BOKO HARAM

INSIDE NIGERIA'S UNHOLY WAR

MIKE SMITH

I.B.TAURIS

MIKE SMITH is a foreign correspondent for AFP news agency. He was AFP bureau chief for part of West Africa from 2010 to 2013 and has extensively covered the Boko Haram insurgency.

‘There is certainly an urgent need for a comprehensive yet accessible account of Boko Haram about which much is written but yet little understood. The author is eminently well qualified, especially from his connection with AFP, who have been at the forefront of reportage on the situation of northern Nigeria, to tackle this subject. The book should find a ready readership among the policy and diplomatic community as well as academics and interested lay readers.’

– Richard Reid, Professor of the History of Africa, SOAS, University of London

‘I enjoyed [this book] very much – it’s a good read. It’s [...] the best account I have read and offers a real sense of place – and crisis. Mike Smith’s book will be widely read and cited.’

– Murray Last, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology, University College London

Boko Haram

Inside Nigeria's Unholy War

Mike Smith

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When my companions passed, and my aims went awry
I was left behind among the remainder, the liars
Who say that which they do not do, and follow their own desires.

Abdullah Ibn Muhammad, brother of Usman Dan Fodio, from the *Tazyin Al-Waraqat*

It is never easy to keep secrets in Nigeria; it is just that secrets, when divulged, are tied up in many distractions.

Wole Soyinka, from *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*

List of Maps

Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without an enormous amount of help from many others. My colleagues at AFP's Lagos bureau deserve special recognition for their tireless efforts in covering a story that has only seemed to grow more horrifying by the day, and my knowledge of Nigeria and the forces underlying the insurgency was endlessly enriched by working alongside them.

Aminu Abubakar, AFP's northern Nigeria correspondent, has broken so many stories that I long ago lost count. His intelligence and insight have helped the rest of the world understand the terrible violence that has shaken his home region. He and I spent countless days and nights over bad phone lines trying to make sense out of the latest attack, and despite it all, he still managed to be the nicest guy you'll ever meet. I'm also proud to have worked with Nigerian journalists and AFP staffers Ade Obisesan, Tunde Agoi, Ola Awoniyi and photographer Pius Utomi Ekpei, along with the rest of the Lagos bureau, including our irreplaceable driver and all-around guide Hassan Jimoh, Patrick Chikwendu, Johnson Moses, Timothy Jamani, Dauda Ishola, Bola Meseda and Isaac Momoh.

Our coverage also would not have been possible without the talented non-Nigerian journalists I worked with in the bureau, including Susan Njanji, Sophie Mongalvy, Ben Simon and Cecile de Comarmond. I owe particular thanks to Sophie for reading through an earlier draft of this book and providing important feedback. I was also honoured to work alongside numerous colleagues from other news outlets, including Jon Gambrell, Sunday Alamba, Lekan Oyekanmi, Christian Purefoy, Tom Burgis, Nick Tattersall, Joe Brock, Tim Cocks, Julie Vandal and Will Ross.

Wise Nigerians willing to share their thoughts on issues facing their country provided me with the kind of perspective any foreign correspondent needs to do his or her job properly. They include Chidi Odinkalu, an anti-corruption activist who is now the head of Nigeria's National Human Rights Commission; Clement Nwankwo, whose PLAC non-governmental organisation keeps an eye on

Nigeria’s corrupt politics; Kyari Mohammed of Modibbo Adama University of Technology, who has provided astute analysis of Boko Haram; and Catholic Archbishop Matthew Kukah, who has for years served as an important voice of reason in Nigeria. I am also grateful to Murray Last for sharing his insight as well as for his important book, *The Sokoto Caliphate*.

I.B.Tauris provided me with support for this project, and I am especially grateful to Lester Crook, who commissioned the book and provided invaluable input, and Joanna Godfrey, who guided it towards publication. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Centre of African Studies at SOAS, University of London, for allowing me to work from its excellent library for the purposes of this project.

Finally, and most importantly, I want to also thank my family, especially my parents, who have supported my travels and my work while hoping that it would some day lead me back home.

While my name is on the cover, this book has in many ways been a team effort. Any and all errors, however, are completely my own.

A Note on Sources and the ‘Boko Haram’ Label

Much of the information in this book is the result of my more than three years in Nigeria between 2010 and 2013, when I was based in Lagos as bureau chief for part of West Africa for Agence France-Presse news agency. I have cited instances where I have relied on reporting from colleagues or on the work of academics. My reporting on the insurgency has included four trips to Maiduguri and a number of other visits to various parts of northern Nigeria, including Kano, Sokoto, Kaduna and Zaria.

I have decided to use the term ‘Boko Haram’ throughout the text rather than the full name of the group (Jama’atu Ahlus Sunnah Lid Da’awati Wal Jihad, or People Committed to the Prophet’s Teachings for Propagation and Jihad). I have done this because the world knows the group as Boko Haram, and Nigerians, including the security forces, continue to refer to it as such. In addition, as a result of the shadowy nature of the insurgency, several different groups or cells may in fact be operating beyond Abubakar Shekau’s faction. Boko Haram serves as a catch-all phrase encompassing the entire insurgency.

The description of what happened on the day of the UN attack in Chapter 1 is mainly based on my phone interviews with UN staffers Geoffrey Njoku and Soji Adeniyi as well as a personal account written by Vinod Alkari that was distributed to his colleagues internally. He agreed to allow me to quote from it, and I have in some cases corrected minor typos or grammatical errors that would otherwise distract the reader. I also spoke in detail with Alkari by phone. A separate, anonymous source who has seen the video surveillance footage of the attack described to me details from it, and I have also visited the site to see the layout.

I have included a select bibliography, but it is worth pointing out several books that were especially helpful. For my research for Chapter 1, the late Mervyn Hiskett’s books on Islam in West Africa and the life of Usman Dan Fodio were invaluable. Murray Last’s history of the Sokoto Caliphate also provided me with great insight on the period, and Toyin Falola and Matthew

Heaton's *A History of Nigeria* served as a useful overview along with Michael Crowder's *The Story of Nigeria*. For the section on the British conquest of northern Nigeria, I relied heavily on Frederick Lugard's papers, archived at the Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Oxford, as well as his annual reports.

I have drawn from a wide range of sources to piece together Mohammed Yusuf's rise, as specified in the endnotes, but I am particularly grateful to an academic who has carried out an extensive analysis of the Boko Haram leader's recorded sermons and speeches. The academic, to whom I spoke by phone, has asked to remain anonymous out of fears for his own safety, and I agreed to abide by his wishes.

For translations of Boko Haram videos and statements from Hausa to English, I often relied on Aminu Abubakar, AFP's correspondent in northern Nigeria who in most cases was the first journalist for an international news agency to obtain them. Aminu translated many of the videos on deadline as we worked together to prepare stories on them for our news agency and I have stuck for the most part with those original translations. Professor Abubakar Aliyu Liman of Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria worked on two translations at my request and specifically for this book: Yusuf's interrogation before his death and his 'tafsir' quoted in Chapter 2.

The vital work by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Nigeria's National Human Rights Commission led by civil society activist Chidi Odinkalu, among others, documenting alleged abuses committed by the security forces has also served as an important source, as reflected in the endnotes.

As specified in the epilogue and prologue, I interviewed Wellington Asiayei in person both in the hospital in Kano after the 2012 attacks there as well as in Warri in 2013. I also spoke by phone with Wellington in addition to speaking with his wife, his brother, his son and his doctors in Kano, India and Warri.

I repeatedly requested interviews with Nigerian government and military officials to allow them to respond to allegations and criticisms. Requests made specifically in connection with this book were not granted; however, I did carry out interviews with officials as part of my work for AFP in Nigeria. I have included details from those interviews, such as the military's denials of abuses, and relied on public statements from officials when necessary.

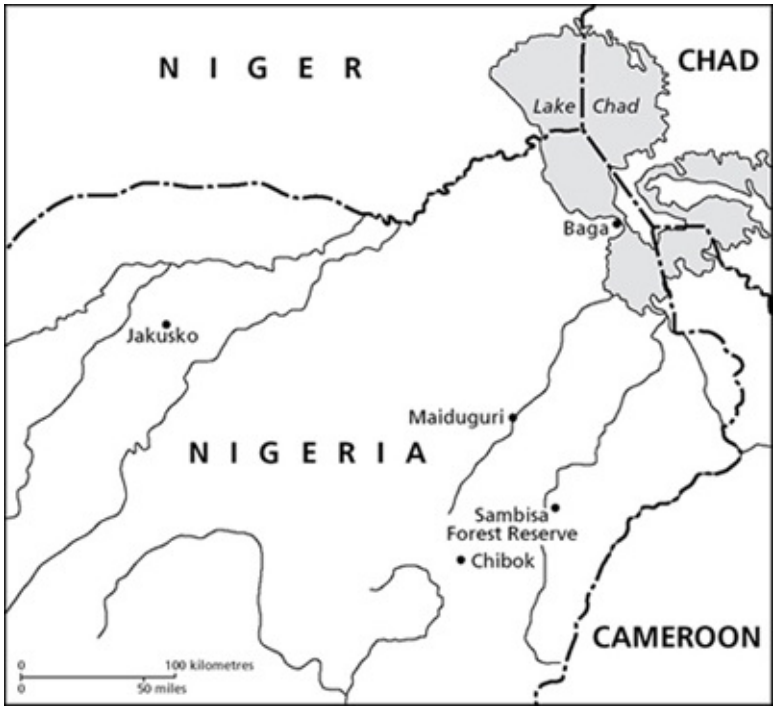
A timeline of key events in northern Nigerian history and the Boko Haram insurgency

- *c.*1085	Kanem-Bornu Empire becomes officially Muslim under Mai Hummay.
- *c.*1349	Kano becomes first state in Hausaland to have a Muslim king.
- 1804	Usman Dan Fodio and followers of his Muslim reformist movement migrate to Gudu, marking the start of a jihad in Hausaland that would lead to the creation of the Sokoto Caliphate across much of what is today northern Nigeria and beyond.
- 1903	A military assault on Kano begins the final conquest of northern Nigeria and the Sokoto Caliphate for the British.
- 1914	Northern and southern Nigeria are amalgamated by the British into a single entity, creating the outlines of the nation that exists today.
- 1956	Nigeria strikes oil in commercial quantities in the Niger Delta in the south.
- 1960	Nigeria gains independence from Britain.
- 1967	Civil war begins after the south-east declares itself an independent Republic of Biafra.
- 1970	Civil war ends with the defeat of the Biafrans. Nigeria remains one nation, but deep divisions persist.
- 1980	Deadly riots break out in Kano involving members of a radical Islamist movement known

	as Maitatsine.
- 1999	Northern politicians push to institute sharia law for criminal cases. Some 12 northern states later adopt some form of sharia criminal law, though it is selectively enforced.
- 2003	The beginnings of Boko Haram begin to take shape when followers of radical cleric Mohammed Yusuf retreat to a remote area of Yobe state and clash with authorities.
- 2009	Boko Haram under Mohammed Yusuf launches an uprising in north-eastern Nigeria after a clash with authorities in Maiduguri. Around 800 people are killed in five days of violence. Yusuf is shot dead by police after being captured.
- 2010	Boko Haram re-emerges after more than a year in hiding with a series of assassinations and a prison raid under the leadership of YusufGs deputy, Abubakar Shekau.
- 2011	Boko Haram claims responsibility for a suicide car bomb attack on United Nations headquarters in Abuja that killed 23 people.
- 2012	A series of coordinated assaults and bomb attacks leave at least 185 people dead in Kano, NigeriaGs second-largest city. Shekau claims responsibility.
- 2013	Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan declares an emergency in three north-eastern states after Boko Haram seizes territory in remote areas of the region.
- 2014	Boko Haram attackers raid the north-eastern town of Chibok and kidnap 276 girls from their dormitory, sparking global outrage.

African states

Key cities in Nigeria



North-eastern Nigeria, including key sites of Boko Haram activity

Prologue: ‘I Think the Worst Has Happened’

The siege that would shake Nigeria seemed to unfold at shocking speed, young men blowing themselves up in bomb-laden cars, hurling drink cans packed with explosives and gunning down officers with AK-47s, all in the space of a few hours. But for Wellington Asiayei, the horror would play out in slow motion.

It was a Friday in Kano, the largest city in Nigeria’s predominately Muslim north, and prayers at mosques had drawn to an end, worshippers in robes having earlier filed out into streets thick with dust in the midst of a dry season near the Sahara desert. Residents of the crowded and ancient metropolis were returning home, manoeuvring their way through traffic or climbing on to the rear of motorcycle taxis that would zip them through and around lines of cars. At police headquarters in a neighbourhood called Bompai, Wellington Asiayei wrapped up his work for the day and took the short walk back to his room at the barracks to begin preparing his dinner.

When the 48-year-old assistant police superintendent reached his room, he heard explosions. ‘Everybody from the barracks was running for their dear lives’, Asiayei would explain to me three days after the 20 January 2012 attacks. The barracks would soon be empty, but despite the confusion, it would still occur to him to lock the door to his room before fleeing. As he began to do so, he noticed a young man who looked to be in his twenties and dressed in a police uniform, an AK-47 rifle in his hands. Asiayei knew that members of a certain branch of the force were often assigned to work as guards at the barracks, and he assumed the young man was one of them. He yelled out to him, telling him that they should both run to headquarters. ‘I saw him raising the rifle at me, and that was all I knew’, he said.

The veteran policeman, still trying to piece together what was happening, felt what seemed to be a gunshot pierce his body. He fell to the ground and lay there face down, blood pooling underneath him. He did not know where the young man with the gun went next. He would remain face down on the floor for what

he believed to be hours before a group of women making their way through the barracks spotted him and finally contacted his supervisor, who arranged for a rescue. Asiayei survived, and three days later he and other victims from the same set of attacks would be in a Kano hospital, his bed among lines of others in a sprawling room. The bullet had damaged his spine and lung. He could not walk.

By the time Asiayei was shot, an unprecedented siege of Nigeria's second-largest city was well underway, dozens or perhaps hundreds of young men, a number of them dressed as police officers, swarming neighbourhoods throughout Kano with no remorse for their victims. The first attack occurred at a regional police headquarters, a suicide bomber in a car blowing himself up outside, ripping off much of the roof. The number of explosions then became difficult to count, one after the other, the blasts echoing through the city. Residents said there were more than 20, and judging from the amount of unexploded homemade bombs that police later recovered, that may be a vast understatement. One doctor who helped treat the wounded said the force of some of the blasts caused at least one home to collapse. Witnesses and police said the attackers travelled on motorbikes, in cars and on foot. They included at least five suicide bombers. In one neighbourhood, they threw homemade bombs at a passport office and opened fire. They also attacked a nearby police station, completely destroying it: the building's tin roof collapsed, the inside burnt, cars outside blackened by fire. Gunshots crackled, corpses were piled on top of one another in the morgue of the city's main hospital and dead bodies were left in the streets to be picked up the next morning. The official toll was 185 people killed, but there was widespread speculation that it was at least 200. It was the deadliest attack yet attributed to the Islamist extremist group that had become known as Boko Haram.

This was long before the kidnapping of nearly 300 girls from their school in north-eastern Nigeria, an atrocity that would draw the world's attention to an insurgency that had by then left a trail of destruction and carnage so horrifying that some had questioned whether Nigeria was barrelling toward another civil war. To understand what led to the abductions, it is important to first know what occurred in Kano. To begin to wrap one's mind around what happened there – bodies lying in the streets and police helpless to stop a rampaging band of young men engaging in suicide bombings and wholesale slaughter – one must first look backward, not only at the formation of Boko Haram itself, but also at the complex history of Nigeria, Islam in West Africa and the deep corruption that

has robbed the continent's biggest oil producer, largest economy and most populous nation of even basic development, keeping the majority of its people agonisingly poor. One must look at colonisation and cultural differences between Nigeria's north and south, the brutality of its security forces and the effects of oil on its economy. But before all of that, it is perhaps best to begin with a charismatic, baby-faced man named Mohammed Yusuf and an episode two and a half years before the attack in Kano.

In a video from 2009, Yusuf can be seen building his argument, the crowd before him off camera but roaring its approval. He describes a confrontation between security forces and his followers when they were on their way to a funeral, and soon he is lashing out at the soldiers and police, accusing them of shooting members of his sect. It is time to fight back, he says, and to continue fighting until the security task force he believed was set up to track them is withdrawn.

'It's better for the whole world to be destroyed than to spill the blood of a single Muslim', he says. 'The same way they gunned down our brothers on the way, they will one day come to our gathering and open fire if we allow this to go unchallenged.'[1]

Yusuf was thought to be 39 at the time and the leader of what had come to be known as Boko Haram. Some had considered him to be a reluctant fighter, content to continue expanding his sect through preaching, but the brutality of the security forces and pressure from his bloodthirsty deputy, Abubakar Shekau, who would later be known as the menacing, bearded man on video threatening to sell kidnapped girls on the market, pushed him toward violence. Not long after the video was recorded, Yusuf would be dead.

His call for his followers to rise up against Nigeria's corrupt government and security forces would lead them to do just that, beginning with attacks on police stations in the country's north. Nigeria's military, not known for its restraint, would soon respond. In July 2009, its armoured vehicles rolled through the streets of the north-eastern city of Maiduguri toward Boko Haram's mosque and headquarters, soldiers opening fire when they drew within range. What resulted was intense fighting that saw soldiers reduce the complex to shards of concrete, twisted metal and burnt cars spread across the site. Around 800 people died over those five days of violence, most of them Boko Haram members. Security forces claimed Yusuf's deputy, Shekau, was among those killed, but they would soon

be proved wrong. Yusuf himself somehow survived the brutal assault, but was arrested while hiding in a barn and handed over to police. They shot him dead.

Years later, rubble remains at the former site of the mosque. Shekau has repeatedly shown up on YouTube or videos distributed to journalists to denounce the West and Nigeria's government and Boko Haram, once a Salafist sect based in Nigeria's north-east, has morphed into something far more deadly and ruthless: a hydra-headed monster further complicated by imitators and criminal gangs who commit violence under the guise of the group. Throughout years of renewed violence, it had been building toward a headline-grabbing assault that would shock the world, and it would do just that in April 2014 with the kidnappings of nearly 300 girls from a school in Chibok, deep in Nigeria's remote north-east. The abductions and response to them would lay bare for the world to see the viciousness of Boko Haram as well as the dysfunction of Nigeria's government and military. But for Nigerians, it was yet another atrocity in a long list of them.

Boko Haram had been dormant for more than a year after the 2009 military assault which killed Yusuf, with Shekau, believed to have been shot in the leg, said to have fled, possibly for Chad and Sudan. During that time, authorities in Maiduguri remained deeply suspicious and on the alert for any new uprising. Academics and others in the area with knowledge of the situation predicted a return to violence, saying underlying issues of deep poverty, corruption, a lack of proper education and few jobs left young people with very little hope for the future. Journalists, including myself, visiting Maiduguri one year after the 2009 uprising were made to understand they were not welcome, with secret police trailing our movements. The police commissioner for Borno state, of which Maiduguri is the capital, refused outright to discuss Boko Haram at the time and warned journalists they could be arrested for even uttering those words. Despite such restrictions, I and two other journalists were able to carry out a number of interviews, including with one man who claimed to be a Boko Haram member – a claim to be taken with a heavy dose of scepticism. Looking back now, I have serious doubts about whether he was indeed a Boko Haram follower, particularly since intelligence agents were monitoring us and would have likely questioned him if they suspected him of being one, but certain details of what he told us seemed to ring true in retrospect, whether by coincidence or otherwise.

Through a local contact, we arranged for the man to be brought to our hotel, a hulking building out of sync with its scrubby savannah surroundings. There were

few other guests, and the hotel, the Maiduguri International, was badly in disrepair, with mouldy carpets and dirty sheets. Staff, including employees who said they had not been paid in months, refused to turn on the generator for much of the day, leaving the hotel without electricity, since Nigeria was, and remains, unable to produce anywhere near enough power for its burgeoning population. It felt as if we had taken up residence in an abandoned building.

The supposed Boko Haram member, dressed in the same type of caftan any average Maiduguri resident would wear, was led into one of our rooms and took a seat in a chair. I pulled up across from him and began asking him questions, a Nigerian correspondent who works for my news agency translating. The man, who spoke in Hausa, said he was 35 years old, and he claimed Boko Haram members had weapons hidden in various parts of the country with a plan of eventually striking again. Despite my repeated attempts to lead him into explaining in detail why one would willingly join such a violent group, he mostly spoke in generalities.

‘We are ordained by Allah to be prepared and amass weapons in case the enemy attacks’, he said. ‘Anybody who doesn’t like Islam, works against the establishment of an Islamic state, who is against the Prophet, is an enemy.’

At the time, we, like so many others, could see the elements that could spark another uprising, the deeply rooted problems that had led to such hopelessness, and we certainly felt that more violence was possible, if not likely. We would not have to wait long for a more definitive answer. Any sense of normalcy the police commissioner and others hoped to portray would soon be shattered. Boko Haram’s deadliest and most symbolic attacks were yet to come.

* * *

In some ways, unrest seems inevitable in parts of northern Nigeria, a country thrown together by colonialists who combined vastly different cultures, traditions and ethnicities under one nation. This was the case for many African civilisations, but a number of factors would make Nigeria a particularly volatile example, and one must of course start with the oil.

Nigeria first struck oil in commercial quantities in 1956 among the vast and labyrinthine swamps of the Niger Delta in the country’s south. Commercial production began in relatively small amounts at first, but new discoveries would soon come, offshore drilling would eventually take hold and Nigeria would become the biggest oil producer in Africa, gaining astounding amounts of money

for its coffers – and a list of profound, even catastrophic, problems to go with it. So much of that money would be stolen and tragically misspent, leading to the entrenchment of what has been called a kleptocracy, assured of its vast oil reserves but with electricity blackouts multiple times per day and poorly paid policemen collecting bribes from drivers at roadblocks, to name two examples among many. Most telling is the fact that it must import most of its fuel despite its oil, with the country unable to build enough refineries or keep the ones it has functioning at capacity to process its crude oil on its own. On top of that, petrol imports are subsidised by the government through a system that has been alleged to be outrageously mismanaged and corrupt. In other words, Nigeria essentially buys back refined oil after selling it in crude form – and at an inflated cost thanks to the middlemen gaming the system.

All the while, Nigeria's population has been rapidly expanding. It is currently the most populous country in Africa with some 170 million people, including an exploding and restless youth population. It also recently overtook South Africa as the continent's biggest economy strictly in terms of GDP size, but its population is far larger, meaning the average Nigerian remains much poorer than the average South African. The title of Africa's biggest economy means little or nothing to most Nigerians, the majority of whom continue to live on less than $1 per day.

It is those Nigerians who are obliged to scrape whatever living they can in whichever way they can find it, while their leaders and corrupt business moguls force their way between traffic in SUVs with police escorts and seal themselves off inside walled complexes. The daily struggle to survive has led to all sorts of outlandish schemes that have, much to the chagrin of hard-working Nigerians, badly damaged the country's reputation. Emails from Nigerian 'princes' promising riches have become so common worldwide that they are now a punchline, but that is only one part of the problem. In Nigeria itself, many residents have taken to painting the words 'Beware 419: this house is not for sale' on the outside walls of houses in a bid to keep imposters claiming to be the owners from selling them when no one is there. The number 419 refers to a section of the criminal code, and all such forms of financial trickery have come to be known as 419 scams. Another infamous example involves the police. Newcomers learn quickly that being pulled over by a policeman can be a maddening experience. They have been known to jump into the passenger seat and refuse to exit until they are 'dashed', or bribed, even if the driver has done

nothing wrong. The almighty dash is central to Nigerian life.

Because the oil has brought riches, there has been little incentive to develop other sectors of the economy. It would be wrong to say that Nigeria's mostly Christian south, where the oil is located, has done well for itself in these circumstances, but it is certainly true that it has fared better than the north. It is better educated, has more industry and jobs and less poverty. Oil-producing states are handed a significantly bigger chunk of government revenue. Despite that, the region has in no way been immune to violence. The deeply poor Niger Delta, badly polluted by years of oil spills, has seen militants and gangsters take up arms, carry out attacks on the petroleum industry and kidnap foreigners. Some of the worst of this violence occurred under the name the Movement for the Emancipation for the Niger Delta and continued until a 2009 amnesty deal drastically reduced the unrest.

