repercussions of that, especially in terms of sort of negative feelings toward the Nigerian state.

In any case, that's something I haven't seen necessarily in the data yet, but what has happened since then is that when I went to Nigeria in September of last year, the narrative that it espouses is essentially that those who don't have any education — so lack of education, or the Almajiris, beggar children, they are the ones who are educated in religious families don't have any formal education, they are the ones who go out and get recruited by Boko Haram. And the narrative does not at all deal with how the education system itself led to the conflict and the resentment in the north that has given life to Boko Haram.

So my policy conclusions from my findings are that Nigeria needs to go beyond just taking kinetic action against Boko Haram to actually addressing the north's grievance against that federal Westernized system of education. And, from all of my interviews, what comes out is that Nigeria's northern citizenry basically needs a system that will represent them better and that also both accommodate not just (inaudible) but that will actually boost their educational and employment prospects that they currently don't see as going anywhere.

And so the main policy economic outcome from my paper has to do with

dealing with the education system. But beyond that, if one especially looks at the post-COVID era and our support for partners in Africa and, in particular, in Nigeria, this is a problem that we cannot ignore, because, if anything, the violence levels are only increasing there, not decreasing.

O'HANLON: Wow, yeah, that's sobering. And I realize this gets a little bit away from the specific educational focus of your research, but just to put this in a broader Nigerian context, you mentioned Goodluck Jonathan and then his successor. Correct me if I'm wrong please, but historically Nigeria has had an informal unspoken process by which it alternates between Muslim and Christian presidents, but that sort of got interrupted in the Goodluck Jonathan period, and I think there were two straight Christian presidents. Do we see any correlation between that and the intensification of the violence from Boko Haram? Or do you think it has less to do with that sort of symbolic issue of who's in charge and much more with the actual policies of where the military campaigns happen on the ground and then economic opportunity and educational reform?

AFZAL: Sure. That's a great point. Many northern Nigerians actually saw — when Goodluck Jonathan came into power they saw sort of that alternating Muslim-Christian president pattern interrupted because Nigeria's previous president, who had been Muslim died very shortly into his tenure and then that's when Goodluck Jonathan came into power. And so that firmly increased the resentment. So that's part of it.

And Boko Haram's ideology rests on two pillars, if you will. There is one

pillar that is against all things in terms of Nigeria's democracy, it's constitution, it's national anthem, it's flag — sort of the symbols of its nationalism. So it attacks that. And then the second pillar, if you will, is that the trend that's against the education system. And so in that first kind of political pillar, that did play a role.

As the intensification of the violence post-2011, it hasn't really done anything international, obviously, beyond the immediate neighbors, and it had an international target in terms of attacking the UN headquarters in Abuja in 2011. So that again symbolizes that the uptick in its campaign had political grounding as well.

I think that's the case with all of these terrorist groups, right. You can't just look at the education system and you can't just look at the history. The story is far more complex. But I think what my work basically says is that in this case in particular, but even beyond that, you know, if you look at the education system and the relationship with extremism, there is a context specific relationship. In this case, that federally imposed system of education led to this dangerous kind of tension and conflict, but that has historical and political underpinnings and that's why it led to that sort of conflict and that sort of tension.

And so, obviously, the relationship between education and extremism is any context is sort of mediated by politics and by history and needs to be looked at in that way.

O'HANLON: So my very last question — and then thank you for this and feel free to weave any concluding thoughts in as well as answering this particular question — but when you make your recommendations, Madiha, about future

educational reforms and giving the north more of a voice and tailoring the curriculum more to economic opportunity locally, and all the other things that would hopefully reduce the sense of alienation and anger, do you expect at this juncture that actual current Boko Haram leadership and membership would be open to thinking of this as a real olive branch? Or do you think that much of that group is already so entrenched in its opposition and its use of violence that what you're really trying to do is address the next generation of would-be recruits, so that there is less fertile ground for current Boko Haram proselytizing and recruiting, and that ultimately the organization just weakens with attrition and weakens with age?

In other words, can you really convert hardcore Boko Haram members today and leaders today with this kind of a policy agenda, or are you more trying to wean the next generation away from ever joining in the first place?

AFZAL: It's very much the latter. So essentially what these results and this analysis tells you is how do we reduce support for the group in the population. Not support for the group only, but the ideology, right. So, you can kill off the group, but if the ideology, the grievances remain, another group can come along and exploit those grievances.

And so the root of extremism, you know, usually goes far deeper than just the terrorist group that is able to exploit those roots. I think the really interesting thing with the Boko Haram case is that as, you know, Mohammed Yusuf sort of expanded his reach in the early 2000s — even my interviews, journalists I met said I play football with these people who then went down to join Boko Haram. We all grew up

together. These two professors who I met from the northern area essentially told me there are many people who sympathize with Boko Haram and then went on to be Boko Haram fighters in our community. So the idea is that there was fertile ground from which he could recruit. And there were apparently reports of these exotic cars lined up outside Mohammed Yusuf's mosque compound. I've already mentioned that it appealed to people who were sort of tearing up their certificates or degrees. And it was people who were wealthy; there were these people who were very politically connected who were joining the group.

From all accounts, it seems that as the group really engaged in its very gruesome levels of violence, the support from that elite declined, if you will. But the point is that the ideological roots and the grievances still remain.

So while the current sort of very hardened Boko Haram recruits — and Boko Haram, by the way, also kidnapped a lot of people, including school girls, and forcibly recruited people. And I heard some of that from students who I met in Abuja who talked about their family members having been forcible recruits. At this point, those who are hardened Boko Haram members are a lost cause. I think what I'm trying to target is the next generation of recruits and also any sort of latent sympathy that exists in the population which could lead the group to regroup and expand again in the northeast if given a chance to do so and sort of draw from this logistical support. Essentially you want to cut off that oxygen from the group. And what gives that oxygen to the group is that extremism and that ideological sympathy in the population.

O'HANLON: Fantastic. Really, Madiha, congratulations on this important work. And I just want to say, on a personal level, because I help run this Africa Security Initiative at Brookings, and you're talking about the most populous state in Africa, and also the country where large Christian and Muslim populations come together like nowhere else on earth — there's no other country I believe that's anywhere close to Nigeria's size and scale that has roughly equal numbers of Christians and Muslims — and so it's such a bellwether for any kind of effort to try to improve these kind of relations within a country, as well as regionally. So it's just really important work and I want to congratulate you and thank you for it.

AFZAL: Thanks, Mike.

DEWS: You can find the paper on education and Boko Haram in Nigeria in our website, Brookings.edu.

The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, starting with audio engineer, Gaston Reboredo, and producer, Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press, does the book interviews and Lisette Baylor and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Finally, my thanks to Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.

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