The neglect of other aspects of the economy particularly hit Nigeria's north, which relies heavily on agriculture, despite northern leaders having run the country for much of its post-independence history. Its culture is vastly different from that of the south, with Islam having migrated along with trade across the Sahara and into the region's savannah lands around the Middle Ages. Much of present-day northern Nigeria, long ruled by Hausa kings, eventually fell under a caliphate in the early nineteenth century following an armed jihad led by a Fulani Islamic cleric, Usman Dan Fodio. Even today, Dan Fodio remains revered, but it is difficult to locate his reformist legacy in the region, where corrupt elites siphon off revenue at will and a huge population of young people roam with nothing much to do. Boko Haram figures may have occasionally paid lip service to Dan Fodio's caliphate, but the extremists' blood-thirsty slaughtering of innocents and lack of any practical plans for how to improve the lives of Nigerians reveal the insurgency to be far different.

As some have pointed out, many in northern Nigeria have come to see democracy as a system that keeps them poor and enriches undeserving, corrupt leaders. In Maiduguri, located near the borders of the neighbouring nations of Niger, Chad and Cameroon, the wealthy take up residence in heavily secured mansions while the poor fetch water from wells, and signs at roundabouts are written in Arabic, proclaiming 'Allah is the Provider'. It was amidst this atmosphere that Mohammed Yusuf began to lead his followers.

Boko Haram's re-emergence more than a year after the 2009 uprising and

Yusuf's death began mysteriously, with men on motorcycles and armed with AK-47s carrying out drive-by shootings targeting community leaders and security forces. It was unclear at first whether these killings were indeed being committed by the same group, but whisperings of its return eventually grew louder, and attacks became more deadly. Police stations were once again bombed and burnt, and roadside explosions began to occur regularly. If Nigeria's southern president was willing to simply ignore it as long as this remained restricted to Nigeria's remote north-east, he would not be allowed to do so for long. Attacks would eventually spread into other parts of the north, then central Nigeria, then the capital itself.

An attack in June 2011 would signal what was soon to come. A man believed to be a suicide bomber in a car sought to penetrate national police headquarters in the capital Abuja, blowing himself up outside. While the death toll was relatively low, it was considered Boko Haram's first suicide attack. There would be more.

On the morning of 26 August 2011, a man driving a Honda Accord made his way through the streets of Abuja, his destination the United Nations headquarters for Nigeria. He managed to barrel his way through the exit side of the front gate, guards unable to stop him. He crashed into the front lobby and set off the explosives inside the car, the blast ripping into the building and gutting much of the inside. The attack killed 23 people and wounded dozens more.

It would only get worse, with churches later targeted, including on Christmas Day near the capital, and an office of one of the country's most prominent newspapers was hit. A British and an Italian hostage were killed in north-western Nigeria by what may or may not have been Ansaru, considered a splinter faction of Boko Haram and which would also be blamed for other kidnappings. Boko Haram members would overrun remote areas of north-eastern Nigeria and raise their own flags, part of the reason the president would eventually decide to declare a state of emergency. Seven members of a French family, including four children, would also be abducted in an incident claimed by Shekau, while dozens of students would be massacred in attacks on schools. Reports began to emerge in 2013 of girls being kidnapped and taken as wives by Boko Haram members. In April 2014, when attackers stormed the town of Chibok and abducted 276 girls from their school, Nigeria's military seemed to have barely put up a fight.

This has all led to intense speculation over what Boko Haram has become, including from Western nations deeply worried over the spread of what they call terrorism. The group's re-emergence, and its increasingly violent and sophisticated insurgency, would occur at a time of major change not only in Nigeria, but also among Islamist extremist groups globally. A decade after the 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks, US President Barack Obama's administration was claiming to have decimated the core of Al-Qaeda's leadership, with the help of a campaign of drone strikes. The bulk of those assertions may have been attributed to Obama's strategy ahead of the 2012 elections, with the president eager to show he had succeeded in his earlier promise of bringing the war in Iraq to a close and refocusing on defeating his country's main enemy, Al-Qaeda.

Still, political rhetoric aside, there certainly seemed to be important shifts occurring in the landscape of 'global terrorism', as it was labelled by the Western world, and there were concerns that unstable African nations could become safe havens for Islamist extremist groups. US military officials in 2011 began warning of signs that the main extremist groups based in Africa – Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Shebab in Somalia and Boko Haram – were working toward closer cooperation through arms or financing. There had been evidence of Nigerian Islamists travelling to northern Mali since 2004 for training with extremists from what would later be known as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, but deeper ties remained an open question. Muammar Gaddafi's fall in Libya in 2011 led to fears that the region's black market would be flooded with looted weapons from depots in that country. A rebellion in Mali in 2012 that saw Tuareg and Islamist groups take over half of the country prompted further concern and fuelled speculation over whether Boko Haram members had gone there to fight – and what would happen after they returned home. France responded with a military assault to push out the rebels in Mali, and a US drone base was established in Niger with the aim of monitoring the Islamists who were responsible.

The US government has since labelled Boko Haram a 'global terrorist' group, but the move has not seemed to have had any major effect, and the debate over whether to designate it as such seemed to again heavily involve American politics. Shekau himself has been put on a US wanted list offering a reward of up to $7 million. After he was named a 'global terrorist' by the United States, allowing his assets there to be frozen, he mocked the designation in a video message. 'I know the United States exists, but I don't know which part of the

world it is located in, whether in the west or the north, the south or the east', he said in a sarcastic tone, an AK-47 leaning against the wall next to him. 'I don't know where it is, not to talk of freezing my assets there.'

Mapping out the details of what Boko Haram is remains extremely difficult. Even the name Boko Haram is something of an illusion. Roughly translated to mean 'Western education is forbidden', it was given to the group by outsiders based on their understanding of the budding sect and its beliefs. The group itself, or at least Abubakar Shekau's faction of it, says it wants to be known as Jama'atu Ahlus Sunnah Lid Da'awati Wal Jihad, or People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad.[2] As for Shekau himself, little is known about him. The US government's wanted notice lists three different possible dates of birth, 1965, 1969 and 1975. His vicious rhetoric and bizarre behaviour in video messages, where he has said he likes to kill humans when commanded by God to do so in the same way he enjoys killing rams and chickens, has led some to label him a psychopath. He also strangely refers to long-dead Western leaders as his enemies, from Abraham Lincoln to Margaret Thatcher. But simply labelling him insane is inadequate, a conclusion based on guesswork that ignores the possibility that he may be trying to provoke by acting in that way. There is also the question of whether it is always the same person appearing in video messages over the last several years. The appearance of the man identified as Shekau in videos has been significantly different at times.

All of this becomes quite confusing very quickly, but overall outlines have emerged and a larger picture can be assembled. It is perhaps best to think of Boko Haram as an umbrella term for the insurgency and the violence that has come with it, with an unclear number of cells or factions carrying out attacks. Foot soldiers may be shared or recruited as needed, drawn from the massive population of desperate young men vulnerable to extremist ideas and perhaps attracted to the money and support the group can provide. Any kind of true organisation may exist only at the very top, with limited cooperation between the various cells. Their aims seem to vary greatly, from the sincere will to create an Islamic state to the desire to collect ransom money, with many other motivations in between. 'Do I think that the kids who abducted the girls in Chibok are the ones who set off the bombs in Jos? No', one Nigerian official who has closely followed the insurgency told me. It appears that they finance themselves mainly through illegal activity, including ransom kidnappings and bank robberies. They have stolen weapons from the Nigerian military, and likely would not find it

difficult to buy arms on the region's black market. Explosives have also been stolen from private companies.

How much all of this involves politics has been continually debated. As elections scheduled for February 2015 began to draw near, new accusations of politicians financing elements of Boko Haram emerged – certainly a possibility, but if so, more likely on the margins. The overarching conspiracy theories repeatedly offered in Nigeria – northern elites seeking to bring down a southern president; southern power brokers seeking to discredit the north – do not hold up to scrutiny. There are simply too many varying interests, the range of targets too great, to be attributable to one sole purpose.

Concerning foreign links, as one well-versed observer put it to me in early 2014, it seems that a practical relationship has developed between certain Nigerian Islamists, particularly those identified with Ansaru, and the leadership of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb or its offshoots. They seek out help when they need it, but otherwise act on their own. Another knowledgeable source, a Western diplomat with extensive experience in the region, told me in March 2014 that it appeared that cooperation involving training and weapons had been deepening over the last few years.

Shekau has pledged solidarity with jihadists globally, including ISIS in Syria and Iraq, but it has never been clear whether such feelings were mutual. For one, outside extremist groups would face the same problem that authorities and would-be peace negotiators have encountered when seeking to probe or communicate with Boko Haram: one never knows with whom one is dealing. Beyond that, Boko Haram's mindless violence may not fit with more recent Al-Qaeda strategy, with the group's leadership having expressed concerns over the indiscriminate killings of fellow Muslims and civilians by its regional affiliates.

Yet it is important to keep all of this in perspective. While links have formed with foreign groups and attacks have been carried out in neighbouring Cameroon, the various elements of the Boko Haram insurgency have remained Nigerian in their outlook. Though demands have ranged widely, they have to a large degree focused on local concerns. The insurgents have sometimes simply seemed bent on the destruction of the Nigerian state, seeking to tear everything down with no end goal in mind. In late 2014, the group again seized territory in parts of north-eastern Nigeria and declared it would be part of a caliphate, but it was not clear whether there were any true attempts at governing such areas.

‘While there are links and there’s procurement of weapons and there’s communication and a whole range of ties between Boko Haram and AQIM and to a lesser extent al-Shebab, it really remains a domestically focused group in the sense that their enemy really is the Nigerian federal state and certain state officials’, the same Western diplomat said. ‘And I think that in an opportunistic manner they cooperate and have communications with transnational groups that may be committed to the global jihad like AQIM, but that’s not their primary objective.’

It is a problem born and bred in Nigeria – and one that Nigerians must resolve amongst themselves. The conditions that have given rise to it must remain the focus of any potential solution.

Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the Niger Delta, has offered little beyond heavy-handed military raids that have led to accusations of widespread abuses against civilians – including shootings of innocent people, the burning of homes, torture and indiscriminate arrests. The government has engaged in doublespeak, at one point claiming to be involved in back-channel talks in a bid to halt the violence, but later dismissing this, with the president calling the Islamists ‘ghosts’ who refuse to show their faces. Shekau, whose whereabouts are unknown and who has often been rumoured to be dead, has repeatedly ruled out dialogue in videos.

While it is impossible to know for certain whether it is always the same man in Shekau’s video messages, it would also not seem to matter much. Regardless of whether there have been Shekau look-alikes, attacks have continued and even worsened. ‘If in fact he is dead, then it shows that we are in a much worse situation than we thought’, the Nigerian official who has followed the situation closely told me. In other words, it showed he could easily be replaced without an interruption in the violence, while the decline of the Nigerian army, largely because of corruption, has left little hope that it can defeat the insurgency. Soldiers ‘would rather go to the Niger Delta to make money’, he said, referring to the allegations of members of the army being involved in the lucrative oil theft racket and other crimes in that region. ‘Whoever is doing this knows they can get the Nigerian army involved in a war they cannot win.’

The lack of faith in both the government and the military has remained one of the most important reasons why the insurgency has not been stopped. ‘I don’t know that northern populations have a great affinity for Boko Haram or

whatever they're advocating, and civilians and moderate Muslims have been the principal victims along with security forces of course', the Western diplomat said. 'But there's this sea of indifference in which they are able to operate because you just don't have a lot of loyalty or affinity for a central government which is seen as completely clueless and, more importantly, unresponsive to the legitimate needs and grievances of local populations.'

As for recruitment into Boko Haram, some see a cycle of poverty and lawlessness as a main cause. 'Religion is the basis of recruitment, so that's why they can get so many people, but the incentive for people to get into it and remain in it is the profit they make from it', Clement Nwankwo, a respected Nigerian civil society activist based in Abuja, told me in June 2014. 'So if there is money available and these people would ordinarily live a street life, where they don't know what they get for the day, but here somebody's paying their bills, somebody is feeding them, clothing them and giving them some little profit [...] And then there is really very little consequence for their actions. They can get away with it. The military hasn't been able to respond in a way that proves a disincentive for them to continue this path.'

In the meantime, the list of the dead only grows longer, each attack helping push the unrealised potential of such an important nation further out of reach. In the south, in the country's largest city of Lagos, steps have been taken in a bid to begin taming the famously chaotic former capital of some 15 million people, whose hours-long traffic jams and exhausting pace of life have become legendary, leaving even the most resilient souls gasping for air. Lagos, along with the rest of the south, has been mainly spared the violence, though there have been questions over whether an explosion in June 2014 claimed by Boko Haram signalled the end of the city's relative peace. If so, the insurgency would reach yet another, far more dangerous stage, and the shoots of progress that have taken root would be tragically ripped out.

There have of course been other bright spots, and recently Finance Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, a former World Bank managing director, and Central Bank Governor Lamido Sanusi have worked to bring about reforms where possible and reduce corruption. But the frequent refrain in Nigeria is that when one fights corruption, corruption fights back. When Sanusi began to publicly ask questions in 2014 about billions of dollars linked to the state oil firm missing from Nigeria's accounts, he was removed from office by the president. From an aristocratic family, he has since become the emir of Kano, one of the country's

most highly respected traditional rulers. He has not entirely abandoned his criticism of government corruption.

* * *

By May 2012, Maiduguri, still considered the home base of Boko Haram, resembled something approaching a war zone. Entire neighbourhoods appeared deserted and security checkpoints kept the city on edge. Christians trying to attend church passed through metal detectors and razor wire, with women forced to leave their bags outside. It was by no means only Christians being targeted; Muslims were often the victims. Residents were caught between the incessant attacks and the heavy-handed response of soldiers, who had been accused of rounding up young men for arrest, burning homes and killing civilians.

The extremists had taken to burning schools, and yet classes were still being held in at least one of the damaged buildings. At that school, a teacher said parents insisted that it remain open, so students dressed neatly in yellow and green uniforms were there scampering among piles of broken glass and shards of cement. ‘I’m not scared because I think the worst has happened’, one 14-year-old girl said as she stood near scorched walls and collapsed tin sheets. ‘There’s nothing left for them to attack.’

How tragically wrong she would turn out to be. On the night of 14 April 2014, hordes of attackers would descend upon the town of Chibok and swarm the boarding school where several hundred girls were sleeping. They were dressed as soldiers and they told the girls not to worry, that they were there to protect them. They led them outside and towards waiting pick-up trucks, and it slowly began to dawn on the girls that these men were not members of the military. They fired their guns and shouted ‘Allahu Akbar’, and they forced the girls into the trucks before driving away towards a camp in the forest. Military reinforcements did not arrive. Parents, their daughters gone and the school burnt, set off towards the forest on motorcycles. They had no choice but to try to find the girls themselves.

1

‘Then You Should Wait for the Outcome’

Geoffrey Njoku heard it, the sound of a bang and the screech of metal on metal, a distant crash somewhere outside. It was a Friday morning, and the 53-year-old was inside a Standard Chartered bank branch on the ground floor of United Nations headquarters in the Nigerian capital, Abuja. He had gone there to take care of some routine personal banking before returning to his work at UNICEF offices on the third floor. Besides the bank staff, there were only two customers inside, Njoku and another person, but other areas of the sprawling, four-storey UN building, spread out over three wings in the shape of a Y in the city’s diplomatic district, were already buzzing with the day’s activity. When the crash rang out around 10.20 a.m., Njoku said out loud in the bank, ‘What’s that sound?’

Up above on the first floor, at least two meetings were in progress. Soji Adeniyi, a UNICEF specialist in emergency planning walking with crutches at the time because of a broken leg, was leading one of them, attended by around 10 colleagues from various UN departments. It had started at around 9 a.m., more than an hour earlier, and was supposed to wrap up by 10 a.m., but it ran over, so they were all still there, in one section of an open-space work area cordoned off with movable partitions, a large table set out in the middle. Adeniyi, too, heard a sound, ‘as if it were a crash through a door or something’, and also did not know what to make of it.

Vinod Alkari, a UNICEF expert from India who had worked in post-invasion Iraq, had not heard anything. He was on the third floor speaking with his colleague Shalini Bahuguna, asking whether she had seen his email related to a water, sanitation and hygiene programme. She seemed distracted and did not respond, confusing Alkari, and instead asked him if he had ‘heard something falling’.

Presumably sometime before that – perhaps days, perhaps weeks – a 27-year-old, softly spoken man in a polo-style shirt had stared into a video camera, his

head wrapped in a turban, an AK-47 rifle in his hands and two others leaning against a wall on either side of him. Two gas cylinders, the type used to manufacture bombs, sat in front of him. He was thin, and the way he occasionally smiled made him appear meek. He spoke in Hausa, the predominant language in northern Nigeria, and seemed almost apologetic at times as he meandered through his speech. He was wearing something that looked like a suicide vest.[1]

As the young man explained what he was preparing to do, he said that he had no choice, that he must carry out Allah's bidding, and he asked his mother, father and wife to understand, while also hoping that his son would follow in his footsteps. At certain points, the sound of what seemed to be a child could be heard in the background along with the clanking of someone apparently tidying up or putting away dishes.

'I am going to shed my blood and I pray to Allah to make me steadfast', said the young man, later identified as an auto repair worker named Mohammed Abul Barra. 'May he take me there safely [...] My mother, my father and my wife, these three people, I call on you to be patient. I know you will be at great pains by losing me, especially you, my mother [...] It is the love of God that made me to be obedient to you and it is the same Allah that commanded me to go and carry out this mission. He even wonders if we prefer our parents, children or relations or the wealth we amassed, or a mansion you built. If you prefer this to Allah, his Prophet and jihad, then you should wait for the outcome.'

His described his belief that a suicide attack would lead him to paradise and hoped the same for his own son.

'Then my son, my son Barra, the son of Allah, may Allah nurture you on the path of the Prophet to make you useful to Islam, to make you follow my footsteps and do what I am about to do now, which is called suicide attack.'

Later in the video, a group of unidentified men took turns giving him hugs, presumably to bid him goodbye. He was then shown sitting in the driver's seat of a grey car and spoke again, this time offering a disjointed message to the US president. When he finished, a blurry and shaky sequence showed a car being driven down a road.

'I tell Obama and other world leaders they were created by Allah in the same way he created us', he said while seated in the driver's seat. 'So whoever rebels

against Allah and goes against his dictates, whatever his status, especially Obama, who is their leader, if he does not repent and convert to Islam, if he dies, he's going to hell and live therein for ever. Obama and other infidels should know God knows about them and is only giving them a respite. And if he seizes them, they have no excuse.'

On the morning of 26 August 2011, as Njoku was banking, Adeniyi was conducting his meeting, Alkari was trying to sort out his sanitation project and many other UN staffers were going about their usual business, the driver of a Honda Accord would make his way into the diplomatic district of the Nigerian capital, a city newly built with petrodollars, its wide boulevards and concrete office buildings giving it an artificial feel in comparison to much of the rest of the country. The driver would pull on to the street leading to UN headquarters, where some 400 staff worked, before directing his car towards the exit gates of the compound and barrelling through.

In the building itself, the atrium and reception area were located where the three branches of the Y converged, facing out in the direction of the two angled arms, about 100 metres away from the gate. The driver moved towards it, crashing through the glass and entering the building. When he did this and burst into the reception area, shattering the glass front and colliding with a wall on the inside, a bizarre moment of uncertainty would occur. Those inside the building seemed unsure how to react, and one woman would walk towards the car. After a few moments, some would begin to run away, seemingly realising that this may not have been an accident. It would be more than 10 seconds before the bomb exploded, pulverising much of what surrounded it.[2] The force of the blast collapsed walls and shattered windows, raining down shards of glass in parts of the building as if it were a hail storm.

Njoku and others inside the bank on the same floor were thrown to the ground by the impact. Something heavy had fallen on his leg, but he did not notice the pain as panic set in and he and the others began figuring out what to do. They could not see the area where the bomber had crashed into the building from where they were, but it was by then obvious that something terrible had happened and they had to escape. The entrance to the bank had collapsed and was blocked, so they were forced to look for another way out. They made their way to a back door, Njoku somehow moving under his own steam despite his injury. When he and the others finally arrived at the back of the building where everyone was gathering, he collapsed on the grass and could not stand again, his

leg now swelling. While waiting to be evacuated by an ambulance, he sent a text message to his wife, telling her ‘we’ve been attacked and I’m injured, but I’m OK’. He was unable to make calls, possibly because of network congestion since so many people were trying to phone out, but the message had reached his wife, who tracked him down at a hospital in the area.

On the first floor where Adeniyi was holding a meeting, parts of the ceiling crashed in, windows shattered and the fire alarm rang out. Adeniyi, then 44, sensed it was a bomb and told colleagues to get under the table, worried there could be a second blast. He manoeuvred himself despite his broken leg as they all took cover. As they did so, they could hear people wailing and crying for help from the room next door, the main auditorium, located just above where the car bomb detonated and the site of some of the worst suffering. They waited briefly under the table – Adeniyi estimates it was between three and five minutes – until they heard the sound of voices from UN security workers calling out from downstairs for everyone to evacuate to the back of the building. Adeniyi was able to get a signal on his phone, so before evacuating, he called the director of search and rescue from Nigeria’s National Emergency Management Agency – someone he knew through his work – and spoke to him briefly. He was assured that the fire service was on its way. He and the others then began determining how they could get out. The partitions surrounding them had collapsed, and they had to clear one out of the way. A glass door was stuck, so Adeniyi used his crutches to break through it, and they made their way to the stairs past a gauntlet of debris. They arrived at the evacuation point at the rear of the building about 10 to 15 minutes after the explosion, everyone from Adeniyi’s meeting having made it out alive. He repeatedly sent text messages to his entire contact list, telling everyone he was fine, and received calls for about an hour from those hoping to confirm with him, including his wife, before his phone battery died. He also went back into the building to try to help and document what had happened. He remembers people yelling; he took pictures and video and directed arriving rescue workers to where victims were trapped. He later found out that two of his close colleagues were among the dead on the ground floor, and he wondered what could have happened if his meeting had wrapped up earlier. ‘It would have been more disastrous for us, because maybe by then some of us may have been in the lobby or in the lift’, he said.

Alkari, further up on the third floor, described a surreal series of events, followed by tense moments where it had seemed more lives were at stake if help

did not arrive. Windows along with their frames collapsed inside the room, scattering glass everywhere, and ceiling tiles fell. One of the frames crashed on to the table between him and his colleague, lightly scraping Alkari's head and drawing a small amount of blood. The lights went out, and then there was 'a sudden silence, the kind of silence one rarely encounters'.

'We both say "it is a bomb",' Alkari wrote later in a personal account of what happened that day. He said subsequently: 'The threats have come true.'[3]

Based on Alkari's experience in Iraq and Shalini's in Afghanistan, they decided, like Adeniyi, to take cover temporarily under the table – a procedure taught in emergency drills in case a second blast hits and to avoid being caught up in falling debris. They heard others scrambling to evacuate, but decided to wait a few minutes longer to be sure. While sitting there, Alkari managed to think to collect his laptop and his bag, and they then decided to leave, moving a window frame out of their way. Everyone from their division had already gone. When they arrived at the central atrium on the same floor, Alkari recalled that 'everything that was on the ceiling was now on the ground, as if the whole building was turned upside down [...] Lift doors were blown off and could not be seen anywhere. There were two big gaping holes where the lift doors used to be. The lift frame was twisted out of shape as if made of paper. At the central atrium level where the lift opens, every glass panel was blown out. A wall had collapsed.'

It was then that they heard cries for help. The collapsed wall had crashed into an area occupied by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, trapping two staffers underneath tables. Two others who were not trapped were scrambling to move the collapsed part of the wall, but it was too heavy. Alkari could not be of much assistance, either, since he had suffered a slipped disk in his back, so they decided the best option was to seek help from elsewhere. It would not be so simple. Alkari moved to a window, its frame blown out, and shouted and waved repeatedly at those below. They noticed him, but seemed not to understand amid the chaos. Some waved back, signalling for him to come down. His urgent message not getting through, Alkari asked his colleague Shalini to go downstairs to find help, and in the meantime he continued to shout from the window as well as make phone calls to colleagues. Most did not answer their phones, but he reached one man, who told him he was on his way to the hospital. By this point, Alkari could see Shalini from his spot next to what used to be the window as she pleaded with people outside.

‘They were dazed and confused to the point that nothing registered’, Alkari wrote later. ‘Finally I see Shalini waving at me saying no one is coming up. She is trying to tell me that there is fire on the ground floor. I am not able to get that message. She sends me an SMS but my mind is occupied with finding help. I did not look at my mobile.’

He then saw a man in the distance down a corridor on the same floor, but the nightmare would only continue. Alkari shouted, and when the man looked his way, he tried to signal to him that people were trapped and needed help. The man stared for a moment from about 20 metres away, and Alkari later wondered if he was debating in his head whether to put himself in further danger or simply get out while he still had the chance. ‘He just turned and left’, Alkari remembered. ‘I do not blame him, but feel like a person left to fend for himself.’

Shalini returned with the bad news that no one had come with her, while the UNODC staffer leading the effort to dislodge the collapsed wall was growing angry and frustrated. Alkari decided he would go downstairs himself to recruit help, and it was while moving down the steps that he began to get a more complete picture of the devastation.

‘Stairs are littered with broken glass, blown-off wood panels, light fixtures and electric wiring. From the second floor down, the stairs have blood stains everywhere. Ground floor was a complete mess. As I step on to the ground, I am in two inches of water. The sprinkler system seems to be working and most likely some water pipe had burst. And there was acrid smoke.’

An ATM machine had been thrown towards the door by the force of the blast, partially blocking Alkari’s way, but he managed to slip past and make it outside, where he saw ‘several people badly hurt, lying on ground crying for help. There is one ambulance taking in someone and another is entering the area to carry others. Some people were lying lifeless, soaked with blood, either dead or in shock. Sirens are wailing, adding to confusion [...] I approach the first person I see and ask him to come with me to the third floor. He is in another world. What I am saying does not make any sense to him.’

He eventually saw two people he knew and they agreed to follow him, along with a third ‘Good Samaritan’ he was not familiar with. The four of them went back into the building, squeezing past the ATM, but saw fire burning on the ground floor with flames Alkari said looked to be five feet high. They decided to push on towards the third floor anyway, Alkari reasoning that the blaze would

not spread quickly because the water sprinklers were on, the building's electricity was off and the first floor was reasonably high up from the ground. As they reached the third floor, they joined one of the UNODC staffers and, finally, lifted the collapsed part of the wall. One of the two women who had been trapped had no injuries, but she seemed to be in shock, shaking and crying. Debris was cleared from a sofa so she could sit and Alkari ran to his office to grab tissues and water. The woman drank and began to calm down, but they realised she had somehow lost her shoes – a problem since broken glass covered the stairs. 'I suggest to Shalini that she clean up every step for the rescued lady to put her foot. A laborious task, but Shalini is up to it', Alkari wrote.

The condition of the second trapped woman was the complete inverse. She was calm, so much so that she was able to warn her rescuers before they moved her that her leg was broken. There was also another problem: a second piece of the wall was in situ and had to be moved to get her out, but it was too heavy even for the five people who remained. Finding help proved to be far less complicated this time. Alkari turned to look around and immediately saw two UNDP staffers who had come up from the second floor. They instantly agreed to assist, but even with seven people, it was a struggle to move the wall. They worked together with 'one, two, three – heave', and eventually succeeded. They lifted the woman out carefully, keeping in mind her broken leg, and carried her over to the sofa, allowing the team to catch their breath before bringing her downstairs. Alkari and one of the UNDP staffers decided to climb to the fourth floor to check if anyone else was there. They called out, but heard nothing in response, then headed back down to inspect other areas of the third floor. It was there that they would see Ingrid Midtgaard, a 30-year-old Norwegian lawyer who had been working for the UNODC, and Alkari described a heartbreaking scene, with the young woman 'sitting lifeless in a chair'.

'Her face is calm', Alkari wrote. 'The Good Samaritan climbs back and checks her pulse [...] She was gone. We are not sure if we should move her to the ground floor. We decide not to move her because by then we had seen several ambulances ferrying people to hospital. Paramedics had arrived. With heavy hearts we leave her behind. If you believe in God, then the God had taken her to be with him.'

Returning to the task of evacuating the woman with the broken leg, they began the journey downstairs. Arriving on the bottom floor, they were greeted by two inches of water, with the sprinklers still working, but no fire. They could

not squeeze past the ATM while carrying the woman to use the same exit, so they decided to manoeuvre her through a broken window, rescue workers on the other side helping to make sure she was not cut on the remaining jagged glass. She was put in an ambulance and taken to a hospital, and Alkari then told a doctor on the scene about Midtgaard on the third floor.

As the day wore on, rescue workers pulled people out from the damaged front of the building with stretchers. The damaged front gate that the bomber drove through sat on the ground. At least 23 people were killed, including 13 UN staffers. Immediately, suspicion fell on the Islamist extremist group that had become known by the name Boko Haram, which would later claim responsibility for the attack in the suicide bomber video and through a spokesman. It was the first time the group had struck at a foreign or international target, setting off a scramble to determine who or what could be hit next. There was a problem, however: apart from the tense, bearded face of Abubakar Shekau, the group's new leader, who had appeared in videos with an AK-47, few knew what Boko Haram was.

* * *

One of history's most successful armed jihads occurred in what is today northern Nigeria. It was more than two centuries ago, when a revered Islamic cleric, the son of a learned preacher who had built a fast-expanding following, found himself on a collision course with the kings who ruled at the time. One of the many tales and legends surrounding his life describes a meeting at the palace of the sultan of Gobir, a former student of the cleric who now feared his authority was threatened by his growing influence. The cleric, an ethnic Fulani named Usman Dan Fodio, along with a group of other Muslim leaders, visited the palace after being summoned by the sultan, Yunfa, who had sent signals that he was interested in making peace with them. He had apparently changed his mind. Once there, the Shehu, or Sheikh, as the preacher would later be known, found himself confronted with a musket cradled by the sultan himself, apparently prepared to kill the man who had caused so much trouble for him and his court. As he pulled the trigger, however, the musket misfired and burnt Yunfa, though not fatally.[4] He lived long enough to see the tables turned, when the Shehu's army, after having routed their Hausa opponents in key battles, collecting their horses and weaponry, marched into the Gobir capital of Alkalawa. Yunfa and his men put up a final fight, but by then there was little hope for him and his court.

The Muslim fighters killed him, and the Shehu and his allies across a wide expanse of what had been known as Hausaland were on their way to forging an Islamic empire. It would come to be known as the Sokoto Caliphate.

The Shehu would turn out to be one of Islam's greatest messengers in what we now call Nigeria, leaving a legacy of Muslim practice, thought and law still very much alive today, but he was by no means the first. Long before that, in the centuries after the Archangel Gabriel appeared to the Prophet Muhammad in a cave near Mecca and revealed to him words of the Qur'an, the Islamic faith had begun to filter across into sub-Saharan Africa. It would be a gradual process, sometimes involving conquest, though it was mainly the result of trade and the innumerable aspects of society that interact with and depend upon it. As camels began to replace donkeys for journeys in the Sahara from around the second century, making it easier to traverse the desert and its forbidding conditions, fleets of caravans began plying its routes, trading gold and salt, among other items, and, of course, slaves. A new world would slowly trudge across it, and the societies it came into contact with would be changed for ever.[5] Many of those societies were prepared to profit from the opportunities the increasingly busy trans-Saharan trade routes offered. In today's northern Nigeria, they included two separate regions in particular: one the Kanem-Bornu Empire, the other a collection of states led by kings in Hausaland.

Bornu would come to be centred mainly in today's north-eastern Nigeria near Lake Chad. It was not founded until the fourteenth century, but its roots lie much further back in Kanem, near Lake Chad's north-east. The Sefawa dynasty came to power there possibly as early as the ninth century or perhaps later, towards the end of the eleventh century, enduring war, societal upheaval and religious change, its power and influence at one point extending, as one historian wrote, from 'the Niger to the Nile'.[6] The dynasty would last until the nineteenth century.

It is difficult to pinpoint when Islam first arrived in Kanem, though some of the religion's initial messengers seemed to have been Ibadi gold traders.[7] Travelling Muslim scholars who sought lucrative jobs in the royal courts of the day would also play an important role in sub-Saharan Africa, with their advanced knowledge and literacy seen as particularly impressive. The kings of West Africa, including in Kanem, would have seen great benefits in cultivating links with their Muslim visitors as well as the states from where they came.

Trade relationships with the Arab world and northern Africa brought considerable wealth and knowledge, not to mention useful allies.[8] It was through these initial contacts that the long, slow journey toward Islam began.

Islam's influence became official in Kanem by the late eleventh century, possibly in 1085, under a king, or mai, known as Hummay, who went on pilgrimage to Mecca perhaps twice or even more.[9] While Kanem was officially Muslim by then, much of the population remained pagan or animistic and would have known little about Islam. The new religion had been mainly confined to the elite, and even among those who did convert, a hybrid version of the faith developed, mixing Muslim and ancestral beliefs, as was the case throughout West Africa.[10] It was in the thirteenth century that Kanem would rise to become the most powerful state in the region and see its influence extend into the Arab world.

Civil wars would gradually intrude on Kanem's prosperity and force the Sefawa dynasty to flee. They moved south-west of Lake Chad and established a new capital at Ngazargamu in an area known as Bornu[11] – where Boko Haram would wreak havoc centuries later. The Kanuri people had come to dominate, and they are still the largest ethnic group in the area today. Both Muhammad Yusuf, the first Boko Haram leader, and Abubakar Shekau, his successor, are considered Kanuri. Bornu would establish a reputation by the eighteenth century as an important centre of Islamic learning.[12] Some 300 years later, Boko Haram would take root amid the remnants of that former empire, by then part of the nation of Nigeria.

* * *

The tale begins with the son of a king of Baghdad, or so one of the many different versions of the legend goes, who fought with his father and fled to Bornu before later arriving in Daura, located in today's north-central Nigeria. When a villager there told him he could only draw water from the well on Fridays because it was guarded by a snake, this wandering prince, named Bayajida, refused to listen. He went to the well anyway, and when the snake appeared, he cut off his head with his sword, freeing the people from the serpent's tyranny. The queen of Daura – it was ruled by a matriarchy at the time – was naturally impressed with this man's skill and bravery, and she decided to marry him. The queen and Bayajida had a boy, named Bawo, whose own sons would go on to found the seven states of Hausaland, which took shape west of

Bornu. Another seven states, known as the Banza Bakwai, or Bastard Seven, would also be founded.[13]

The story is obviously a myth, rich in symbolism – a heroic man from Arab royal stock freeing Daura from its older, traditional ways. Some have pointed to the similarities with Islamic traditional stories and suggest it may have been a useful way of describing the arrival of North African newcomers, who mixed with the local residents and formed what we now call the Hausa people.[14] The Hausa were not a distinct ethnic group, with the label given to the combination of people who spoke the language and who gradually coalesced.[15] Today, Hausa is the lingua franca of northern Nigeria.

It seems Islam began to make headway in Hausaland around the time Wangara gold traders and Muslim missionaries from other parts of West Africa flowed into the area in the 1300s. The first state to have a Muslim king was Kano, when Yaji dan Tsamiya ruled from 1349 to 1385. Other Hausa states would eventually move toward Islam as well, and the kingdoms' wealth and trading power grew strong. They were blessed with natural resources, trading nuts and other produce as well as ivory and gold. Slave trading was also practised. Hausaland became known for its leather and textile production; by one account it was considered the workshop of West Africa for a time. Its reputation spread to such a degree that Italian-speaking merchants arrived in Kano likely via Tripoli as early as the sixteenth century. Islamic learning deepened among the elites and literacy spread. Kano and Katsina battled it out – sometimes literally, as they were frequently at war – for the title of the most important trading centre in the region during the eighteenth century.[16] Today, Kano remains northern Nigeria's largest city, a bustling, crowded commercial centre. Its 'workshop of West Africa' glory faded, however, as the country's attention turned to oil. Some of the city's centuries-old textile dyeing pits remain in use as a reminder of its prosperous past.

While the Hausa had come to rule the kingdoms in the region, they were by no means the only people inhabiting them. On the margins of the main cities and towns in Hausaland, the Fulani were in certain ways divided between two worlds, living within the kingdom but with their own customs and ways of life, traditions dating back centuries. While certain Fulani clans were nomadic and cattle-herders, others were more stationary, tending to remain in one area for longer periods of time, forming their own communities that included subsistence

farming. Some clans, including the Toronkawa, gravitated toward Islamic teaching and their members travelled as itinerant scholars. They were speakers and readers of classical Arabic and were respected for their knowledge. One family that emerged from that clan and eventually settled in the Hausa kingdom of Gobir was that of Usman Dan Fodio.[17]

The young Dan Fodio showed promise as a scholar and preacher. His father taught him how to read and write in addition to studies of the Qur'an, and the community at Degel, where the family had settled, believed him to have certain powers that allowed him to control supernatural spirits, or djinns, even as a boy. After his father, another of his early teachers was a Tuareg named Sheikh Jibril Umar, a controversial figure at the time thanks to his strict beliefs. Umar had been influenced by the Wahhabi school of Islam, which had begun in part as a reform movement advocating a return to a purer version of the faith. Despite disagreements early on between Umar and Dan Fodio, who was brought up in the Sufi tradition, the learned and travelled scholar would have an important influence on the Shehu's life.[18]

Dan Fodio would begin preaching himself when he was 20 years old as a travelling holy man, which was common at the time. According to one biography, he deliberately lived an austere life, with 'only one pair of trousers, one turban, and one gown. He ate abstemiously and was uninterested in wealth and possessions, which he regarded as corrupting. He is said to have earned his food by twisting rope, an occupation he could carry on while reading or teaching.' He would also compose books and poems, both in Arabic and Fulfulde, the Fulani language. He would not, however, make it on pilgrimage to Mecca despite attempting when he was younger, when his father reeled him back.[19]

As the number of his followers expanded and a tide of Muslim reformers joined with him, Gobir's leaders would become increasingly worried. The balance between the Shehu's formal religious preachings and his sermons criticising the injustices of the day is difficult to determine, but both were part of his movement. It allowed the reformists to gain backers from those who were at the time still believers in the ancient religions, helping to usher in a profound change in the culture and history of what is today northern Nigeria. Dan Fodio also would have benefited from 'Mahdist' beliefs at the time – the idea among some Muslims that, when the end of the world is near, a messenger will appear,

similar to Christian ‘end times’ beliefs. Many likely saw the Shehu as the ‘Mahdi’, though he never claimed to be. The turn of the Islamic century in 1200 (1785 in the Gregorian calendar) would have added to such speculation, since Mahdist prophecies have often been associated with the end of the century.[20]

Gobir’s rulers would seek to crack down on the growing reform movement as they began to feel threatened by it. Around 1788, the sultan at the time, Bawa, hatched a plot to end the threat once and for all. He invited all of the Muslim reformists to his palace under the guise of a goodwill gesture to commemorate the Eid al-Adha holiday, but instead planned to kill them when they arrived. He thought better of it and abandoned the idea after seeing the large number of reformers who showed up – and instead offered the Shehu a gift. The Shehu, unbowed, refused the gift and used the occasion to demand better treatment for his followers.[21] Bawa, in a sign of the Shehu’s growing power, would agree to five important concessions: the Shehu would be allowed to convert people; those who wished to convert would be allowed to do so; that ‘any man with a turban’ – a Muslim, that is – should not be harassed; prisoners should be freed; and Gobir residents should not be unfairly taxed.[22]

That was, however, by no means the end of the struggle. Sultan Nafata reversed Bawa’s earlier commitments, issuing a number of proclamations aimed at cutting off the reform movement. They included outlawing anyone from preaching except the Shehu and the banning of turbans and veils. Sons would also not be allowed to abandon their father’s faith, and converts were ordered to return to their ancestors’ beliefs. Such blanket restrictions were unlikely to ever work in practice, and the laws were a failure, prompting an even harsher response from Nafata, who later had members of the Shehu’s family detained.[23]

The Shehu would begin having what he described as mystic visions in 1789, when he was 36, and these experiences would have a major effect on him and his movement. As he wrote himself in his Wird, or Litany, the Shehu believed that the Prophet Muhammad had appeared to him along with Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, the founder of the Sufi order to which he belonged, the Qadirriyi. A key vision would appear to him in 1794, when the Shehu would see al-Jilani handing him the *saif al-haqq* – the ‘sword of truth’ or ‘sword of God’.[24]

When Yunfa came to the throne in Gobir, it would appear the Shehu would have an ally in him. He had by some accounts been his student, and the Shehu may have used his influence to help him become sultan. The turbulence of the

day would, however, bring them into direct conflict despite the fact that both had initially seemed intent on avoiding war. The assassination attempt at Yunfa's palace involving the misfiring musket may be at least partly legend – at least two versions of the story exist, including one where the Shehu used magical powers to avoid death – but the fighting that would break out later shows that the situation had intensified to the point where a compromise may have no longer been possible.[25]

A confrontation would provide the spark for the jihad. There are once again varying interpretations on what exactly happened in the incident, but it seems to have started with a Gobir raid on a Muslim community in Kebbi. Yunfa then took the drastic step of ordering the Shehu and his family to leave Degel, which he initially refused to do. Instead, the Shehu decided that the time had come for 'hijra', an imitation of the Prophet Muhammad's migration with his followers from Mecca to Medina. The community packed the few supplies it had and left for Gudu in February 1804, the books belonging to the ever-scholarly Shehu transported on the back of a camel.[26] Their journey marked the start of a rebellion – an armed jihad, to the Shehu's followers.

War would result, and the Muslim reformers would use their knowledge of classical Arab battle manoeuvres, religious conviction, skilled archers and a motley collection of fighters willing to join the cause for various reasons – Fulani, Hausa and Tuareg – to defeat the Gobir army. The Shehu, who was 50 at the time the jihad began, would be in charge, but he did not participate directly in the fighting. His son Muhammad Bello and his brother, Abdullahi, would be commanders in the field. Those fighting would include a large number of Islamic scholars, an indication of the idealistic community the Shehu had fostered. As Murray Last points out in his book *The Sokoto Caliphate*, when 2,000 fighters from the Muslim side were killed in one battle, 200 were said to have known the Qur'an by heart.[27] Not all of those fighting were as well intentioned, though. At one point during the trying campaign, the Shehu's brother Abdullahi grew weary as many of his fighters abandoned the movement's ideals and engaged in outright plunder. He tried to leave for Mecca, but was talked into remaining. In his biography of the Shehu, Mervyn Hiskett quotes from one of Abdullahi's poems, where he laments their thievery and lack of morals:When my companions passed away and my aims went awryI was left behind among the remainder, the liarswho say that which they do not do and follow their own desires.[28] By October 1808, the Muslims, despite having begun

the war under-equipped and with few supplies, would have the Gobir army on the run. A final assault would occur that month, when Yunfa's men were unable to stop an invasion of the capital, Alkalawa. Yunfa himself was among those killed.[29] The Shehu had encouraged Muslim leaders in other Hausa states to also rise up and fight for the cause, and many did, extending the jihad beyond what Dan Fodio's army could have accomplished on its own. What would result over the following years would be what we now call the Sokoto Caliphate. It would last nearly a century, at one point including much of today's northern Nigeria and beyond.[30] It would be wrong to think of it as a cohesive and united nation state; it was instead a very loose collection of allied 'emirates', with the caliph in Sokoto as the central power.

Sokoto's history should not be romanticised. The war that led to it was brutal, leaving behind destroyed villages and scores of dead. There has also been evidence of extreme, barbaric punishments during the time of the caliphate, including impaling prisoners or burying them alive. It is not clear how common such punishments were. Slavery and slave-raiding were also widespread and an integral part of society, and all of these practices must be factored into any judgement about the caliphate's place in history.

At the same time, its positive aspects must not be cast aside, either. It was a relatively stable society throughout its century-long existence, and in some ways could be considered a natural outgrowth of the region's history, or at least a more natural process than what was soon to follow. Its emphasis on education and literacy also stands in stark contrast to the nihilistic violence of Boko Haram, whose kidnappings of girls and slaughtering of boys in their school dormitories show it to be a very different and perverse movement – a betrayal of the Shehu's vision.

'As an example of state-building, it was truly remarkable', Murray Last, author of *The Sokoto Caliphate*, wrote recently, while also cautioning that its dark side must not be overlooked:

> It witnessed almost no rebellions or schisms, famines or epidemics, and it was economically successful as well, with trade and manufacturing in the region expanding as never before and merchants who travelled far and wide. Its reformist leaders wrote more than three hundred books. [31]

The late Mervyn Hiskett, who wrote extensively on Islam's advance into West Africa and particularly northern Nigeria, has written that the region's nineteenth-

century jihads set in motion a wave of social change. ‘Not only were they military and political victories for literates over non-literates, to a large extent; they also intensified literate activity in areas where Islam was already established and they introduced it into areas where it had never before existed.’ Such an emphasis on literacy included education for women,[32] and Dan Fodio’s daughter became a renowned poet and scholar, following in her father’s learned footsteps.

Hiskett continued later: ‘What the final result of this process of change might have been, if Africans had been left to work things out for themselves, can only be guessed at; but they were not left to do this.’[33]

* * *

The letter stood as a final set of instructions, and it involved a mission of such audacity that considering it now evokes both awe at its daringness and disgust at its intent. Sir George Taubman Goldie, an intense but private man who enjoyed reading and who was doggedly committed to extending the British Empire, was the letter’s author. He wrote forthrightly and clearly, setting down the mission’s goals and some of its dangers. The recipient of the letter was Frederick Lugard, then a 36-year-old who had served various roles in Afghanistan, India, Burma and East Africa. He had been hired by Goldie to lead an expedition to an area of West Africa known as Borgu, located in parts of today’s Benin and Nigeria. In one section, Goldie favourably described one of the men who was to be travelling with Lugard and touched on the problem of drinking.

‘You will find him docile and active, while his constitution is thoroughly acclimatized – an immense advantage in Western Africa’, Goldie wrote. ‘I believe him to be thoroughly sober, but there are few men in West Africa whom I should trust too far with the care of liquors; the depressing climate predisposing the best men to take stimulants unduly.’[34]

The mission set out in the letter, written on 24 July 1894, was to be on behalf of the Royal Niger Company, and Lugard was due to travel soon to West Africa aboard a steamer leaving from Liverpool. The Royal Niger Company by then was officially chartered by Britain and had worked to open up the interior of what is today Nigeria to trade. The French and Germans had been at the same game, penetrating into African territory as far as possible to cut out coastal middlemen and lock up new markets. Goldie was particularly concerned about the French, who, according to him, had been entering into dubious treaties with

local chiefs who did not have the authority to do so. To counter this, he called on Lugard, a restless former military officer and explorer who had been lauded for his work in East Africa. In the letter, Goldie told Lugard that he was to arrive at the port of Akassa in the Niger Delta region, journey upriver 550 miles to Jebba, then head westward on land towards Borgu. In places where no treaties between the French and the local rulers existed, he was to do his best to obtain a declaration saying so and seek to sign his own. Goldie also warned Lugard 'to remember, above all, that diplomacy and not conquest is the object of your expedition westwards'.

'The French Press for the last six years have incessantly boasted that French officers and travellers, with (or even without) a single French companion and with very few native carriers and armed men, are able to cross new regions peacefully, and acquire valuable treaty rights where Englishmen can only make their way by force, leaving behind them a hatred and fear of Europeans. I do not for a moment admit the truth of this; but it is possible that, in regions where Europe has absolutely no military power, the gaiety, cajolery and sympathetic manner of the French have more effect in obtaining treaties than the sterner and colder manners of our countrymen.'

Goldie also told Lugard that he should try to collect as much information on the places he encountered as possible 'and to bring home for investigation any specimens of rock or sand which the natives assure you contain gold. The gradual lightening of your loads as you proceed will enable you to do this on a considerable scale.' He was also informed to be on the lookout for gum trees, shea butter trees and rubber vines.[35]

Lugard was a natural choice to lead such an expedition. He had made his name in Uganda with the Imperial British East Africa Company. A month before receiving his instructions from Goldie, he had written to his brother saying that he was 'pledged to W. Africa, and apart from W. Africa, my life is pledged to Africa. I would not chuck my life's work'.[36] One should not take that to mean he had a bleeding heart of altruistic intentions. He, too, was committed to the British Empire, and what he was mainly pledged to seems to have been his government's mission on the continent – though he would later call it the 'dual mandate', or advancing the British cause while also improving the lives of Africans.[37] At the same time, Lugard was also a complicated and curious man, and his life had up to that point taken drastic turns. His military career was

derailed when he set off on a doomed pursuit of a woman, which left him distraught and in search of new adventures. As a result, he was to embark on his first of many missions into a region that would eventually come to define his life and legacy.[38] As Lugard would later write, he would travel to areas where no European was believed to have been. In the thick of the Borgu expedition, he wrote to a friend in England in October 1894 from Camp Kiama in the 'Niger Territories', frightened because he had been warned that he and his party were set to be attacked. Two weeks later, he wrote again, saying the attack did not happen and seeming to be embarrassed that he had panicked.

'I am very vexed with myself for having mentioned the matter', Lugard wrote. 'I had just been sent for by the king in the night, and naturally my mind was full of the matter, for I thoroughly believed in its truth. Suffice it to say that I am travelling in a part of Africa which does not bear a good name – that I find my way very full of difficulties. No European has been here before.'

More than two weeks after that, he would indeed be attacked, and Lugard himself was hit in the head with what may or may not have been a poisonous arrow. He set out the details in another letter to the same friend.

> These people of Borgu are famed for their treachery, and I have had occasion to prove it. After welcoming me most hospitably, and exchanging presents, etc., they arranged a night attack on me. The old local chief of the town was not in the plot, and opposed it very strongly. Being helpless against the 'princes' who had hatched the design, he sent and warned me – but I already had the news. The hostile party then gave up the night surprise, and determined to attack us openly as we started on our march. Their object was to loot all our goods, and kill or drive us away. They got a severe lesson, but I was myself hit in the head by a poisoned arrow. The Borgus are celebrated through this part of Africa for their deadly poisons. The arrow penetrated the skull a good way, and was so firmly wedged in it that it required very great force to extract it. Fortunately it was not one of the common barbed ones, and was merely a straight spike. I ate all kinds of filth that was given me as antidotes against the poison, and whether amongst them I took a really effectual remedy I do not know. Anyway the wound has given me no trouble whatever, and is now healing rapidly. [39]

Lugard would succeed in the main goal of his journey and conclude a treaty with Nikki, the capital of Borgu, on 10 November, ahead of the French by 16 days. It would be dubbed a 'steeplechase', won by Lugard, though he would later say that those using that word would have chosen a different one if they were familiar with the trudging pace of the expedition's donkeys.[40] He would later head back south to Akassa before deciding to move north again after falling ill in the delta's humid climate and taking large amounts of quinine to avoid contracting malaria.[41] His Nigerian adventure was only beginning.

* * *

European interference in what is today Nigeria dates back centuries before Lugard's Borgu expedition. The Portuguese arrived in the kingdom of Benin in today's south-western Nigeria in the fifteenth century and began trading in pepper and slaves. The British arrived later, seeking to muscle in on Portugal's dominance of trade in the region.[42] By the mid-nineteenth century, Britain and other European countries had outlawed slavery, and changes were sweeping across not only their countries, where Enlightenment ideas were taking hold, but also West Africa, which was seeing trade patterns shift dramatically. Britain was seeking palm oil to help power the industrial revolution back home, and it wanted to penetrate into the interior of West Africa to cut out middlemen and trade directly. The so-called 'scramble for Africa' would also play out between European powers seeking to expand their footholds on the continent in search of new markets and vital resources. For the British, a focused and determined Goldie would take on the role of pushing further inland, first through his United Africa Company, which saw him bring together several trading outfits, and later with the Royal Niger Company, which would be chartered by the British government after initial reluctance to do so, with concerns of overextending in the region. The results of Goldie's pursuit of furthering the Empire would have far-reaching consequences, and some would later label him, with or without irony, 'the founder of modern Nigeria'.[43]

By the time Goldie turned to Lugard for the Borgu mission, the British had already established a fully fledged colony in Lagos and protectorates in the Niger Delta and parts of Yorubaland in the south-west. Christian missionaries had also been arriving in southern Nigeria, bringing with them new beliefs, Western forms of education and a desire to eradicate slavery. Despite reluctance among many in Britain for further colonial expansion because of the costs involved, among other reasons, a combination of factors moved the country gradually in that direction. First, as Goldie and others sought to open up more markets, security was a major problem. Fighting in Yorubaland disrupted trade, and African middlemen retaliated against British traders who sought to penetrate further inland and break their hold on the market. Disputes over pricing and other matters related to trade also broke out regularly.

Beyond that, there had also been a major effort to halt slave trading along the

coast, with British ships pursuing and stopping slave ships leaving the region. The bid to stop slave trafficking was no doubt to a large degree altruistic, driven by Enlightenment ideas that were changing the world, but it also worked hand in hand with Britain's goal of expanding its own trade. If African traders could not deal in slaves, a more lucrative business, they would opt for palm oil, which Britain needed. British officials would also remove local leaders based on their involvement in the slave industry.[44]

Another important factor was that competition among European nations over African territory was intensifying. In 1884, negotiations began in Berlin among the major European powers – the so-called Berlin Conference – that would stretch into the next year and reach decisions on how to divvy up the continent among them. Judging from the results, one could mistakenly believe that the Europeans must not have realised that ancient, functioning societies existed in the locations that they were carving up on paper. They of course knew better.

Britain's punitive expeditions in today's Nigeria to end slavery as well as bring local chiefs and kingdoms in line with the Empire's will would have devastating consequences. Perhaps the worst example occurred in 1897, when an overwhelming British force of some 1,500 men was sent to the kingdom of Benin, centred in part of what is today's south-western Nigeria. A dispute had arisen over trade as well as the kingdom's continued use of human sacrifice and slavery. After a treaty was signed covering those three issues, a British party sought to visit the kingdom to ensure the treaty was being followed. When it drew near, the king's messengers informed them that it was not an appropriate time to visit and that they must turn back. Fighting erupted and resulted in a massacre on the British side, with six from the British party killed including the protectorate's acting consul-general along with most of the 200 or so African troops travelling with them. In response, the force of 1,500 was sent to Benin's capital, Gwato, and reduced it to ashes. As the historian Michael Crowder has noted, the punitive expedition 'marked the end of one of the greatest and most colourful of West African kingdoms'.[45] One legacy of the assault can be found today in far-away London. Many of the now-famous Benin brass plaques, produced by skilled artisans in the kingdom in the sixteenth century, were carted off. Some remain on display in the British Museum.

Despite the presence of the British, the Sokoto Caliphate founded by Usman Dan Fodio remained in power, but it would soon fall. Lugard would be the driving force, having been appointed high commissioner of the newly formed

British protectorate of northern Nigeria in 1900. In one letter to his brother in February of that year, he talks of the beauty of the site of his house in Jebba on the River Niger. He was writing from Lokoja, at the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers in central Nigeria, located south-east of Jebba, and the protectorate's administrative capital at the time. He expressed pride in the progress he had made so far in setting up an administration in the new protectorate despite battling through illness. He wrote to his brother Edward:

> Personally I have a house on a most exquisite site at Jebba – a superb view. I have had furniture sent out, enormous cases of writing tables, folding tables, sofas, armchairs, Almiras, wardrobes, marble wash-stands, chests of drawers, settees, & chairs of rosewood, &c, ice machines, huge sets of china (120 dinner plates &c), & of glass and electro-plate – carpets, utensils, every mortal thing, as furniture of Govt. House – had to have a small room enlarged to hold it – looks very well now, & I've dined 6 guests every Wednesday. So I really feel a start has been made even in so short a time. [46]

Lugard and Goldie, the two men who would be, for better or worse, largely responsible for the creation of modern-day Nigeria, had also become friends, and they exchanged letters about their struggles as well as more personal anecdotes. In one letter from July 1900, Goldie, who had struggled over the death of his wife two years earlier, seemed in better spirits, having just returned from a trip to China. His Royal Niger Company had been bought out by the British government at the start of the year in 1900 to make way for the new protectorates, and his work in West Africa would be all but done.[47] 'I believe I have reached a plane of stoicism (not hard heartedness) from which nothing can dislodge me', wrote a 54-year-old Goldie. 'I have a few friends (you among the chief) and I want no more.'[48]

As for Lugard, he had struck up a relationship with a well-regarded journalist named Flora Shaw. She had travelled extensively, and she suggested in her writings that Britain's territories along the River Niger in West Africa be given the name Nigeria.[49] In 1902, she and Lugard married.

Within a few years, Lugard's efforts to bring northern Nigeria – all of the Sokoto Caliphate as well as the remnants of the Bornu Empire – under one administration were coming to a head. He had been carrying out his version of 'indirect rule', the idea, also used elsewhere, that the British would govern through the local authorities, meaning the emirs and the existing structure of the caliphate, though they would have the final word on all matters. He had decided on such an arrangement mainly because the British did not have nearly enough

people on the ground to even come close to effectively governing a region as large as northern Nigeria, though he also spoke of his desire not to interfere in religious beliefs and of instituting reforms gradually.[50]

While the caliphate's Islamic ideals may have been severely compromised in its final years, with its later leaders far less attached to the vision of the Shehu, the state itself appeared to remain in somewhat functioning order.[51] Lugard would, however, argue otherwise when he later pushed for a military assault in his correspondence with the Colonial Office in London. He also acted with a firm hand when he believed it was necessary, replacing non-compliant emirs from a combination of humanitarian concerns and hard-nosed practicality. The humanitarian aspect involved the continued use of slave raiding and attacks on other communities by certain emirs, which Lugard insisted must end. But those reasons often seemed to mix with a more simple desire to install someone willing to cooperate with Lugard on his terms.

By 1902, much of the region had been subdued, but the main leaders of the caliphate had no intention of giving up control to the Christians. A series of controversial letters between Lugard and the caliph showed the dicey diplomacy being engaged in by both sides. One in particular would become the subject of debate in later years, with doubts since raised over whether it had been badly misinterpreted or misrepresented – a vital point, since Lugard used it when arguing in favour of the raid that would lead to the caliphate's downfall.[52] It was said to have come from the caliph at the time, Abdurrahman, who had earlier been informed in letters from Lugard that he was replacing the emirs of Bida and Kontagora, which were part of the caliphate.

'From us to you. I do not consent that any one from you should ever dwell with us', read a British translation from its original Arabic into English of the letter received in May 1902. 'I will never agree with you. I will have nothing ever to do with you. Between us and you there are no dealings except as between Mussulmans and Unbelievers ("Kafiri") War, as God Almighty has enjoined on us. There is no power or strength save in God on high. This with salutations.'[53]

Later that year, in October 1902, the murder of a British officer named Captain Moloney in Keffi set off a final chain of events leading to an assault on Kano. The murderer was the Magaji – a high-ranking official there – though the circumstances of what happened have been in dispute. The Magaji then took refuge in Kano, where the emir welcomed him, all but inviting a firm response

from the British. In convincing the British government of the need for military action, Lugard quoted from the caliph's hostile letter as a way of responding 'to the strong feeling which you inform me exists in England that Military Operations should if possible be avoided, and the desirability of conciliatory measures'. After quoting the letter, he wrote that 'to send a messenger to Kano would probably be tantamount to condemning him to death and courting insult myself'. Lugard then wrote in striking language of what he clearly saw as the righteousness of the British campaign, literally labelling it a mission ordained by God, and spoke of the noble goal of wiping out slavery and barbaric punishments. He also argued that the Fulani rulers of the caliphate had come to be seen as oppressors by Hausa commoners and brutal slave masters.

> The advocates of conciliation at any price who protest against Military Operations in Northern Nigeria appear to forget that their nation has assumed before God and the civilised world the responsibility of maintaining peace and good order in the area declared as a British Protectorate and that the towns of Kano and Sokoto are ruled by an alien race who buy and sell the people of the country in large public slave markets daily, these being now – thanks to the British rule – the last remaining centres of this traffic. That methods of cruelty involving a complete disregard for human suffering are daily practised. Underground dungeons in which men are placed and left to starve, public mutilation in the market places, bribery in the so-called Courts, oppression and extortion in the whole scheme of rule. The Military Operations so much deprecated have, in the great cities of Bida, of Kontagora, of Yola, of Bautshi, of Illorin, of Zaria and elsewhere led to the suppression of these things, while the Fulani caste, though aliens, have been re-instated and treated with honour and consideration. The bulk of the population is on our side, those who oppose us are their oppressors. The task upon which I am employed is one of prevention of the daily bloodshed which has already denuded this country of probably half its population and even the suppression of the forces of tyranny and unrest has been achieved with almost no bloodshed at all. [54]

Lugard laid out his strategy ahead of the assault, telling the Colonial Office that he did not expect significant resistance in Kano and would not need further troops. After taking Kano, the soldiers were then to travel through Katsina on their way to Sokoto. The plan was to send a letter to Katsina ahead of the deployment's arrival which was, according to Lugard, 'conciliatory in tone'. It would, however, state that the emir had been uncooperative and 'the time has come when Government must declare its Sovereignty and assert its right to send Officials without molestation to any place within the Protectorate'. A similar letter would be sent to Sokoto, but would also state that the late caliph – who had recently died – had ignored the treaty made with the Royal Niger Company. 'Both letters contain strong assurances that it is not my intention to interfere in any way whatever with the Mohammedan religion or the position of the Sultan of Sokoto as the Head of the Faith', Lugard wrote. He then again wrote of the

Fulani rulers as brutal dictators and returned to his insistence that the British mission was just and noble.

The Fulani race are aliens to the country whose population they have oppressed. Their power has become effete and their rule has degenerated in most places into a tyranny. They recognise themselves that their day is past [...] At this crucial moment the task of setting up the Pax Britannica in the country was assigned to me. My policy has been to retain the Fulani as a ruling caste, but to transfer to the Government the Suzerainty which they claimed by right of conquest involving as it does the ultimate right to the Land and Minerals of Nigeria. [55]

The stage was then set for the British deployment under Colonel T.L.N. Morland, whose expedition left Zaria for Kano on 29 January 1903. It included nearly 800 troops from the West African Frontier Force – African soldiers led by British officers – as well as four Maxims, the machine guns that gave the British such an advantage in firepower.[56] They would not face much resistance. On the way to Kano, the company would have to fight its way through the town of Bebeji, blasting through the gate and leaving the king, two chiefs and some 30 others dead. When they reached Kano, they encountered earthen walls and fortifications surrounding the city so imposing that Lugard would later write that he had 'never seen, nor even imagined, anything like it in Africa'. Parts of it were 30 to 50 feet high and 40 feet thick. The walls themselves were testimony to the ancient civilisation in Kano, with construction having begun on them in the eleventh century.[57] Morland was not able to enter at the so-called Zaria gate, so he moved to the next one, which his men blasted through, then stormed the town, killing about 300 of the emir's soldiers. The emir himself was said to have fled to Sokoto about a month earlier. A letter was sent to the caliph in Sokoto from Morland seeking to explain the reasons for the British expedition, but stating bluntly that they were there to stay.

After salutations know that the cause of our fighting with Aliu [the emir of Kano] is that Aliu received with honour Magaji, the murderer of a white man, when he came to Kano, and that he also sought war between us. For those two reasons we fought him and are now sitting in his house.

We are coming to Sokoto and from this time and for ever a white man and soldiers will sit down in the Sokoto country. We have prepared for war because Abdu Sarikin Muslimin [the late caliph] said there was nothing between us but war. But we do not want war unless you yourself seek war. If you receive us in peace, we will not enter your house, we will not harm you or any of your people.

If you desire to become our friend you must not receive the Magaji. More, we desire you to seek him with your utmost endeavour and place him in our hands.

If you are loyal to us, you will remain in your position as Sarikin Muslimin, fear not.

If you desire to be loyal to us, it is advisable for you that you should send your big messenger to meet us at Kaura (or on whatever road we follow). Then he will return to you with all our words.

My present to you is five pieces of brocade. [58]

The caliph responded with his own letter saying he would have to discuss the situation with his councillors. Lugard felt the response to be ‘evasive’, and the expedition, some of whose soldiers were by then suffering from lung sickness as a result of the dusty Harmattan wind, moved toward Sokoto, joining up with another party of about 200 troops along the way in Argungu. When they arrived, they were met by around 4,500 Sokoto fighters, including some 1,500 on horseback. Lugard wrote later that ‘the Sokoto army contained many fanatics, who charged our square in ones and twos, and courted certain death, but except for these the resistance shown was feeble, and the whole army was soon in full flight, pursued by our mounted infantry’. He put the Sokoto army’s death toll at 70 dead and 200 wounded, while the British side had one killed and one wounded.[59]

The conquest of the proud Sokoto Caliphate was at hand, and Lugard would arrive in the city on 19 March 1903. The caliph had fled and intended to make it to Mecca, with thousands eventually following him on his journey. A British force caught up with him at Burmi near the River Gongola and, according to Lugard, ‘was opposed (on July 27th) with great determination and fanaticism. The town was taken after a fight which lasted till dusk, and about 700 of the enemy were killed, including the ex-sultan and most of the chiefs.’ The man who had murdered Captain Moloney, the Magaji, also died there. The ex-emir of Kano, Aliyu, had travelled north ‘disguised as a salt merchant’, but was captured by the local authorities in Gobir. He was sent further south, where he was given a place to live and an allowance.[60]

Lugard addressed the remaining elders in Sokoto on 20 March 1903, instructing them to decide on a recommendation for who would be the new sultan. He told them ‘there will be no interference with your religion’. The following day, he spoke plainly about the British now being in charge, saying ‘the treaty was killed by you yourselves and not by me’. Lugard said:

The Fulani in old times under Dan Fodio conquered this country. They took the right to rule over it, to levy taxes, to depose kings and to create kings. They in turn have by defeat lost their rule which has come into the hands of the British. All these things which I have said the Fulani by conquest took the right to do now pass to the British. Every Sultan and Emir and the principal officers of State will be appointed by the High

Commissioner throughout all this country. [61]

It was not the end of the resistance the British would face in northern Nigeria, with a number of uprisings occurring in later years led by Muslim Mahdists, who believed the world would soon end and that it would be preceded by the coming of a redeemer, or the Mahdi. The uprisings, however, sometimes had little to do with religion and saw criminals or runaway slaves take advantage of such beliefs to whip up anti-establishment sentiment. That was the case in Satiru near Sokoto in 1906, the site of a particularly brutal uprising against the British. A man named Dan Makafo, described by Lugard as ‘an outlaw from French territory’, seems to have persuaded the son of a leader of a previous such movement to become head of a new uprising. When the acting British Resident for Sokoto received word of what was occurring, he rode to the village with a mounted infantry company. According to Lugard, the mission was aimed at negotiating a peaceful solution, but ‘a series of mistakes were made, which ended in a complete disaster’.

Upon reaching Satiru, the Resident moved ahead of the rest of the company and shouted that he had come in peace, but the commander of the troops became concerned and rode forward to catch up. The movement prompted those gathered at Satiru to charge against the company while the resident and his entourage remained unprotected. ‘The horses took fright, and a general melee ensued’, Lugard wrote. The acting resident was killed along with the assistant resident and the commander of the troops and 25 soldiers. The medical officer on the mission later provided a detailed description of what they had encountered after they had arrived on a ridge and the village with a ‘good number of huts’ came into view. After the confusion and the charge by those in the village, hand-to-hand fighting broke out.

‘I managed to catch a horse and was going to mount when some men ran at me’, read an account provided by the medical officer, Martin F. Ellis:

One killed my horse with a spear, and a second one I shot with my revolver. The third lunged at me with a spear and stuck it in my right shoulder. A trooper Moma Wurrikin then came up and shot the man who wounded me and then caught me a horse and lifted me into the saddle. The same trooper then rushed cross to [assistant resident] Mr. Scott who had got free from the enemy for a few moments but could not catch his horse which had broken loose, caught the horse and gave him it and then mounted his own. On Mr. Scott trying to mount, a man thrust at him and knocked him back off the horse, and he was then attacked by several men on the ground. Sergeant Gosling then came up from the right and helped me to keep in my saddle assisted by Private Arzika Sokoto and afterwards put on a tourniquet and stop the artery bleeding. As

I was quite unable to mount Moma Wurrikin undoubtedly saved my life and tried his best to save Mr. Scott's, shooting at the enemy as he went to and fro. [62]

The incident left the British stunned, and Lugard would leave little doubt about how he intended to deal with such violence. He sent a company of troops to wipe out the uprising.

'The enemy made several brave charges, and resisted the troops hand to hand in the village', wrote Lugard, but they were no match for the British forces. 'The village of Satiru was razed to the ground, and the Serikin Muslimin (sultan of Sokoto) pronounced a curse upon anyone who should again rebuild it or till its fields.'

The local authorities, including the sultan of Sokoto, had remained loyal to the British throughout. 'It is permissible to call these people "rebels", for they were fighting not merely against the British suzerainty, but against the native Administration, and the Sultan of Sokoto was at one time in great fear lest his own city might be carried away by the infection', Lugard wrote in his annual report.[63] More than a century later, when Boko Haram would target Nigeria's traditional rulers as part of its insurgency – including an assassination attempt on the revered emir of Kano – Lugard's description would echo in a familiar way.

* * *

The Satiru uprising would be among the last challenges Lugard would face before leaving Nigeria, a dozen years after embarking on the Borgu expedition for Goldie's Royal Nigeria Company, but he was to return. After a stint in Hong Kong, Lugard was reassigned to Nigeria in 1912 to oversee the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates – creating the outline of the country that exists today. The amalgamation officially occurred on New Year's Day 1914, with Lugard as governor-general.

Lugard, like the colonial era itself, can now be judged in the light of history. When writing on the administration of northern Nigeria, he displayed his sweeping intelligence and understanding of the Sokoto Caliphate and the history that led to it. 'We are here the inheritors of a civilization, which ranked high in the world when the British Isles were in a state of barbarism, – a civilization which later, through the Moors, placed Spain in the foremost rank of culture and progress', he wrote in 1905.

The races of Hausaland have from time immemorial been accustomed to taxation on the lines adopted by

modern nations, graduated taxes on property, death duties, ad valorem dues and the like. They have for ages lived under a system of rule through graduated offices and specialised functions in each department of State. The Fulani rulers of today are educated gentlemen, who are fully able to appreciate our ideas of progress, their judges are deeply versed in Mohammedan law and are imbued with the fundamental principle of its impartiality. [64]

Yet, despite such understanding, he was a man of his era, and the profoundly unjust views that led to colonialism could perhaps be summed up by a brief passage in another letter Lugard wrote in 1908 to a successor in Nigeria. After being informed that one of the colonial officers there ‘apparently affects native dress and has married a native’, he responded indignantly:

Webster, you say, has married a black woman! He ought to be cleared out *at once*. [65]

2

‘His Preachings Were Things that People Could Identify With’

It had been nearly a week of violence in July 2009 and Mohammed Yusuf stood shirtless, a bandage on his left arm, a soldier to his right wearing camouflage and a chin-strapped army helmet. Others in the room held up their mobile phones as someone off-camera put questions to him, recording the inglorious end to his violent, short-lived uprising. The most wanted man in Nigeria had been captured, found in his father-in-law’s barn. His mosque now sat in ruins.

Yusuf responded calmly and matter-of-factly, though he looked far more haggard than he had only days before, when he sat before a crowd at his mosque, dressed in a white robe and fez-like cap, and denounced the same security forces now surrounding him, stirring the anger of his followers, who shouted ‘Allahu Akbar!’ in response. He perhaps could have predicted that he would not make it through the day alive, but he gave no hint of it while answering his interrogator’s questions.

‘We went to your house yesterday. We saw lots of domestic animals; we saw medical facilities; we saw materials [another voice mentions materials for making bombs] that you assemble. What are you going to do with these things?’, Yusuf was asked in Hausa.

‘As I said, I use these things to protect myself’, Yusuf responds.

‘To protect yourself – is there no constituted authority to protect you? Is there no constituted authority to protect you?’

‘It is the constituted authority that is fighting me.’

‘What have you done to warrant authorities going after you?’

‘I don’t know what I have done. It is because I propagate Islam.’

When the questioner tells Yusuf that he, too, is a Muslim, Yusuf says, ‘I don’t know the reason why you reject my own Islam.’

‘You have said Western education is forbidden?’

‘Yes, Western education is forbidden.’[1]

Yusuf had by then become something of a folk hero to his followers and a marked man for the security forces. He was 39 and had been repeatedly arrested, but always found himself later released, welcomed back to his neighbourhood in Maiduguri by adoring crowds. Some described him as a reluctant fighter, content to continue to build his movement by preaching the evils of Western influence, condemning evolution and denying that the Earth is a sphere. Whether or not he had truly been pushed toward violence earlier than he would have liked, he was certainly convinced by the time of his capture, with Maiduguri having been shaken in the days before by gun battles in the streets and a relentlessly brutal military assault in response. Terrified residents fled like refugees. There would be no question of Yusuf’s release this time. Amid a crowd of soldiers in a drab room, the interrogator continued his line of questioning. He sought to force Yusuf to explain his opposition to Western education while at the same time embracing other elements of Western culture.

‘How is it forbidden? What about the (Western-style) trousers you are wearing?’

‘There are several reasons why Western education is forbidden. The trouser is cotton, and cotton is the property of Allah’, Yusuf said.

It was the kind of logic that Yusuf had been preaching for years and what brought him increasingly into conflict with his early mentors. For all its obvious flaws, his philosophy and sometimes odd interpretations of the Qur’an appealed to young men in Maiduguri, a city once known as a crossroads and major market as the capital of Borno state, whose reputation for Islamic learning had been widespread. It was now seen as a place whose restless, unemployed youth, corrupt politics and unforgiving poverty had helped induce a violent uprising by a seemingly bizarre religious sect led by Yusuf. His interrogator pushed ahead on the same line of questioning.

‘You know Allah urges us to acquire knowledge. There is even the chapter of the Qur’an that makes that clear’, he told Yusuf.

‘But not the type of knowledge that goes against Islam. Any type of knowledge that contradicts Islam, Allah does not allow you to acquire it. Take magic. Allah has created its knowledge, but He does not allow you to practise it.

The path of godlessness is based on knowledge, but Allah has disapproved of that type of knowledge. Astronomy[2] is knowledge; again, Allah has prohibited such knowledge.'

'When they went to your house, they saw computers, other equipment and hospital facilities. Are these things not products of knowledge?'

'These are technological products. Western education is different. Western education is Westernisation.'

'How is it you are eating good food – see how you are looking very healthy. You drive fine cars, you eat good food, you wear fine clothes, but you direct your followers to wear these things [referring to ragged clothing], and then you give them only water and dates, then you tell them to go and sell their property?'

'No, no. It is not like that. Everybody lives according to his means; everybody has his means in his hands. Even you are all of different means. Everybody lives according to his means. Anybody living in affluence, driving a fine car, must have the means to do so. The other person that does not have those things, he simply does not have the means.'

Yusuf could have simply refused to answer, declined to participate in a debate with a man from the Nigerian security forces, whose members had just gunned down his followers and destroyed his mosque. He instead responded in detail, seeking to convince his doubters. It is worth asking whether Yusuf assumed the recording of his interrogation would one day become public.

'Why did you leave the premises of your mosque?'

'The reason is because you have come and dispersed the people staying in the place.'

'You have sent people to fight. As their commander you should have stayed with them.'

'My followers have left.'

'Where did they go to when they left?'

'They have left.'

After more back and forth on where his followers escaped to and questions about the location of his headquarters, Yusuf was asked who was 'assisting' him.

‘It is said that you have soldiers, you also have police, you have everything, and you are organised?’

‘No, that is not true.’

Asked who his assistant was, he named Abubakar Shekau and added that he did not know where he was.

‘You have all run away together with your followers. Where are the remaining people? How many people ran away?’

‘It is not everybody who runs.’

‘Who are the people who are assisting you internally and externally in the jihad you have declared?’

‘There is nobody from outside.’

‘No, no.’

‘By Allah, I will not lie to you. By Allah, I will not lie to you.’

He was asked whether he had a farm and admitted that he did, then the interrogators questioned him on the violence.

‘Now you have caused the death of innocent people because of your views in the community.’

‘The people who died are those that you have killed yourselves.’

‘What about the killings done by your followers?’

‘My followers did not kill people.’

‘All those that have been killed?’

‘It is my followers who have been killed.’

‘Yes?’

‘All those who killed them are the real offenders.’

* * *

The rise of a man like Mohammed Yusuf in north-eastern Nigeria might seem predictable. The once-proud region and centre of Islamic learning, home to the ancient Kanem-Bornu Empire east of the Sokoto Caliphate that had long ago dominated West Africa, its power resonating into the Arab world, has fallen on hard times more recently. As Nigeria’s oil economy led to the neglect of other

industries and corruption flourished, the north-east struggled. The region, for so long a crossroads of ideas and trade in the scrubby savannah near Lake Chad and the Sahara desert, trailed much of the rest of the country in education and wealth by the time Yusuf began building his movement. In 2000–1, the north-east had the smallest number of students admitted to Nigerian universities – 4 per cent of the country's total.[3]

The poor state of education in the north has resulted from an array of causes. It is rooted in history, including suspicions over Western education and its purpose, as well as access to proper schools and families unable to afford to send their children to classes. The British colonial administration did manage to establish a certain number of quality schools, but the Christian missionaries who promoted Western education throughout the south during the colonial era were largely denied access to the north. Reasons included resistance from northern Nigerian leaders themselves as well as from Lugard, who argued that the region's culture and religion should be left intact to as great a degree as possible. Qur'anic and Islamic education remain an important part of the culture, and in many cases they can be of high quality, though there have been accusations of fly-by-night schools also existing, provoking concern over whether they are simply churning out roadside beggars and potential extremists. In any case, the dilemma facing northern Nigeria is clear: the days of the region's trade and interests being orientated toward the Arab world have long since passed, and failing to adapt to the reality of today's Nigeria holds obvious dangers. Even now, the outlines of a feudal culture remain in place, with emirs living behind palace walls while hangers-on gather outside. The emirs' power is mainly ceremonial, but in a country where patronage and traditional links play an integral role, they wield important influence. Such influence can be quite positive, with traditional rulers working to mediate conflict and serve as voices of reason, such as efforts toward Muslim–Christian dialogue by the sultan of Sokoto, for example. But the approach of each of the emirs varies, and the potential for abuse of power is evident. They, too, would become targets for Boko Haram, viewed as part of the same elite lacking true Islamic values and which has robbed the country of its riches for so long.

While cultural and historical factors have certainly played a part, it is Nigeria's legendary corruption and mismanagement that have been most responsible for the current condition of the north-east and the country as a whole. Nigerians of all ethnicities and origins have lost any faith they may have

once had in their government, justice system and security forces. The bright light of the country's vast potential has been snuffed out by thieves disguised as businessmen, military generals and politicians. It is worth asking whether even the best intentioned leaders could have overcome the daunting challenge left behind by colonialism: a country in name only, with ancient societies and hundreds of different ethnic groups thrown together under one nation state. But that original sin has only been compounded by graft on a scale so enormous it baffles the mind. Consider a few infamous examples among many: 1990s military dictator Sani Abacha, himself a northerner, along with his family looted hundreds of millions of dollars from the Central Bank, even by the truckload, according to one informed account;[4] James Ibori, once the influential governor of the oil-rich Delta state in southern Nigeria, was found to have embezzled possibly more than $250 million, while also allegedly trying to bribe his way out of being investigated with a sack stuffed with $15 million;[5] the theft of Nigerian oil has been estimated at $6 billion per year, with suspicions of involvement by members of the military and high-profile figures.

The list goes on, and all the while tens of millions of Nigerians live in deep poverty, often with little access to electricity or decent roads. The poverty rate stood at around 28 per cent in 1980, but shot up to 66 per cent by 1996, when Abacha was leader.[6] The percentage of the population living in poverty has decreased from the dark days of the Abacha regime, but a World Bank calculation using data from 2009–10 showed 63 per cent of Nigerians were still living on less than $1 per day.[7] Meanwhile, the population has been booming at an incredible rate, with Nigeria projected to grow from its current 170 million people – the highest in Africa – to around 400 million by 2050.[8] One does not need to be a fortune-teller to predict the potential trouble ahead. A World Bank study found that as many as 50 million young people in Nigeria may be unemployed or underemployed, a situation the bank's lead economist for the country told me was 'a time bomb' if not addressed.[9] The Boko Haram insurgency shows the clock is ticking and time is running short.

Nigerian history since independence in 1960 has been replete with struggle and tragedy, while at the same time producing some of the world's most revered artists, including the late writer Chinua Achebe and Africa's first Nobel laureate for literature, Wole Soyinka, as well as the afrobeat musician Fela Kuti. All three stridently criticised Nigerian mismanagement, and Achebe's often-quoted first

lines of his 1983 essay *The Trouble with Nigeria* remain true today: ‘The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character.’[10]

The British decision to throw north and south together to create an amalgamated Nigeria in 1914 would set it on a path of becoming the potential giant of Africa, both in terms of its economy and its population. The problem was that it would also lay the groundwork for ethnic, regional and religious divisions that would tie the nation up in power struggles and spark violence, with the question of whether the country should call it quits and break up continually being posed. It is an option that Nigeria’s leaders have always ruled out, but the debate roils on nonetheless, renewed regularly by eruptions of the country’s many crises.

Nigeria’s colonial rulers can certainly be blamed for much of this. Britain’s policies toward Nigeria often seemed to exacerbate divisions rather than bring its people together. The north’s culture had to a large degree been preserved, while the south was being transformed through Western education, the spread of Christianity and trade along the coast. At first, Lugard sought to extend his version of indirect rule in the north throughout the rest of Nigeria, where it often did not fit. In the Igbo areas of the south-east, for instance, Lugard’s blueprint for how indirect rule should work was completely at odds with the local, decentralised form of governance.[11]

At the same time, there were projects put in place to connect the country, particularly through infrastructure. Railways and roads were constructed, allowing people and goods to circulate far more easily, while waterways were dredged to make way for ships. Such infrastructural improvements were built out of self-interest, since they made it easier to ship goods in and out of the country, allowing European companies to take full advantage.[12] But it would also help lead to an economic inter-dependence among various ethnic groups. As the years passed, Igbos from the south-east set up as market-sellers in the north; northern Fulanis and Hausas raised livestock and produce sent to the south. Those are just two examples, and such links have only deepened over time. Nigeria’s largest cities, particularly Lagos, are now melting pots of all of the country’s ethnic groups, who flock there in search of work. Arguments on behalf of breaking up the country become far more knotty when considered from that perspective. What does a Hausa businessman born in Kano but living in Lagos do if the two

cities become capitals of separate nations? The same goes for the Igbo trader from south-eastern Enugu living in Maiduguri in the north-east.

The social, political and economic patterns that would later define modern Nigeria slowly began to take shape after 1914. A lack of Western education in the north caused problems early on. Unlike in Lagos, which had long been a fully fledged colony and where an elite section of the population schooled abroad had begun to develop, or in the south-east, where missionary-established schools dotted the humid landscape, only a relatively small number of northerners had been European-educated. This led to southerners being sent north to work as civil servants, which would feed into fears among northerners that their region would be trampled upon by rival ethnic groups.[13] Such fears would greatly intensify as Nigeria tumbled toward independence, and not only among northerners, though they were more apprehensive than others.

The drive toward independence was led mainly by educated elites from Lagos, including Herbert Macaulay, as early as the 1920s, followed by the Nigerian Youth Movement. It came at a time when other African colonies were also seeking to break away from their colonial masters and with global opinion turning against imperialism, pushing Britain to cooperate.[14] Economic factors also played a role, among a list of other reasons, with the cost of maintaining the British Empire becoming too heavy a burden to justify.

It is impossible to understand modern-day Nigeria without considering its ethnic and regional divisions. Seeing the potential trouble ahead, much of the debate in formulating the Nigerian state in the run-up to independence and afterwards has centred on how to divide power. In the years before independence, models were put forward that ranged from being strongly centralised to a collection of regions. Those in favour of a more centralised government argued that citizens should first consider themselves Nigerians instead of Igbos, Yorubas, Hausas or Fulanis, and the state must reflect that goal. Others said such a goal was unrealistic and the vast differences between the regions must be taken into account and accommodated.[15] A form of that debate continues today, with those who believe the presidency must be rotated between regions every couple of terms and others who believe the country has moved beyond ethnic politics, that the best candidate should win, regardless of background.

In the north, trepidation over how it would fare under an independent Nigeria

could be seen in its reluctant embrace of self-rule. The final version of the constitution just before Nigeria's independence locked in place a federal system with three regions: west, east and north. The east and west were more eager to break away from the British and run their own affairs, and both regions opted for self-rule in 1957. The north, however, delayed the move until 1959, a year before fully fledged independence for Nigeria.[16]

The British withdrawal left behind a newly independent nation in 1960 with the same federal system of government. Traditional rulers remained in place, including the emirs in the north, and though they had no formal powers, they continued to wield influence in all manner of decisions, from appointments and the distribution of public money to behind-the-scenes negotiations to settle disputes. They also served as living links to Nigeria's pre-colonial past and continue to do so today. The sultan of Sokoto remains Nigeria's highest Muslim spiritual figure, and emirs are symbols of the region's Islamic traditions, but the Sufi traditionalism and established authority they represent would put them at odds with more radical, anti-Western clerics who would begin to emerge in the 1970s, often aligned with Wahhabi-Salafi thought, with financing from Saudi Arabia promoting its spread globally.[17] For Boko Haram decades later, the emirs would come to be seen as enemies and betrayers of the extremists' version of the Islamic faith. Some would be targeted in assassination attempts.

Ahmadu Bello, the great-great grandson of Usman Dan Fodio and a vigilant protector of northern interests, was the northern region's first premier, taking office in 1954. He argued forcefully that the emirs must be maintained and given important roles in the north, contending that they would act in accordance with local government and not as overlords. 'To remove or endanger this prestige in any way, or even to remove any of their traditional trappings, would be to set the country back for years, and indeed, were such changes to be drastic, it might well need another Lugard to pull things together again', Bello wrote in his autobiography published in 1962. 'We must get away from the idea that they are effete, conservative, and die-hard obstructionists: nothing could be farther from the truth.'[18]

The north was given the most seats in the federal parliament of the three regions, thanks to both its size and population, and elections before independence in 1959 set the stage for Nigeria's post-independence politics. Ahmadu Bello's Northern People's Congress won the greatest number of seats

and formed a coalition with the main eastern party, the Igbo-dominated National Council of Nigerian Citizens, which lent the new government at least some semblance of north–south unity.[19] The first prime minister was Tafawa Balewa, a northerner, and he and Bello worked to improve conditions in the north through quotas in the military and government projects aimed at benefiting the region, among other moves. Such programmes added to tensions, angering southerners, who felt cheated.[20] There was also a fledgling oil industry following its discovery in commercial quantities in the Niger Delta in the south in 1956, and it would soon come to dominate the country's economy while also further exacerbating ethnic divisions as a result of disagreements over how to share the wealth.[21]

With those fault lines in place, the run-up to Nigeria's devastating civil war began soon after independence. In 1966, a group of military officers, mainly from the Igbo ethnic group dominant in eastern Nigeria, would attempt a coup and assassinate Prime Minister Balewa. Ahmadu Bello, as well as the premier of the Western region, Samuel Akintola, would also be killed. An army general, Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi, was installed as leader, but he too was an Igbo and the entire affair came to be seen in the Hausa-Fulani north as a power play by Igbos. A counter-coup would result.

The counter-coup sparked by anger from northern officers occurred about six months later and brought to power Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon, a Christian from ethnically mixed central Nigeria. The country remained on edge, however, and the bitterness resulted in massacres of Igbos living in the north. As a result of such killings and other factors, south-eastern Nigeria decided on 30 May 1967 to secede from the country and form the new Republic of Biafra, named for the bight off the West African coast. It was led by Odumegwu Ojukwu, an Oxford-educated army officer who would become a hero to many in the south-east, his thick beard and intense eyes giving him the air of a revolutionary. The country's government led by Gowon would not accept such a move, especially considering control of vast oil reserves was at stake, and war began in 1967. The rest of the world's attention was gradually drawn to Biafra as images of starving children haunted TV screens and the pages of newspapers. Many died from starvation as a result of a blockade, prompting harsh criticism against the Nigerian side, but also of Ojukwu over his refusal to surrender even when defeat became apparent, a position he defended by saying that an attempted 'genocide' of Igbos was underway and he had to do all he could to

stop it. In 1970, with the Nigerian military charging ahead and the Biafran cause essentially lost, Ojukwu was forced to flee to Ivory Coast. Gowon declared a policy of ‘no victor, no vanquished’ and Nigeria would remain one nation, but in reality the country was deeply divided. By the end of the so-called Biafran war, an estimated 1–3 million people had died.[22]

In an interview 30 years after the war with journalist Peter Cunliffe-Jones, Ojukwu, who died in 2011, defended his actions, saying ‘the war was a tragedy, but it was inevitable, unavoidable’. He said that ‘the Igbos had no choice. It was a fight for the survival of the Igbo people against plans to wipe out a generation. That was the issue that we faced: genocide.’[23] The tragedy of the war was poignantly depicted decades later by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, while Chinua Achebe would also write of his experience at the time in his memoir *There Was a Country*.

Gowon would lead the country into the 1970s, a period that would give rise to many of the afflictions that have kept Nigeria from realising its enormous potential. While corruption had certainly existed in Nigeria previously, an explosion in oil revenue in the early part of the decade greatly raised the stakes, caused inflation to skyrocket and led industry not linked to petroleum to be ignored.[24] Gowon also dragged his feet on returning the country to civilian rule, and by 1975, some members of the military had had enough. Their response was perhaps unsurprising: another coup. General Murtala Mohammed, from Kano in the north, was installed as head of state and pledged reforms – only to be assassinated about six months later. His deputy, the civil war general and future two-term president Olusegun Obasanjo, a Yoruba from the south-west but with close links to his northern military colleagues and politicians, would take over until elections could be organised.

Obasanjo oversaw a transition to civilian government, with 1979 elections won by a former finance minister from the north named Shehu Shagari. A new constitution was put in place ahead of the elections changing Nigeria’s system of governance over to a US-style democracy, with a president, vice president and national assembly, and renewed efforts were made to develop political parties that were broad-based instead of representing only one region or ethnic group.[25] But Shagari became president with the country still wallowing in severe economic troubles, and the situation was only to become worse. When the bottom fell out of the petroleum industry with the so-called oil glut of the 1980s,

Nigeria was left utterly unprepared. The country had badly overextended itself in terms of spending, and Shagari's government splurged on projects that benefited cronies.[26]

Civilian rule under Shagari would last a mere four years. On New Year's Eve 1983, Muhammadu Buhari, a military officer with rigid ideas about how to run his country, would come to power with yet another coup. He, too, would seek to reform Nigeria, but his approach was short-sighted. He sought to instil a sense of discipline in Nigerians, as if the frantic scramble to survive in the country was a cause and not an effect of mismanagement at the top. He labelled this effort the War on Indiscipline, and it ranged from petty concerns, such as forcing Nigerians to stand in line properly, to more serious measures, including public executions for alleged criminals. The infamous tale of Umaru Dikko, transport minister under the Shagari regime before the coup, served as an illustration of the approach by the Buhari administration. Suspected of major corruption, he fled to London, where Nigeria's government tracked him with the help of Israeli agents. He was drugged and stuffed in a crate for shipment back to Nigeria to face corruption charges, but the British authorities discovered the plan and stopped it from being carried out to completion. The box was opened at the airport, and inside was an unconscious Dikko with the doctor who had drugged him.[27]

Patience ran thin with Buhari and his narrow-minded authoritarianism, and another power-hungry military officer would see to it that his days as Nigeria's leader were numbered. This time, however, the officer who would lead the coup and later the nation, Ibrahim Babangida, was a far more sophisticated politician, and he would manoeuvre to remain as head of state for eight years, from 1985 to 1993. He was a civil war veteran and one of the plotters of the coup that ousted Gowon, and would oversee the final transition of the nation's capital from Lagos to Abuja, along with the lucrative contracts that went with it.[28] He would gain the nickname 'Maradona', with Nigerians comparing his shifty political and survival instincts to the great Argentine footballer's nimble play. Wole Soyinka, the Nobel prize-winning Nigerian writer who personally knew Babangida but kept him at an arm's distance, wrote of him:

> Nettled by a seemingly consensual and persistent view in the media that he was evil at heart and in intent, he finally retorted that if he was indeed evil, he was at least an evil genius [...] Suave, calculating, a persuasive listener and conciliator – but with sheathed claws at the ready – ever ready to cultivate potential allies, he had a reputation for meticulous planning. [29]

Unfortunately for Babangida, even his formidable skills at outsmarting his opponents were no match for the circumstances in which Nigeria found itself. With the economy in tatters and the country drowning in debt, he had little choice but to submit Nigeria to a rigorous regime of cuts and financial policies. The plan, the Structural Adjustment Programme, allowed Nigeria to reschedule its debt, but it was deeply unpopular, leading to cuts in government jobs and increases in fuel prices, to name two examples.[30]

Other issues added to public anger toward Babangida. The 1986 assassination of journalist Dele Giwa by letter bomb led to suspicions that his regime may have been involved – he has firmly denied it – while the transition to new elections and a planned return to democracy was tortuous and repeatedly delayed. After banning all 13 political parties that applied to participate, claiming they were not 'national' enough amid other concerns, Babangida's regime eventually created two artificial groupings, the Social Democratic Party and the National Republican Convention, that would be the only ones eligible.[31] It was a discouraging start to what was supposed to have been Nigeria's new era of democracy, but the election itself in 1993 would turn out to be far more promising. Election day exceeded expectations, and even today Nigerians speak of the polls as the cleanest in their country's history. Moshood Abiola, a wealthy Yoruba businessman from the south-west, appeared set to be the next president of Nigeria. While he had been pilloried years earlier in a song by Fela Kuti, there was little doubt that he had won the vote and was the choice of the people. The problem would come afterwards, when Babangida would overplay his hand. He decided to annul the vote for a list of reasons that few took seriously, denying Abiola the presidency. His move sparked outrage, particularly in Lagos, where street protests broke out and mobs set up roadblocks.[32] Babangida was finally forced to yield, and he installed a transitional government under the direction of his ally Ernest Shonekan. It would turn out to be a move that would have disastrous consequences for the years ahead.

Less than three months later, a military officer who had served as Babangida's deputy took advantage of the weak Shonekan and ousted him from power, installing himself as leader and beginning perhaps the most despicable period of Nigeria's post-independence history. Sani Abacha, a northerner from Kano, set about enriching himself and his family by looting hundreds of millions of dollars from the treasury, trampling on the basic rights of the population and overseeing a brutal military and police force. Nigerians suffered daily from his rule, and

Wole Soyinka, who has described Abacha as a 'psychopath', was forced to flee into exile out of fears for his life.[33] Moshood Abiola, the winner of the 1993 election, was jailed a year after the annulled vote after declaring himself president.[34] The regime's execution in 1995 of the Niger Delta activist Ken Saro-Wiwa along with eight others put Abacha's outrageous behaviour in the international spotlight. Leaders worldwide, including the revered Nelson Mandela, condemned the executions and the Commonwealth suspended Nigeria's membership. Nevertheless, Nigeria would have to live with Abacha for another three years. He died in 1998 in suspicious circumstances, supposedly having had a heart attack. Rumours swirled and continue to do so today, including whether he was in the company of Indian prostitutes at the time he died.[35] In Lagos, there were celebrations to mark his death.

With Abacha gone, years of military rule and turmoil would finally draw to a close. All three military rulers since Buhari's New Year's Eve 1983 coup had come from the country's north, but it had meant little in terms of progress for the average northern Nigerian, not to mention the country as a whole. The nation's elite were siphoning off vast amounts of oil money and leaving the poor and working class to scrap for what remained. Nuhu Ribadu, who would later serve as head of the country's anti-graft agency, estimated in 2006 that more than $380 billion had been stolen or wasted since independence – an amount greater than the total gross domestic product of a long list of countries, including Colombia, Iran, South Africa and Denmark.[36]

A transition to civilian rule was on the way, and this time it would not be annulled. That did not mean, however, that Nigeria was on the cusp of a new era of true democracy. There would be elections, but they would be marred by fraud and violence, and the corruption that had become so entrenched would continue to strangle hopes of progress. The 1999 vote led to a return of Olusegun Obasanjo, the former general and one-time military ruler from south-western Nigeria with extensive connections in the north. Election day was largely peaceful, but observers reported serious allegations of fraud, including ballot-box stuffing and altered results.[37] Obasanjo had run as the candidate of the newly created Peoples Democratic Party, which would become an all-encompassing, nationwide behemoth with a multitude of competing interests. The party would essentially develop into a coalition of influential politicians, kingmakers and regional strongmen agreeing to line up under one banner to control power, with the understanding that the presidency would be rotated

between north and south.

Obasanjo would be re-elected to a second term in 2003, again amid voter fraud allegations from observers,[38] and his two terms delivered decidedly uneven results, with significant economic improvements, but a failure to tackle many of the problems plaguing Nigeria's development. The prospect of a return to the bad old days of strongman rule was also raised with a push for a constitutional change that would have allowed him to seek a third term of office.[39] The bid was denied by members of parliament, and Obasanjo stepped down after his two terms, clearing the way for a third straight election – at the time, the longest period of uninterrupted civilian rule since independence.

Meanwhile, the government had been collecting billions in oil revenue, prompting deep resentment in the Niger Delta region in the south, the heart of the country's petroleum industry. Obasanjo would face a militancy in the Niger Delta that would eventually cut deeply into revenue from the nation's prized resource.

The Delta had seen unrest before, particularly when protests and violence in the Ogoni community had led the oil giant Shell to abandon production there in 1993. The region remained desperately poor despite its natural resources, while its creeks and rivers had also been badly polluted by years of spills, often without any repercussions for the companies responsible. The Ogoni movement in the 1990s for a fairer distribution of resources had to a large degree been led by the activist and writer Ken Saro-Wiwa, whose execution by the Abacha regime drew global condemnation. Shell would be accused of collaborating with the regime in the executions of Saro-Wiwa and his fellow protest leaders, an allegation it has always denied. It agreed to pay some $15.5 million in compensation in a lawsuit related to the executions and Ogoniland unrest in 2009, but did not admit guilt.[40]

When frustrations again boiled over in the Delta in the late 1990s and 2000s, the militancy would develop into a mix of many interests, including gang leaders seeking a slice of industry revenue, jobless youths and genuine activists. Pipelines were regularly blown up and foreign oil workers were kidnapped for ransom, resulting in a sharp reduction in Nigeria's oil production. An umbrella group took shape named MEND – the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta – that claimed responsibility for attacks and advocated for the region in statements emailed to journalists. Military raids had little permanent effect on

the worsening militancy, and Obasanjo would leave behind a festering crisis in the Delta. With so much oil revenue at stake, it would be up to his successor, Umaru Yar'Adua, to find a solution.

In 2009, an amnesty programme was launched for Delta militants, offering stipends and job training to those who agreed to give up their arms. All of the major gang leaders and thousands of their followers participated, leading to a steep reduction in violence and allowing production to rise to previous levels of around 2 million barrels per day. But while the amnesty succeeded in its goal of boosting oil production, conditions in the delta have not changed and the possibility of a return to violence once payments to gang leaders are reduced or stopped altogether remains a serious concern. Indeed, certain gang leaders are reputed to have been made extremely wealthy by the amnesty and related deals, having not only collected stipends from the programme, but also lucrative contracts for 'pipeline surveillance' or 'waterways security'. It has also reinforced the idea that those who create problems in Nigeria can be paid to stop, providing an incentive for people with little hope of otherwise finding their way out of poverty.

Nevertheless, because it has calmed the violence, the Niger Delta amnesty programme has been cited by some as an example of what could be done in the north-east to bring at least a temporary end to Boko Haram's insurgency and halt the horrific attacks that have killed thousands. Unfortunately, the problem is far more complicated.

* * *

Mohammed Yusuf is believed to have been born in 1970 in Jakusko in Yobe state in north-eastern Nigeria, where the savannah begins to fade into desert. His family origins are something of a mystery, though those who were familiar with him and others who have investigated his movements say his parents seemed to have been poor, perhaps subsistence farmers. He eventually found his way to Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state and the most important city in the region.[41]

It was in Maiduguri where an influential trader, Baba Fugu Mohammed, would act as something of a foster parent to Yusuf. They were from the same ethnic background – they were Kanuris, the largest ethnic group in Borno state – and Mohammed had a reputation for taking people in at his large compound. He had amassed his wealth mainly through dealings in agricultural products such as gum arabic and beans.[42] He engaged in regular legal battles with the authorities

and others over land rights when they sought to encroach on his property, and his lawyer, Anayo Adibe, said some of his cases were among those taught at his law school.

Yusuf, according to his own account, did not have any formal Western education.[43] He eventually married one of Mohammed's daughters, who was one of several wives and, by some accounts, the most prominent since she was the daughter of his foster-father. He would worship at Maiduguri's Indimi mosque, an impressive structure with stained glass, marble tiling and two minarets, situated in a relatively upscale district of the city and named for the wealthy businessman who financed it. It was at Indimi where Yusuf is believed to have encountered a cleric in the Wahhabi-Salafist tradition named Ja'far Mahmud Adam, who was widely known as Sheikh Ja'far.

The cleric was based in Kano several hundred miles away, but sometimes visited Maiduguri and Indimi to preach. His strong critique of Nigeria's establishment Sufi Muslims gained him a following in the north. The bespectacled cleric was well versed in Islamic studies, a graduate of the Islamic University in Medina, but was not averse to Western-style education and attended secular schools while growing up. He was influenced by Nigeria's Izala[44] Islamic reform movement, an organisation that grew out of the teachings of another cleric, Abubakar Gumi, in the 1960s and 1970s. It would become powerful and attract a number of highly educated Muslims, but the emergence of a new generation and various ideological disputes eventually led it to fracture. Adam was one of several bright, younger figures to strike out on their own.[45]

Amid such turbulent change in northern Nigeria, a populist movement in the 1970s and 1980s that was far less intellectually driven would also emerge, led by an itinerant preacher originally from Cameroon but based in Kano. It would spark deadly riots and serve as a prelude to the later rise of Boko Haram. It became known as the Maitatsine movement, the Hausa name given to its leader, Muhammadu Marwa, and which translates roughly to 'The Anathematiser' or 'the one who damns'.[46] He had declared himself a prophet and interpreted the Qur'an in odd ways, and the movement was driven in part by class and ethnicity, with Marwa a non-Hausa in an area where Hausas dominated. Those factors combined with the hangover from an oil boom in the 1970s, which brought about an economy utterly dominated by the petroleum industry and the corruption that came with it. Initial riots broke out in 1980 in Kano and killed

more than 4,000 people, with Marwa also left dead. Rioting in other locations in subsequent years would kill several thousand more.[47]

Debates over Islamic sharia law also occurred when a new constitution was being debated in the late 1970s. There were already local sharia courts dealing with civil matters and personal status law, but a push from some in the north sought the creation of a federal sharia appeals court and led to a bitter dispute between Christians and Muslims hashing out the new constitution.[48] The issue arose again after the 1999 return to civilian rule, with northern states moving to incorporate sharia criminal law. It was a combination of political opportunism on the part of local politicians as well as sincere campaigning by Islamic reformers. Today, sharia law is official policy across most of northern Nigeria at varying levels, though it is selectively enforced. While a number of people have been sentenced to death by stoning for crimes including adultery, it seems such sentences have all been overturned or reduced later. At least two amputations have been carried out, with a man convicted of stealing a cow having his hand cut off in 2000 and another for the theft of bicycles.[49] More recently, after Nigeria's federal government enacted a law outlawing homosexuality in 2014, sharia authorities in the north carried out a witch-hunt, resulting in a number of people being flogged for being gay, with some protesters demanding that they be stoned to death.[50] Both the new law and the action by the sharia courts have drawn international outrage.

In a sign of the tensions that had been building by the early 2000s, a comment in a newspaper column helped lead to rioting in the northern city of Kaduna that killed around 250 people. The column had suggested that the Prophet Muhammad would have been happy to have selected a wife from a Miss World pageant that was to be held in Nigeria. Many saw the column as blasphemous, exacerbating already existing ethnic and religious divisions in Kaduna.[51]

Mohammed Yusuf came of age within this ferment. Crudely educated but evidently curious, he would become a student of the more learned and disciplined Sheikh Ja'far, who was about a decade older. Some have called him his 'intern' or protégé, and one imam has said that Adam had labelled him the 'leader of young people'.[52] It seems, however, that their master–student relationship was always doomed. Adam, at least publicly, was a much more practical man, advocating for Muslims to work within the system to bring change. Rather than opposing Western-style education, he instead argued that

Muslims must be equipped with such knowledge in order to be in a better position to face their opponents and transform society. He also did not believe Muslims should refuse to accept positions within a secular government since doing so would leave them powerless and dominated by non-believers.[53] Yusuf would turn out to be far more radical on both of those points, plus a range of others, and that would set the two men on a collision course. They seemed to have split by around 2003, and the beginnings of what would later become known as Boko Haram were emerging.

It was that year when another radical named Mohammed Ali, said to be a Borno native who may have studied in Saudi Arabia, led a group of young people who had been followers of Yusuf on an imitation of the Prophet Mohammad's withdrawal to Medina, or hijra.[54] Ali and Yusuf had fallen out for unclear reasons. The group set up a camp in a remote part of Yobe called Kanamma, and by one account, it included 50 to 60 members who lived in tents and mud huts. Other accounts put the number at as many as 200. As described in a US diplomatic cable, they were said to have initially been unarmed, trading peacefully with local residents, but a dispute erupted when a local chief insisted they pay for fishing rights at a pond. Locals then demanded that the group leave the area, and the police were said to have arrested some of them on 20 December 2003. Less than two weeks later, on 31 December, the group launched a series of attacks on police stations, stealing weapons along the way, including at least five AK-47s from police in Kanamma.[55] The wave of violence lasted four days, and Ali was said to have been among those killed in the unrest. More attacks would occur in September 2004 in Borno state, leading to a clash with soldiers near the border with Cameroon. It was also around this time when a certain number of Nigerian extremists would seek training in northern Mali with the group that would later become known as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

It is unclear whether Yusuf played any role in the violence at the time and he would later deny it. In any case, he was already known to the authorities through his preaching in Maiduguri and was suspected of being involved. In a 2006 interview with two of my AFP colleagues, Yusuf said that he had not advocated the 2003–4 violence. 'These youths studied the Qur'an with me and with others', Yusuf would say, referring to the group that left for Kanamma:

Afterwards, they wanted to leave the town, which they thought impure, and head for the bush, believing that Muslims who do not share their ideology are infidels [...] I think that an Islamic system of government

should be established in Nigeria, and if possible all over the world, but through dialogue. [56]

The group began to be known as the Nigerian Taliban around the time of the 2003–4 attacks. There were claims that the name was given to them by local officials because they had called their camp in Kanamma 'Afghanistan', though that story has been disputed and different versions have been offered.

Yusuf would again perform the hajj in Mecca in 2004; he would himself say that he travelled to Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage in 2000, 2002, 2003 and 2004.[57] His return home this time, however, was delayed because he was wanted back home over the Nigerian Taliban violence. A negotiation would be required to allow him to fly back, and the then deputy governor of Borno state would step in to mediate. The deputy governor, Adamu Dibal, would say later that Yusuf approached him in Saudi Arabia, where Dibal had been leading a pilgrimage, and asked for assistance in getting home, telling him that he was non-violent and had been wrongly accused. Dibal reasoned that intelligence officers could gain important information from Yusuf if he were back in Nigeria.

'Through my discussions with him [...] and through my contacts with the security agencies, he was allowed back in', Dibal said in a 2009 interview with Reuters news agency.[58] 'It is true he was brilliant. He had this kind of monopoly in convincing the youth about the Holy Qur'an and Islam.'

It was apparently not the only meeting Yusuf would have during his extended stay in Saudi Arabia. Another important discussion would occur in which Yusuf would be confronted by his old master. Sheikh Ja'far Adam and several others met with Yusuf to try to convince him to renounce his radical beliefs. During the meeting in Saudi Arabia, Yusuf is said to have promised to change his ways and tell his followers he had been wrong. He would return home in 2005, but would not keep his promise to Adam.[59]

Back in Nigeria, Yusuf had become isolated from more mainstream Muslim leaders, having been kicked out of Indimi mosque after angering its hierarchy. Members of Indimi were reluctant to speak in detail about Yusuf during my two visits there out of fear of retaliation by Boko Haram, as well as not wanting to be associated with the notorious sect leader, though they have provided a general idea of what led to his expulsion. In October 2013, I spoke to a small group of men gathered in a room at the back of the mosque, including one who identified himself as an imam. Dressed in loose-fitting robes and wearing no shoes in

accordance with Muslim tradition as they sat casually on the floor, they recalled that Yusuf had been there around 2002 and 2003.

'He was trying to mislead people', said one of the men, adding that he attended the mosque at the time and remembered seeing Yusuf. 'He was saying that, automatically, people must leave Western education. He was emphasising that anything in government is bad, that any uniformed man should not be accepted.'

During a brief visit three years earlier in 2010, a security worker at the mosque told me that elders there had tried to convince Yusuf to follow a different path. 'We did all we could', the 65-year-old said. 'Muslim clerics had spoken with him [about his views].'

* * *

Yusuf started his own mosque by at first preaching in a makeshift set-up outside his home before using his father-in-law's land to build his own complex nearby in the Maiduguri neighbourhood known as Railway Quarters.[60] While it was widely known simply as the Markaz – Arabic for centre – Yusuf named it after Ibn Taymiyyah, the Islamic cleric born in the thirteenth century in Mesopotamia, in an area that is today part of Turkey. Ibn Taymiyyah's movement sought a more austere form of Islam, as it existed at the time of the Prophet, and his ideas would later have a major influence on Wahabbism and Salafism.[61]

Yusuf's group gradually came to be known as 'Boko Haram', not necessarily by its members, but by local residents and the news media who picked up on the idea that its leader was opposed to Western education. The most commonly accepted translation of the Hausa-language phrase is 'Western education is forbidden', though it can have wider meanings as well.[62] The group would eventually refer to itself as Jama'atu Ahlus Sunnah Lid Da'awati Wal Jihad, or People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad.

While Yusuf became notorious for opposing Western education, his underlying beliefs and the reasons why he attracted followers were somewhat more nuanced. His knowledge of the Qur'an and Islamic learning were believed to be sufficient, and he certainly knew enough to win over and preach convincingly to a small army of recruits. He felt that British colonialism and the creation of Nigeria had imposed an un-Islamic way of life on Muslims through all the various layers of a modern state – Western schools, a Western legal

system, Western democracy, and on and on. He advocated the development of an Islamic state where Muslim principles and sharia law would be obeyed, and denounced northern Nigeria's traditional leaders, including the sultan of Sokoto, the country's highest Muslim spiritual figure.[63] He is said to have expressed similar such ideas in a book he wrote, apparently all in Arabic.[64]

Whether he specifically emulated Usman Dan Fodio, the nineteenth-century jihad leader in what is today northern Nigeria, is up for debate. One Nigerian journalist who knew him contends that he did, saying Yusuf spoke of returning the lands of Dan Fodio's Sokoto Caliphate to what he perceived as their former Islamic glory. Others are not so sure, saying Dan Fodio did not seem to feature prominently in his sermons. Some also point to ethnic differences, since Dan Fodio was Fulani while Yusuf was Kanuri. It is clear, however, that Yusuf admired a number of hardline clerics from elsewhere, as his decision to name his mosque for Ibn Taymiyyah and his references to various texts showed. His teachings were in line with Salafist thought, and those who have studied him label him as such.

He was a fundamentalist in the strictest sense of the word, believing very literally in all of what he took away from the Qur'an. He seems to have lacked, if not the capacity, then at least the will for metaphorical understanding and a practical approach to his beliefs. Like many other extremist leaders, he took verses of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet out of context and bent them to fit his arguments. Describing Yusuf's thoughts on education according to his sermons, an academic who analysed his rhetoric, based on dozens of recorded sermons, wrote:

> Following the common understanding of the Hausa word 'boko', Yusuf understood it to mean modern secular education brought to Nigeria by the British colonial administration, including agriculture, biology, chemistry, engineering, geography, medicine, physics, and the English language. For Yusuf it was ḥaram for Muslims to acquire, accept, learn, or believe any aspects of these subjects that contradicted the Qur'an and Sunna, while all other aspects that supported or did not contradict the Qur'an and Sunna were ḥalal (i.e., religiously permissible) for Muslims. In addition, Yusuf condemned the Nigerian educational system as ḥaram because it mixed men and women in the same classrooms.

His theories outside of education included an insistence that the world was flat.

> Yusuf argued that the geographical conception of how rains occur contradicts Qur'an 23:18, where Allah says: 'And we sent down water from the sky according to (due) measure, and we caused it to soak into the soil; and we certainly are able to drain it off (with ease)'. He also quoted a Hadith that says that whenever it

rained the Prophet Muhammad would go outside and touch the rain because it was fresh – i.e., created anew by God. He stated that the geographical idea that the earth is spherical is a mere research finding that is void because it contradicts the clear text (nass) of the Qur'an – but without mentioning chapter and verse. [65]

Yusuf would espouse similar views during a 2009 interview with the BBC, whose Hausa-language broadcasts are widely listened to across northern Nigeria. In the interview, he would also dispute the theory of evolution.

'There are prominent Islamic preachers who have seen and understood that the present Western-style education is mixed with issues that run contrary to our beliefs in Islam', he was quoted as saying. 'Like rain. We believe it is a creation of God rather than an evaporation caused by the sun that condenses and becomes rain. Like saying the world is a sphere. If it runs contrary to the teachings of Allah, we reject it. We also reject the theory of Darwinism.'[66]

Yusuf may have lacked the learning of Sheikh Ja'far and other Nigerian Muslim leaders, but his charisma and ability to win over followers was not in doubt. Judged from videos of him, his chubby face and inviting speaking style gave him the air of a kind older brother who knew something you did not and was willing to help you by sharing it. He was able to attract followers both through his charisma and because hopelessness among the region's young men made them open to hearing his call. He painted an image of his followers standing firm in the midst of an evil world, with him as the enlightened leader – a cult of personality in many ways. While he may not have always directly spoken about government corruption, he was certainly anti-establishment and his attacks on Nigeria's secular and traditional authorities were set against the backdrop of crushing poverty that were the everyday reality of his followers. Strict sharia law may seem like a promising option to those in such circumstances.

Even some non-Muslims found themselves agreeing with what they interpreted as Yusuf's anti-government rhetoric. Anayo Adibe, the lawyer for Yusuf's father-in-law Baba Fugu Mohammed and a Christian born in Lagos, was living in Maiduguri at the time, running his law practice. He would meet regularly with Mohammed at his home and would sometimes cross paths with Yusuf, though he said they did not know each other and never had conversations. He was, however, familiar with some of his preachings, or at least second-hand versions of it, with talk of his rise having spread throughout Maiduguri. He said he understood Yusuf's anti-government sentiment since

corruption was, and remains, maddening, though he stressed he did not support his decision to pursue violence.

‘Even myself, I agreed with him – completely’, the 41-year-old Adibe, thin and bald-headed with a grey-flecked goatee, told me one afternoon at his bare-bones law office in Abuja, where he moved after the situation became too tense in Maiduguri. As we spoke, there was no electricity in his office thanks to another of Nigeria’s repeated power cuts. The windows were open and the sound of horns bleating outside on Abuja’s roads occasionally echoed into the building. Adibe, his voice calm but insistent, explained further: ‘Because his preachings were usually against the ruling class, and you don’t need any special kind of education, or even come close to him, to agree with him, particularly when you consider the level of poverty in the land at that time. His preachings were [...] things that people could identify with.’

Kyari Mohammed, who has closely followed Boko Haram as head of the Centre for Peace and Security Studies at Modibbo Adama University in Nigeria, held a similar view. For him, Yusuf’s crusade against Western influence resonated in Maiduguri and elsewhere because all many young people in north-eastern Nigeria know of Western-style democracy is what they have been subjected to: elites filling their pockets while the masses of poor struggle to survive.

There were of course other factors that helped feed Yusuf’s movement. One was political thuggery, with politicians in the north-east, like their counterparts in the Niger Delta in the south, using local gangs to intimidate opponents and rig elections. Once elections ended and politicians stopped paying them off, the ‘militias’, bitter over being abandoned, were said to have joined with Yusuf. One politician who has come under particular scrutiny over the issue is Ali Modu Sheriff, the former governor of Borno state. Ahead of the 2003 elections, he was a member of the Senate, becoming Borno governor after the April 2003 polls and serving for two terms. Sheriff has been accused of using and abandoning thugs who went by the name ECOMOG – co-opting the name of a West African military force – and as a result contributing to the development of Boko Haram. He has repeatedly denied the allegations. A Nigerian government committee appointed to look into the Boko Haram crisis described the problem in detail, as highlighted in a White Paper produced from its findings.

‘The report traced the origin of private militias in Borno state in particular, of

which Boko Haram is an offshoot, to politicians who set them up in the run-up to the 2003 general elections', the White Paper drafted by a panel headed by Interior Minister Abba Moro said, according to an account by Nigeria's *Sunday Trust* newspaper.

> The militias were allegedly armed and used extensively as political thugs. After the elections and having achieved their primary purpose, the politicians left the militias to their fate since they could not continue funding and keeping them employed. With no visible means of sustenance, some of the militias gravitated towards religious extremism, the type offered by Mohammed Yusuf. [67]

There have also been allegations that Sheriff promised he would institute strict sharia law in order to gain the backing of Boko Haram followers in the 2003 vote before later reneging.[68] In 2014, with elections months away, the ex-governor would again be accused of financing elements of Boko Haram by an Australian mediator seeking the release of more than 200 kidnapped schoolgirls. The mediator, Stephen Davis, also accused a former army chief of staff of sponsoring the insurgents. Both men forcefully denied the accusations.[69]

Another factor some argue helped supply Yusuf with followers involved the young Qur'anic students known as almajiris, who travel from rural areas to study under Islamic teachers in cities and towns, including Maiduguri. The system has long been in existence and has been described as producing promising students in line with tradition – Usman Dan Fodio was himself a travelling scholar, for example. But it has been criticised more recently as unadapted to the modern world, without enough supervision of schools and their teachers. There have been allegations of families in northern Nigeria too poor to care for their children on their own sending them to live at schools that sometimes amount to little more than shacks, with the students then sent begging on the streets for alms. However, many caution against blaming almajiris for the rise of Boko Haram, and they are correct in saying that no one is sure whether they constituted a significant number of Yusuf's followers. Nevertheless, the government panel on Boko Haram called for the almajiri schooling system to be modernised since it may be producing young people susceptible to becoming extremists.[70]

The number of followers Yusuf had has never been authoritatively determined, though a military estimate said there were 4,000 in 2009 at the time of his uprising.[71] The government White Paper said most members were poor and aimless young people, though the military has claimed that earlier on it

included educated adherents such as university professors and civil servants. Borders in the north-east are porous, and it is certainly not out of the question that young men from Chad, Niger or Cameroon were also part of the movement, but attempts by some to blame the problem on foreigners have never been backed up with proof.

'The sect draws the bulk of its membership from [motorcycle taxi drivers] and the vast army of unemployed youths, school drop-outs, and drug addicts that abound in the affected areas', the government White Paper said. It added that 'the federal, state and local governments should as a matter of priority, initiate and design appropriate measures for mass economic empowerment. To this end, the federal and state governments should immediately address the issue of unemployment in the face of the large number of jobless youths in northeast zone.'[72]

While there were more than enough rudderless young men in Maiduguri and its surroundings for Boko Haram to draw from, Yusuf's movement required more than just members. He also needed money, and determining where he received it from has long been one of Nigeria's great parlour games and the impetus for grand conspiracy theories, including from those who suspected Yusuf of acting on behalf of powerful politicians. It is important to distinguish between Boko Haram under Yusuf and its re-emergence after his death, when such questions would become far more complicated and suspicions over links to foreign groups would deepen.

First, a significant amount of its financing under Yusuf is believed to have come from members themselves, including those encouraged to sell their goods and property and commit to the cause. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the group also provided some form of welfare assistance to its particularly impoverished members, with the Nigerian state failing to supply any basic level of social programmes or safety net, and that this could have strengthened Yusuf's standing among the poor.[73]

One specific instance that has given rise to conspiracy theories involved a high-profile member named Buji Foi, a former Borno state commissioner for religious affairs under Sheriff who later became a Boko Haram member. Foi was suspected of financing the group, and some have sought to link Sheriff, the former Borno governor, to Boko Haram through him, alleging that the governor funnelled money to Yusuf through his commissioner.[74] Sheriff, again, has

always denied this, and Foi was killed in 2009 following the uprising. A shaky video purportedly showing police summarily executing him was posted online.[75] 'Buji Foi was a politician [...] And he was out of my cabinet two years before the Boko Haram crisis and, if I would be held responsible for anything done by anybody who served in my cabinet, then nobody can govern any state in Nigeria', Sheriff told local journalists in 2011.[76]

Beyond Nigeria, there have been claims of Osama bin Laden supplying seed money to Boko Haram in its early years through intermediaries. It should be stressed, however, that such claims are questionable and no proof has ever been offered for them.[77] Bin Laden, however, did in 2003 name Nigeria as one of several countries ready for 'liberation'.[78]

In 2012, allegations also emerged in Britain and Nigeria that Boko Haram had benefited from money from a London-based Islamic charity named as the Al-Muntada Trust Fund. An inquiry by Britain's Charity Commission found no organisation by that name, but it did locate an Al Muntada Al-Islami Trust. The commission turned up no evidence of such activity, and the Trust has strongly denied it.[79]

With or without prominent backing, Yusuf was able to build a formidable movement, with recordings of his sermons being sold in the markets and circulated among sympathisers. The police repeatedly arrested him, but he does not appear to have ever been convicted of a crime. The government White Paper noted two occasions when a court in Abuja discharged him and followers welcomed him home in celebration. It said that 'the reception accorded him upon his return to Maiduguri attracted a mammoth crowd that temporarily undermined state authority, and served as an avenue for him to attract additional membership into the sect'.[80] He also participated in debates where he defended his beliefs and interpretations of the Qur'an. The academic who studied his recorded sermons quoted him as saying in one such debate: 'The system of modern education that the Europeans brought to Nigeria contradicts Islamic faith. I am not the first to say so for earlier scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah as well as modern scholars of Islam have also said so.' The academic then paraphrased Yusuf: 'When asked whether he had studied in schools, he responded that he never even attended primary school, and that he obtained his information about modern subjects from the British encyclopedia.'[81]

Adam became increasingly frustrated with Yusuf and publicly questioned his teachings, seeking to point out what he saw as his former student's hypocrisy. In particularly scathing comments, Adam sought to portray Yusuf as a dilettante misleading his followers with potentially dangerous consequences. He said:

You are not a prophet. You have not yet proven your faith or moral character to your neighbours. If it took Prophet Muhammad 23 years preaching Islam, for how many years have you preached before you decided to judge Muslims as unbelievers because they have Western education or because they work for the government? You did not have sufficient religious knowledge, or even enough general knowledge. You only know your little town. What do you know about the history of various struggles for Islam? [...] Nearer to home, how many battles did Usman Dan Fodio fight? Apart from Fodio's name, what do you know about his battles? In how many battles did he participate in the fighting? [...] Above all, right now, what plans do you have?

Adam would also paint Yusuf as a hypocrite.

He has an international passport to travel. Does the passport contain quotations from the Qur'an or Hadith? Does it open, 'In Name of God, the merciful and compassionate?' Does it have God's Greatest Name? Or does it say Federal Republic of Nigeria, and bear the image of Nigeria's coat of arms? Who gave him the passport? Was it not the authorities of the Nigerian government? Why did he accept it? Does that not indicate his acceptance of the government? He could have said, 'I do not accept Nigerian government. It is worthless and any paper it issues is equally worthless'. He could have travelled to Saudi Arabia without his Nigerian passport. When asked, 'Where is your passport? Where is your visa?' He could have said, 'Saudi Arabia is a Muslim country. I am a Muslim. I believe there is no god but Allah and Prophet Muhammad is his Messenger' [...] He took his wife to a government hospital [...] and he rides on a road constructed by the government with revenues from usury, taxes collected from alcohol manufacturers and from petroleum, mixed all together to pay for road construction. Still, he uses water and electricity produced by government agencies. So he refused to enter the government through the door but gets in through the window. [82]

Worries grew over the intentions of Yusuf and his followers, and the intelligence and security agencies would say later that they were keeping an eye on them. A well-known Salafist cleric in Nigeria, Sheikh Muhammad Awwal Adam Albani, claimed he met with Yusuf to counsel him on his misguided beliefs, while Adam was said to have had a series of meetings with him for the same purpose in addition to their encounter in Saudi Arabia.

'I was one of those who constantly talked to him about the ideology of Boko Haram', Albani told Nigeria's *Sunday Trust* newspaper in an interview published in January 2012.

On some occasions, I sat with him with his students, and [on] other occasions, only two of us sat. The essence was to convince him that Islam doesn't accept the ideology of Boko Haram. I tried to convince him that since he claimed to be the follower of Sunna, therefore Sunna has its teachings and principles, and the

idea of Boko Haram is contrary to those teachings. All our efforts, because I know other scholars like late Sheikh Ja'far also engaged him on such issues, fell on deaf ears. He proffered some defenses, which are not authentic in the jurisprudence of Islam. [83]

In 2007, as Adam led dawn prayers in Kano, gunmen stormed the Dorayi Juma'at Mosque and shot him dead. Suspicions have remained that Yusuf acted against his former master and was behind the murder of the man who once mentored him. There have also been allegations of political motives for the killing as the murder occurred a day before governorship elections, with presidential polls set for the following week. Albani, too, would be murdered along with his wife and son years later in February 2014, with Boko Haram members also suspected.

* * *

The march towards a violent uprising by Yusuf and his followers moved ahead, and a number of his recorded lectures and sermons reflecting his militant rhetoric can still be found on the Internet and elsewhere. In one of his sermons, he portrays himself and his followers as in a struggle together against the evil of the world and the Nigerian state. He tells them to be ready for when the authorities come to abuse them based on their Islamic beliefs and says 'do not leave your weapons behind'.[84]

The date of the recording is not clear, though Yusuf references both the Abu Ghraib detainee controversy in Iraq, which became public in 2004, as well as the Prophet Muhammad cartoons published in September 2005 that led to protests across the Arab world. During the speech, Yusuf is dressed in a white robe and traditional cap with followers seated on the floor around him. A scroll with phone numbers runs across the bottom of the screen as well as a notice advertising video and audio.

'Instilling fear in you, arresting you, beating you, killing you or killing someone else, torching the whole lot of you ablaze, tear-gassing you, whatever they will do to you, should not make you abandon your religion', Yusuf says in the Hausa language.

I swear to Allah it is important to know, for instance, one day out of the sheer hatred they have for you, they will be throwing tear gas at you, because there is the opportunity to do that to you, because they know that you can't do anything. They will round you up and throw tear gas at you together with your children. The children will be coughing. They will do that to even the tiny kids that pass by here, including the toddlers who are strapped on the back of their mothers. I swear to Allah they will do that to you. That is what they are doing in all other countries.

He continues later: ‘One day you will see your leader placed on the table being tortured. They will be hitting him with a club and he will be falling and rising up as a result. We know this is going to happen to us. We also know this will not be considered as humiliation, but as a test from Allah. This is the nature of Islamic path. If this is not done, people will not wake up.’ At that point, the audience chants ‘Allahu Akbar’.

Towards the end of his speech, after referring to the Prophet Muhammad cartoons, he broadens his argument and encourages violence against those who ‘insult’ Islam. He also, however, tells his followers that they should not burn churches, since the buildings can be used for other purposes ‘after the jihad’. Chants of ‘Allahu Akbar’ also break out a couple times during this part of his speech.

Once Islam is insulted, just go and fish out the leader of those people and slaughter him. All the individuals involved in the insult should be killed. Why is it so? It is because they are not trustworthy. Allah said if you do that they will desist from the act. Allah used a definitive term in the Qur’an here. If you kill even a few from among their leaders, they will stop the insult. I hope it is understood? You should not even bother yourself with burning and destruction of churches because the person who builds the church is still around. You have not done anything by burning churches. That is why it is counterproductive to do things without planning, by just waking up and going to burn a church. No, no! This is not what Islam is teaching. Everything requires careful planning, organisation, leadership, doing the right thing. You must know that when you start moving forward there is no turning back. I hope it is understood? Don’t just go and burn churches. After the jihad it can be turned into a storage space. Remove the leaders of unbelievers because they are not trustworthy if you want them to stop insulting your religion.

An incident on 11 June 2009 in the Gwange area of Maiduguri would set off the uprising. It would occur after Boko Haram followers were killed in a traffic accident, with members of the group travelling to the cemetery for the funeral. In one of several different versions of what happened that day, a government committee of inquiry found that Yusuf’s followers spotted another Boko Haram member being ‘disciplined’ by security forces from Operation Flush II task force, originally formed to combat armed robberies and other such crimes. Police often force those they deem guilty of minor infractions to perform frog-jumps on the roadside or other humiliations. Various reports said the run-in occurred when police sought to enforce a new law requiring motorcycle riders to wear helmets. According to the government committee’s report, which was obtained by the anonymous scholar who studied Yusuf’s sermons, Boko Haram members then tried to ‘rescue’ the man being detained and steal the police officers’ guns, prompting them to open fire. The police officers said they shot

only at the legs and did not try to kill them, and the report said 17 Boko Haram members were wounded.[85]

In what would amount to a call for armed jihad, a deeply angered Yusuf would provide a sharply different version. He would appear before his followers and deliver a passionate and fiery speech labelled an ‘open letter’ to the government. He would lash out at Nigeria’s security forces and stir the audience with his forceful denunciations. The crowd repeatedly responded with either jeers at the mention of the Borno state governor’s name and others they deemed enemies or loud shouts of ‘Allahu Akbar’, and Yusuf would stoke their anger. He began calmly, but his voice built at various moments as he pointed and gestured forcefully with his hands. He said that on the previous Thursday, several Boko Haram members were taking four corpses for burial at Gwange cemetery.[86]

‘They ran into some Nigerian army members along with mobile policemen belonging to Operation Flush under the leadership of Ali Modu Sheriff, the governor of Borno state’, Yusuf said. He continued:

> They opened fire on the procession, and at the moment 18 brothers are in hospital receiving treatment. One was shot in the back. Two bullets were removed in an operation. There was one who was shot in the groin. A bullet brushed someone close to the eye. If it had moved an inch, he would have been killed. Another one had both his legs battered. Somebody was shot in the thigh [...].
>
> We said that we would not rely on rumours and stories reaching us, which was why we refused to comment yesterday until we went and saw for ourselves. We went and saw them drenched in their blood. They did nothing; they did not insult anyone; they did not commit any crime. But simply out of sheer aggression, which is the hallmark of the government of Borno state, which was the reason why they formed the Operation Flush unit, with the sole aim of creating obstacles to our movement and harassing other residents.
>
> We’ve been saying that this unit was formed purposely against us and it has now become evident. The blood of a Muslim is precious [...] It’s better for the whole world to be destroyed than to spill the blood of a single Muslim. The same way they gunned down our brothers on the way, they will one day come to our gathering and open fire if we allow this to go unchallenged. The way they did this, they will commit terrorist acts against women if they are allowed. We’d rather die than to wait for them to commit aggression against our women or to come to our gathering and humiliate us. You should know we would never keep silent and allow anyone to humiliate us. It’s not possible for someone to come and shoot our brothers. We take them to hospital and bear the medical bills while [the shooter] goes home, without giving a damn. It’s not possible [...] Mad soldiers. As long as they are not withdrawn from the city, there will be no peace.

The first strike would occur on 26 July in the city of Bauchi, located south of Yusuf’s home state of Yobe. An estimated 70 Boko Haram members, armed with guns and grenades, descended on two locations: a police station and a

mosque belonging to Izala. According to one account, police on duty at the station fled, but a larger deployment returned later and managed to keep the attackers from breaking into the armoury. A police raid in response on a shanty town where the Boko Haram members in Bauchi were believed to have lived then set off a gun battle. The death toll was put at 55, with as many as 200 people arrested.[87]

It was only the beginning. After the Bauchi clashes, Yusuf told a reporter by phone that 'we are ready to die together with our brothers'. He called a person killed in Maiduguri in an accidental bomb blast a martyr who was building a weapon in self-defence.

> What I said previously, that we are going to be attacked by the authorities, has manifested itself in Bauchi, where about 40 of our brothers were killed, their mosque and homes burnt down completely, and several others were injured and about a hundred are presently in detention. Therefore, we will not agree with this kind of humiliation. We are ready to die together with our brothers and we would never concede to non-belief in Allah [...].
>
> I will not give myself up. If Allah wishes, they will arrest me. If Allah does not wish, they will never arrest me. But I will never give up myself, not after 37 of my followers are killed in Bauchi. Is it right to kill them? Is it right to shoot human beings? To surrender myself means what they did is right. Therefore, we are ready to fight to die.
>
> The end of this crisis is: kafirci (apostasy) and the kind of harassment my people are facing must stop. Democracy and the current system of education must be changed otherwise this war that is yet to start would continue for long. [88]

Over the course of the next day, police stations in Potiskum in Yusuf's home state of Yobe and in an area of Kano state called Wudil were attacked, while the worst would occur in Maiduguri, where a series of assaults targeted state police headquarters, police training facilities, a prison and two other police stations.[89] Street battles broke out between Boko Haram fighters and police there, with residents taking cover, leaving roads deserted. The attacks, while using mostly basic weapons, nevertheless revealed a level of coordination and capacity that the authorities seem to have underestimated, with violence in four states: Kano, Bauchi, Yobe and Borno.

My AFP colleague Aminu Abubakar, who was in Maiduguri at the time, compared the situation to war. Anayo Adibe, the Maiduguri lawyer for Baba Fugu Mohammed, said it was like being in 'hell'. On the first night, Adibe took cover inside his house with his wife, his seven-year-old daughter and his three-year-old son. The gunfire quieted early the next morning, and when he saw

soldiers had taken up positions on the streets, he thought calm had been restored and decided to go into his office.

'While in the office, fighting broke out again', Adibe told me. 'Bomb fire, right at the roundabout. Two policemen were killed by close range, so there was a lot of pandemonium immediately. So I had to close the office.'

He and others from the building waited until the fighting stopped just outside, then he ran for his car and rushed home. He decided he would take refuge at the army barracks, where many Christians living in Maiduguri were relocating out of fear that the extremists would target them. Most were simply setting up makeshift camps outside on the grounds of the barracks, but Adibe had friends in the army and they allowed him and his family to stay with them inside as gunfire echoed through the city.

The fighting roiling the streets of Maiduguri was sporadic, and the breaks in the violence left residents unsure of what was occurring. Adibe and his family remained at the barracks for a couple of days. Conditions began to worsen there since many people did not have adequate food or water, so families began deciding to risk it and return home. Adibe and his family were among them. If you were going to die, 'it was better to die at home', he said. Besides, rumours were circulating that the situation was in fact finally being brought under control. Was it, I asked him? 'No, at that time it wasn't', he said.

Despite the mayhem, there had not appeared at the time to be attacks specifically targeting Christians, with the extremists focusing on retaliating against symbols of the Nigerian state. However, claims have emerged since indicating Christians may have in some instances been killed after being threatened with death and told to convert to Islam. Human Rights Watch, in an October 2012 report, quoted several witnesses who said Christians were abducted and killed, including one woman who told the organisation the attackers slit her husband's throat after he refused to 'do the Muslim prayer'. It is not clear how widespread such killings were and I have not personally come across such accounts in my reporting.[90]

On Tuesday 28 July, the third day of the uprising, the security forces would seek to crush it once and for all – though President Umaru Yar'Adua would stick to his schedule and fly off on a visit to Brazil. Troop reinforcements from the central city of Jos would prepare for a brutal raid on Boko Haram's mosque and headquarters. After gathering at a military barracks, they flooded into the

Railway Quarters neighbourhood, arriving, according to one report, in ‘six armoured tanks and five military trucks loaded with troops’.[91] Piles of dead bodies and wholesale destruction would result.

The troops would raid Yusuf’s mosque and reduce it to rubble, with journalists who were there at the time saying it appeared the military used mortar fire. In the wake of that clash, authorities would also be accused of rounding up young men they suspected of being Boko Haram members, forcing them to kneel down or lie on the ground, then shooting them. In a particularly stomach-churning video, alleged security forces shoot dead a number of young men in that way. Such footage would later be used in Boko Haram propaganda, including in the UN suicide bomber ‘martyr’ video. One man identified as a Sufi activist, speaking to US embassy officials at the time, spoke of ‘excessive use of force by security agents who alleged[ly] shot motorists and pedestrians “just because they have a beard”. “As a result”, he said, “residents are shaving their beards and changing the style of their dress to avoid being targeted.”’[92] In another video, a man identified as Buji Foi, the former religious affairs commissioner for Borno state and prominent Boko Haram member, can be seen being forced to walk before being shot dead.

Calm finally began to return by Thursday, but by then the toll was shocking. More than 800 people had been killed since Sunday across four states. Yet, somehow, Mohammed Yusuf had managed to survive and escape from his mosque. Soldiers were on his trail though, and they arrested him on 30 July apparently having located him in a barn on his father-in-law’s property not far away from the mosque. Before handing him over to police – alive – he would be interrogated as he stood shirtless, defending his beliefs.

Later that day, images of what appeared to be Yusuf’s dead body were shown to journalists. They showed a man lifeless in the dirt, his torso riddled with bullet holes. In the hours after Yusuf’s death, Nigerian police officials offered at least two different versions of what happened: one claimed that he was shot while he had been trying to escape, another that he was killed in a shoot-out between Boko Haram members and security forces. However, witnesses said that police had carried out a summary execution on the grounds of state police headquarters. Human Rights Watch interviewed a 24-year-old woman who described seeing Yusuf handcuffed and sitting on the ground, saying that they should pray for him, when three enraged policemen opened fire.

‘They first shot him in the chest and stomach and another came and shot him in the back of his head’, the woman told the rights group on condition of anonymity. ‘I was afraid and started running. When I came back, he was dead.’[93]

The US State Department’s Country Reports on Terrorism for 2009 provided this account:

> The Nigerian military captured Maiduguri-based Boko Haram spiritual leader Mohammed Yusuf alive after a siege of his compound, and turned him over to Maiduguri police, whose colleagues had been killed by the group. A local policeman summarily executed Yusuf in front of the station in full view of onlookers, after parading him before television cameras.

For Yusuf’s father-in-law, Baba Fugu Mohammed, the nightmare was not yet over. On Friday morning, 31 July, the day after Yusuf was killed, he contacted his lawyer, Adibe, to say the police had summoned him, asking how he should respond.

‘He just said the police were looking for him, so I told him that if the police were looking for him, that he should answer them [...] That was the last time I heard from him’, Adibe told me. He said he did not expect that his client’s life would be in danger.

At some point later, the old man, believed to be in his seventies, rode to the police station – on the back of a motorcycle taxi, according to what Adibe was told – and never returned. His dead body was later taken to a morgue, a gunshot to his head. His son, Babakura Fugu, went to Adibe’s office and showed him a photo of his dead father.

‘The morgue attendants recognised his father when they brought his corpse, so with their phone they snapped photographs of the body, which they now gave to the family’, Adibe said. ‘Everybody was upset, even myself. I was very upset. How could such a thing happen, for a man as old as that? [...] He was almost 80 at the time [...] Just because he was an in-law.’

Without a trial, it was impossible to know if he had ever been guilty of any wrongdoing. The body was never released to the family, likely buried in a mass grave with many others killed over the course of those five days, with no known records saying where. In 2012, his family would be given a measure of justice when the government, after refusing for nearly two years, would finally decide to obey a court ruling ordering it to pay damages for the unlawful death of Baba Fugu Mohammed. They were given a payment of 100 million naira, or about

$625,000. His son Babakura would also participate in an attempt at peace talks with Boko Haram. That, too, would end tragically. He would be assassinated over it.

3

‘I Will Not Tolerate a Brawl’

It had been a tumultuous few months in Nigeria, for reasons that had nothing to do with Boko Haram, and the man being asked to lead the country seemed unsure of many things. In his defence, he was by no means the only one. On a Friday in February 2010, as he met with the US ambassador, the fedora-wearing zoologist recently named acting president of Africa’s most populous country, Goodluck Jonathan, according to an account in a diplomatic cable, would make a few startling admissions.

The main subject of the meeting was the condition of Umaru Yar’Adua, who, at least on paper, remained Jonathan’s boss and the president of the country. He had fallen ill with pericarditis, a heart condition, and had long struggled with a kidney ailment,[1] his weight loss and increasing frailty having become evident despite efforts by his aides to hide his condition from the public. As his illness gradually took hold, he continued to try to carry out his duties, but on a limited schedule. Finally, in November 2009, the president would become so sick that urgent treatment was required, and he was flown abroad to Saudi Arabia.

As the weeks passed, his aides said little about the details of his condition, and Nigeria found itself with essentially no true leader, drifting off in an unpredictable direction, an unsettling state of affairs in a country with a history of military coups. Those surrounding Yar’Adua manoeuvred to keep Jonathan, vice president at the time, from being made head of state. Regional and ethnic politics, as always, played a major role, with politicians from the north, where Yar’Adua was from, reluctant to see the power of the highest office in the land – and the astonishing levels of patronage that go with it – shift to the south, Jonathan’s native area. But the longer Yar’Adua remained out of sight and in another country, the more difficult it became for his camp to defend their position. Speculation was rampant. The respected *Next* newspaper reported in January 2010 that he was ‘seriously brain damaged’ and could no longer carry out his duties.[2] In a bid to refute such reports, the president’s advisers arranged a phone call with a BBC reporter in which a man claiming to be Yar’Adua spoke

briefly.[3] It resolved nothing, and with the leadership of the country increasingly adrift, Nigeria's parliament finally made Jonathan acting president on 9 February 2010.

The move at least gave the government the illusion of clarity, though it would be short-lived. Two weeks later, on 24 February and about three months after being taken to Saudi Arabia, Yar'Adua would be flown back home, again muddling the picture of who was in charge, though he was kept out of the public eye. It was amid those circumstances that then US Ambassador Robin Sanders met acting president Goodluck Jonathan at his official residence in Abuja.

An account of the meeting in a US diplomatic cable portrayed Jonathan as a man trying to do his best, but struggling to figure out how.[4] He was said to have told her that '"everyone's confused" about who is in charge of Nigeria'. He was described as being upset that the first government statement after Yar'Adua's return home referred to Jonathan as the vice president rather than acting president. He added, according to the cable, that a second statement was issued the next day after the presidency 'received a lot of pressure to correct this error so that the lines of leadership and executive direction were clear'. He was said to have spoken of his belief that 'this terrible situation in the country today has been created by four people', naming Yar'Adua's wife, his chief security officer, his aide-de-camp and his chief economic adviser, implying that they were running the show behind the scenes and refusing to relinquish any power. According to the account in the cable made public by Wikileaks, Jonathan said 'he does not know their motives, but expected it was likely for nefarious purposes'. When Jonathan met with Yar'Adua's chief security officer, Yusuf Mohammed Tilde, and his aide-de-camp, Colonel Mustapha Onoedieva, he was said to have told them that 'the best thing is to stop the charade' since he believed Yar'Adua was semi-comatose and did not understand what was happening. He visited Yar'Adua's wife, Turai, to express his sympathies, but, reflecting the deep mistrust at the highest level of government, 'under no circumstances did he want Turai to come to his official residence'.

Jonathan was described as saying that he and others would seek to persuade those close to Yar'Adua that the best course for the country would be for him to resign. In the meantime, military chiefs were seeking to ensure politicians were not plotting with soldiers in the barracks, considering the risk of a coup. The confusion could even be seen in cabinet meetings, with Jonathan explaining, according to the cable, that the last one before Sanders's visit 'was disastrous

and included yelling and screaming', declaring it 'totally dysfunctional'.

'He said he is "not a politician" and had very limited experience as an administrator, but concluded, "I will not tolerate a brawl"', the cable said. He was said to have indicated he planned to dissolve the cabinet and appoint a new one once he felt the public was comfortable with him as acting president.

It had already been a remarkably accidental political career for Jonathan, the son of a canoe maker born in the village of Otuoke in the swampy Niger Delta. He was a slow-moving man who could seem uncomfortable speaking in public, uttering generalities and occasionally fumbling his words. Seeking to portray himself as an everyman in a country where so many live in poverty, he spoke of having no shoes or electricity when he was a boy. He would attend university and study zoology, eventually earning a PhD in the subject, before beginning a career in politics that would seem as fortuitous as his first name. While deputy governor in his home state of Bayelsa, his boss, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, would become entangled in a corruption probe that led to him fleeing to Britain, allegedly dressed as a woman.[5] Alamieyeseigha denied doing any such thing and refuted the accusations against him, but in any case, he was impeached and forced out of office back home, ushering in Jonathan.

Fortune would soon favour Jonathan again. When Yar'Adua prepared his run for president in the 2007 elections, he would search for a running mate from the Niger Delta, where oil militants had been wreaking havoc on the country's cash cow industry. Jonathan, to his credit, was not blind to this. During his meeting with the US ambassador, he was described as saying that he understood that he was picked to be vice president because he 'represented the Niger Delta'.

'I was not chosen to be vice president because I had good political experience', the diplomatic cable quoted him as saying. 'I did not. There were a lot more qualified people around to be vice president, but that does not mean I am not my own man.'[6]

The world was about to find out. With Yar'Adua dying in May 2010, Goodluck Jonathan, ready or not, would become Nigeria's leader at a crucial time in the country's history. Elections were approaching, the youthful population was becoming more engaged and Islamist extremists in the country's north would re-emerge under his watch with their most violent and sophisticated attacks yet.

* * *

It had been almost a year since the dark days of July 2009, and the insurgents from what everyone now called Boko Haram, at least those who had survived, had gone underground. Mohammed Yusuf's mosque still lay in ruins, an uncleared pile of rubble guarded by policemen who kept people from lingering in the area and refused to allow photos to be taken without prior permission from the authorities. The neighbourhood surrounding it, set back from Maiduguri's main roads, was quiet and calm, almost bucolic. Goats crossed the unused railway tracks that led to an abandoned nearby station. Women and children pedalled bicycles along dusty paths or rode on the backs of motorcycle taxis, the low hum of their engines among the only sounds.

A walk among the rubble of the former mosque provided glimpses of the catastrophe that had occurred there, and in some ways what lay ahead. Concrete had been smashed into jagged chunks and two IV bags hung from a tree, presumably where Boko Haram members sought to treat their wounds. Cars and motorcycles were burnt, and clothes, pots and pans were strewn across the site. It all just sat there as an eerie, macabre reminder of what had happened a year before. No one had bothered to clear it.

The Nigerian security forces stationed in Maiduguri remained on high alert. The local police commissioner finally agreed to meet me and three colleagues in his office during a visit to the city in July 2010, but he refused to say anything during our brief, tense encounter. He warned that even uttering the words 'Boko Haram' was illegal and declined to answer any questions on the subject, making it clear he preferred that we simply leave – both his office and the city. Operatives from the country's main intelligence agency trailed us, at one point telling me and my colleagues we were 'invited' to visit his boss, the euphemism used by Nigerian security forces to summon someone for questioning. It is an invitation one is not allowed to decline. We did as we were told and, after arriving, were asked to sit in a small waiting room. We were nervous since we had no idea what they had planned for us, and the appearance of red splotches on the wall in the room we were waiting in only added to the discomfort – very likely not blood, but, given our mindset at the time, who knew? There were some initial tense moments after we were called in to meet with the local director, but he turned out to be a reasonable man after he learned that we lived in Nigeria and were not parachuting in on a quick visit to the country. We explained that we aimed to do stories on what was happening in Maiduguri one

year after the uprising, and we were able to reach an understanding. He allowed us to continue working, albeit under the close scrutiny of his men, and did not object to us taking photos and making video recordings at the site of Yusuf's destroyed mosque. We were followed so frequently by intelligence officers that it became almost farcical. They eventually began speaking casually to us, in a friendly manner. I asked one for a suggestion of where to eat, and he mentioned a place in a nearby shopping centre. I believe I had the chicken and rice. It wasn't bad.

Most officials, much like the police commissioner, declined to say anything at all on the record during that visit, but we did manage to arrange an interview with Borno state's information commissioner at the time, Isa Sanda Beneshiekh. He told us Boko Haram had been defeated and a new requirement that all religious groups must register with the government would help prevent future unrest. 'We are assuring our people [...] and the whole world, that such a situation will never happen again', Beneshiekh said.

Even before the first anniversary of the 2009 uprising and military assault, there were signs that whatever peace had been obtained through the military's brutal crackdown would only be temporary. In the weeks before the anniversary date, video and audio clips began to circulate in northern Nigeria purporting to feature Abubakar Shekau, Yusuf's deputy during the 2009 uprising and its presumed new leader. The police called the footage faked, clinging to their story that Shekau had been killed in the previous year's assault, though they offered no proof and there was no way of knowing the truth at the time.

Mysterious indications later led to suggestions that Boko Haram had restarted its violent campaign, though with a different strategy. The first signs were assassinations of local clerics or members of the security forces, usually involving two men on motorcycles and armed with AK-47s carrying out hit-and-run attacks. It was at first difficult to know what to make of these incidents. While it was reasonable to think that Boko Haram had indeed returned, gangland-style killings could also occur for all sorts of reasons, from shady business dealings to political score settling. There was the real possibility that criminals were taking advantage of the fears stoked by the Islamists as cover to carry out retribution against their rivals since they knew Boko Haram would likely be blamed. This uncertainty would later turn out to be another element of the complex threat posed by a new and stealthier Boko Haram.

An incident in September 2010 served to put aside further doubts that Boko Haram was re-emerging. It occurred in the city of Bauchi, where Yusuf and his followers began their short-lived uprising more than a year before. On a Tuesday evening just before the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, a group of men, heavily armed with AK-47s and what seemed to have been homemade bombs, descended on a prison, chanting 'Allahu Akbar'. They shot at the prison gate and forced their way inside, freeing more than 700 inmates, including about 150 alleged Boko Haram members.[7] It was then clear to many that Boko Haram was back, no matter what the authorities wanted the country to believe.

The pattern of assassinations of local officials, police and clerics that had emerged would continue over the next several months, leaving dozens of people dead. There would also be bank robberies that the group was suspected of using to finance their operations. However, as disturbing as the situation was becoming, the trouble mostly remained concentrated in north-eastern Nigeria, far away from the seat of power in Abuja and a world apart from the bustling and chaotic economic nerve centre of Lagos in the south-west. There were indications that some of the president's political backers in the south saw the insurgency not as an awful symptom of severe poverty, neglect and the absence of faith in government in northern Nigeria, but as a conspiracy. Power brokers from the Niger Delta region would question whether the violence was being sponsored by northern politicians intent on discrediting the president.[8] In making such a case, they were also expressing what some average Nigerians in the south believed. In some ways, it was understandable. Nigeria's do-or-die politics, with so much corrupt money at stake, had led certain politicians over the years to govern as if they were running an organised crime racket. Nigerians may have seemed prepared to explain much of what was happening in their country with conspiracy theories for a simple reason: they often turned out to be true.

This was different, however. It certainly could not be ruled out that some northern politicians had played a role on the margins, as had been alleged with Ali Modu Sheriff, who was governor of Borno state from 2003 to 2011, but Boko Haram was in the process of growing into something far more complex, beyond the control of any politician or traditional ruler. Blaming northern elites for the violence could give the president and his team a convenient excuse for failing to stop it, but it would do nothing to get to the heart of the problem and in fact obscure the root causes, suffocating hopes that the government would act to address them. Such conspiracy arguments would become even harder to defend

as the situation spiralled further out of control and Boko Haram's targets widened. Even the northern emirs – meant to be upholders of Muslim tradition in the region – were not spared. One of Boko Haram's most high-profile attacks was an assassination attempt against the emir of Kano, when gunmen opened fire on his convoy in January 2013. He was not hurt, but two of his sons were wounded and at least three people were killed.[9]

Another awful line would be crossed on Christmas Eve 2010, showing how bad the threat was becoming and how much worse it could get. It would demonstrate that Boko Haram had evolved into a more lethal, sophisticated and diffuse force, likely with various cells that operated independently and for their own reasons.

It had been a busy day in Abuja. President Jonathan had hosted a summit of West African leaders to discuss responses to a dangerous political standoff in Ivory Coast, with Laurent Gbagbo at the time refusing to cede power after losing the presidential election to his rival Alassane Ouattara. When it finally broke up and the region's presidents made their way back to their home countries, Nigerians were beginning to celebrate, popping off fireworks as night descended to commemorate Christmas and the upcoming New Year.

In Jos, a major city in Nigeria's ethnically and religiously divided central region, many Christians headed to church, and markets were crowded with shoppers stocking up for the holiday. The city and surrounding region had been deeply torn in recent years by unrest not linked to Boko Haram. It had often been described as religious violence because it opposed Christians and Muslims, though the disputes were really ethnic in nature, sparked by local power struggles, land disputes or cattle theft. Such violence often saw residents shot or hacked to death with machetes and houses set on fire, sparking cycles of attacks and retribution. The last serious outbursts in the region had occurred early that year, in January as well as in March 2010, leaving hundreds dead.[10] The violence on Christmas Eve would, however, involve explosives.

Seven bombs planted at various spots ripped through the city, including at a market busy with Christmas shoppers, killing at least 32 people.[11] On the same evening in Maiduguri, hundreds of miles away, extremists attacked three churches and killed six people. In Jos, where even the slightest spark is capable of setting off ethnic tensions, rioting broke out in the days following, killing dozens more. It was unclear if the attacks in the two different cities were planned

together, but the simple fact that they occurred at all were startling enough. Bombs had never before been used in Jos, and churches had not been previously singled out for attacks.

On 28 December, a statement appeared on a website believed to be from Boko Haram claiming credit for both the Jos bombings and the church attacks in Maiduguri. A video was also posted of a man believed to be Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram's new leader, calling the attacks part of a 'religious war'. In the video he said:

> We are the ones who carried out the attack on [...] Jos. We are the Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad that have been maliciously branded Boko Haram [...] Everybody knows about the gruesome murders of Muslims in different parts of Nigeria [...] Jos is a testimony to the gruesome killings of our Muslim brethren and the abductions of our women and children whose whereabouts are still unknown [...] My message to my Muslim brethren is that they should know that this war is a war between Muslims and infidels. This is a religious war. [12]

The bombings marked the group's first move out of the north and into the tinderbox known as the middle belt, as central Nigeria was often referred to, threatening to inflame the ethnic and religious tensions that had long haunted the region. It was exactly the kind of provocation that had so worried those afraid that Nigeria could again go to war with itself, as it had more than forty years earlier. Nigeria had repeatedly defied such doomsday predictions, somehow surviving repeated catastrophes and remaining together as one nation, however fragile, but escalating the conflict in the middle belt posed new, unpredictable risks.

There was at first widespread scepticism about whether Boko Haram was indeed responsible for the Jos bombings. In some ways it seemed more likely that those involved in the ethnic conflict in the middle belt would carry out such an attack in Jos, even though bombs had not been previously used there. The middle-belt conflict had gradually worsened over the years, from the use of rudimentary weapons such as sticks and arrows to guns, and it was certainly plausible that bombs could be the next stage in the crisis. Another factor that was especially important was that election season was approaching, and it had long seemed that local power brokers had exploited the region's tensions and stoked some of the violence for political gain. In the face of all of that, however, as time passed and Boko Haram was blamed for more violence in central Nigeria, the group's claim seemed to ring true.

Speculation over the Jos attack would quickly be interrupted. The next bombing would be yet another escalation, not in terms of casualties or scale, but location. It would occur in Abuja, the nation's capital, on New Year's Eve night as crowds gathered in an area known as Abacha Barracks, where an outdoor market and bar were located. Though it was next to a military barracks, it was a popular place for civilians, similar to many other spots across Nigeria where people go to relax, sip Star and Gulder beer and eat grilled fish at tables set up under the stars. The bomb would go off early in the evening, killing at least four people and wounding around 12 others.[13] Nigeria's president spoke of the bombing at a church service the following day, referring to whoever carried it out as 'criminals' being used by 'demons' and employing biblical language to describe the country's struggles. He seemed to hint at political links with elections approaching and politicians from northern Nigeria opposing his candidacy, but his remarks were too vague to interpret.

'Some people say they are politicians, some say they are religious fanatics, but to me they are pure criminals', Jonathan said. He continued:

> They are ones demons are using these days, not only in Nigeria. For those of you who have time to listen to world news on Al-Jazeera or CNN, you will see that terrorism is criss-crossing the whole world. Today, there are two things that are so important and so noticeable – technological developments. Countries, nations, are developing technologically. The next that is pushing these countries backward is terrorism. But I will tell Nigerians, be calm, be stable. If you look at the journey of the Israelites to go to the promised land it was tortuous. A number of them even died along the way [...] These explosives and explosions are part of the road bumps that are being placed, but God will see us through. They will never stop Nigeria from where we are going to [...] God will help us as a nation that we will get to the root of this matter. I urge Christians to continue to pray that some of these people will even confess to Nigerians, that at the appropriate time they will tell us that they are behind this. But for now, the security people are on it and they will get to the root of this matter. [14]

* * *

The election campaign ground ahead. Despite having earlier signalled that he may not run, leaving open the possibility that the north could regain the presidency, Jonathan eventually launched himself into the campaign with the strong backing of his southern political benefactors. This had led to a rift within the Peoples Democratic Party, with northern politicians plotting a way to win the primary and deny Jonathan the nomination for the office he already held. Prominent northerners announced their candidacies, including former military dictator Ibrahim Babangida, the so-called Maradona and evil genius of Nigerian

politics. Babangida, who had remained influential despite having left office in 1993, was remembered by much of the country, however, particularly in the south-west, for his cancellation of the 1993 elections. After Babangida announced he was running, posters went up in Abuja with ‘June 12, 1993’ written on them, reminding everyone of the annulled vote. Other northerners to announce their candidacies for the PDP primary were Atiku Abubakar, who was vice president under Obasanjo and a wealthy ex-customs official invested in sectors ranging from telecommunications to oil; Aliyu Gusau, a former national security adviser and intelligence expert known for his ample connections and behind-the-scenes influence; and Bukola Saraki, the then-governor of Kwara state and scion of an influential family.

The campaign for the nomination largely amounted to a series of negotiations, not to mention the distribution of cash-stuffed envelopes as the 12 January primary drew near.[15] In the end, the party would have to decide whether it would maintain what it called ‘zoning’, a policy of rotating the presidency between the north and south every two terms, or if it was prepared to abandon it and hand the nomination to Jonathan. As the weeks passed, it became increasingly clear that Jonathan’s team was having some success in building support for his case that the country was better off without ‘zoning’, that such a power-sharing agreement was no longer needed to hold the vast and complex country together, that it had moved beyond ethnic politics. Among the electorate, he seemed to inspire a certain amount of hope – somewhat ironically given his sleepy persona. His unlikely rise and calm demeanour led to the impression that he may be different from the country’s dominant politicians who had robbed Nigeria of so much of its wealth over the years. His campaign managers seized on this and sought to capitalise on it, using Jonathan’s Facebook page to announce his candidacy and emphasising his family’s humble roots. Despite his sometimes fumbling speech and arguments from his opponents that he was ill-prepared, there was a feeling among many in the country that Nigeria had tried strongmen, military men and slick dealmakers, only to be left disappointed. Perhaps it was time for something else.

Meanwhile, as this feeling gained momentum, the northerners who had announced their candidacies and other elite politicians from the region forged ahead with discussions on how to proceed. All of the major northern PDP candidates eventually agreed on a united strategy, though perhaps for their own

reasons. Babangida, Gusau and Saraki announced that they would drop out of the race in support of a single northern candidate, Atiku Abubakar, setting up a showdown between him and the president at the party's primary, where thousands of delegates would line up at Eagle Square parade ground in the capital and drop ballots in clear boxes live on national television. Their votes were counted aloud immediately afterwards as the cameras rolled, a process that would not finish until the early hours of the next morning. As the count droned on, it became clear that Jonathan had managed to lock up more than enough delegates, and he would go on to dominate the primary vote.

In a sense, Nigerian history had been made. The PDP had cast aside its rotation policy and nominated a southerner when it was supposed to be the north's turn. Beyond that, Jonathan could also become the first elected president from the oil-producing and impoverished Niger Delta region, and since he was an Ijaw by ethnicity, the first not to be a Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani or Igbo, Nigeria's main ethnic groups. His journey was not yet complete, however. The general election awaited, and it posed a potentially significant challenge to the PDP's grip on the presidency, which the party had controlled since Nigeria ended military rule in 1999. His main opponent, the ex-military dictator Muhammadu Buhari, was a northerner with populist support, based largely on the impression that he was tough on corruption, even though his regime in the 1980s had been accused of major rights abuses.

As election day approached, there was intense focus on preparations and whether or not the polls would be fair this time around. There were high hopes for the academic now heading the electoral commission, Attahiru Jega, a respected intellectual viewed as relatively independent. The presidential election was to be the second of three votes staggered over three weeks, with the parliamentary polls set to be first on 2 April, the presidential vote on 9 April and the state governors' ballot on 16 April. It was going to be a marathon, and with so many uncertainties, there was a feeling of both hope and trepidation in the country. Could Nigeria finally get it right and set itself on a course that would allow it to fulfil its great potential? Or would the election descend into chaos and violence like others before it? The potential for both could be seen during the voter registration process in the weeks leading up to the election. Young and earnest election workers, intent on seeing their country improve, diligently sought to enlist Nigeria's huge population using an electronic registration system. At the same time, registration centres lacked electricity, sometimes

causing them to borrow or rent small generators from residents. When generators were not available, there were delays, and crowds waiting to register grew frustrated. Yet, despite such challenges, the electoral commission announced at the end of the process that 73.5 million people had been registered, and there was reason to see progress in the perseverance showed by both election workers and the public.

But as the first of the three elections opened, Jega ran into trouble straight away. A few hours after the start of the parliamentary election, he was forced to appear on national television and announce what in many countries would have been unthinkable: he was calling it off and suspending the vote by one week because voting materials had failed to arrive at a long list of locations throughout the country. The rumoured and official reasons offered for why the materials had been delayed ranged from sabotage to a simple contractor's error. Whatever the true explanation, Nigeria's bid at holding respectable elections had stumbled badly out of the gate, and Jega would be forced to quickly recover as the nation waited impatiently. There was an initial backlash against him, with many people questioning how he could allow such a disastrous misstep. But as the furore died down and many of those criticising Jega acknowledged the near-impossible task before him, support once again swayed behind him. Election observers and anti-corruption groups expressed their faith in him and judged that he had made the right decision, that an election in such questionable circumstances could never have been called free and fair.

The following week, however, would bring worse news. The Boko Haram violence that had been ignored for so long would strike at the heart of what was hopeful about the election. In the city of Suleija, about 45 miles from Abuja in the country's centre, far away from the restive north-east, a bomb would explode as poll workers gathered at an electoral office on the night before the vote, including young university graduates from the National Youth Service Corps. Thirteen people were killed and dozens of others were wounded.[16] Blame fell on Boko Haram, with security forces later saying a cell of the group based in the area was responsible.

The parliamentary vote would nevertheless go forward as planned, though not in Suleija, where another postponement would occur. There would also be two other, less deadly bomb attacks in Maiduguri on election day, but overall there was a sense of progress, with residents appearing determined to cast their vote.

The following week's presidential election was the main event, and in many ways, the conduct of the vote was being seen as equally important as the actual outcome. Jonathan's government had been promising a free and fair ballot for months, and Western diplomats and good-government groups had also been urging the country's leaders to stick to that commitment. Holding a reasonably fair election would in itself be a major accomplishment for Nigeria and could serve as an example for other African nations given the country's status as the continent's most populous.

Election day opened smoothly in most of the country, but the unrelenting Boko Haram violence would again hit the north, with two explosions in Maiduguri, including one the night before, and one in the city of Kaduna. Casualties were said to be minimal. Sadly, the country had almost come to expect such incidents, and the explosions had no effect on the conduct of the vote in the rest of Nigeria. There were other isolated instances of violence and irregularities, but positive signs emerged as the day progressed. Locally based observer groups deployed motivated young Nigerians, who used mobile phones and social media to record and relay what they saw. Nigerians seemed committed to making a statement, peacefully queuing up and casting their ballots. As polling places closed and counting began, one could not help but feel encouraged by the scenes that unfolded: Nigerians stood by, sometimes in the rain, and recorded the counting process with their phones. That does not mean there were no problems; there were many. There had been instances of underage voting, intimidation and violence, not to mention allegations of figures being doctored in some areas. What would happen after the ballots were taken away to collating centres would also be another matter, and one that observers would later raise serious concerns over.[17] But despite that, there was the sense that such incidents were far fewer than in previous years. As a result, election day produced a feeling of positivity for many, who felt that finally, after years of chaotic, violent and fraudulent polls, Nigeria had taken a step toward true democracy.

Unfortunately, the positive vibes would not last. As early results began to come in the morning after the vote, a potentially dangerous trend emerged. Initial figures revealed a sharp divide in the electorate between the north and south. As more results were reported, giving Jonathan a clear lead, the violence began. Rioting would break out in neighbourhoods across the north, eventually spreading to 12 of the country's 36 states. It spiralled completely out of control,

with communities turning on one another and mobs targeting northern politicians they believed cooperated with Jonathan and his allies. In the city of Kano, mobs stopped cars and searched for southerners and Christians while fighting running battles with the police. They charged into the luxurious home of a former speaker of the House of Representatives, ransacking the inside. The worst violence occurred in southern Kaduna state, part of the middle belt between the country's north and south, where Christian communities turned on Muslim residents, burning homes, hacking people to death with machetes and gunning people down. One official, trying to find words to describe what had happened there, told me, 'I wouldn't like to use the term massacre [...] some places it was terrible'. Despite his reticence to use the word, what occurred in the southern Kaduna communities of Zonkwa and Kafanchan was certainly a massacre. Over the course of three days, an estimated 800 people were killed in the violence across the north, the vast majority in southern Kaduna state. Another 65,000 were displaced.[18]

The following month, I visited the city of Kaduna, the state capital further north and where thousands of displaced had taken refuge in a camp. One woman from Zonkwa, 67-year-old Talle Musa, spoke of hiding in a neighbour's house and her husband being murdered. 'He said whatever happened we should not go out, that we should just be patient', she said. 'We didn't know it was like his farewell to us.' She became faint and backed away, declining to speak further. Others at the camp talked of people being burnt, hacked or shot. One man said he managed to escape by hiding in a well.

Various theories were offered for why the violence occurred and what set it off. Some said rumours of rigging were to blame, while others claimed that the initial incident was the result of a simple dispute over money, with ruling party operatives failing to pay neighbourhood thugs who rounded up votes on their behalf. Whatever the initial cause, it quickly built on itself and became a general expression of frustration on various levels – anger over corruption, the north's loss of the presidency, long-festering communal disputes, to name a few. Nigeria had been once again shown to be a deeply divided country, and the riots led to rising calls for someone – anyone – to stop the violence before it was too late. Jonathan went on national television and made a frightening comparison. 'If anything at all, these acts of mayhem are sad reminders of the events which plunged our country into 30 months of an unfortunate civil war', the president said, evoking the Biafran conflict more than four decades earlier.

At the time of the speech, calm was returning, a large military deployment helping to restore order, but the underlying tensions remained. Jonathan would be sworn in for his first elected term as president amid deep bitterness and resentment in much of the country's north. While election observers called the polls a significant improvement over previous years despite major problems and said they believed Jonathan to be the legitimate winner, many in the north still felt the vote had been stolen. Some academics and politicians from the north said they were seeing signs of a class war develop since rioters in cities such as Kano went after not only perceived political enemies, but also those believed to be wealthy or corrupt. Tanko Yakasai, a veteran northern politician and power broker, told me in the living room of his home in Kano that he feared something akin to a mass revolt if poverty and unemployment were not addressed. 'People will come to destroy my house', he said. 'Those unemployed youths will just vent out their anger regardless of the consequences, and they will attack anybody who appears to be a well-to-do person.'

The rioting was not caused by the Boko Haram insurgency, but it further exposed the insecurity confronting an inexperienced president and the country he had come to lead through various turns of fate. He would have another reminder after being sworn in for his first elected term under heavy security in Eagle Square in Abuja more than a month after the rioting. In the hours following Jonathan's inauguration, bomb blasts blamed on Boko Haram went off in four separate cities, killing about 20 people.[19]

* * *

It was a common refrain before 2011: Nigerians would never blow themselves up for any cause. They were too individualistic. The country can often feel like a brutally cut-throat place – every man for himself, with extremely difficult, if not impossible, odds for the millions of desperately poor. President Jonathan had apparently also subscribed to a version of this view. Back in February 2010, as ex-US president George W. Bush visited Nigeria, he and former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice met with Jonathan, with part of the discussion touching on the case of the so-called underwear bomber, a Nigerian named Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, and his attempted bombing on Christmas Day two months earlier, when he sought to set off explosives on a flight into Detroit in the United States. The case had shaken Nigerians, but Abdulmutallab had travelled to Yemen and was believed to have been recruited into Al-Qaeda in the Arabian

Peninsula, so many people back home viewed him as an aberration.

'Jonathan joked that "Nigerians don't want to die" and that suicide bombers like Abdulmutallab possessed "traits alien to the nation", which were usually inculcated from abroad', according to a US diplomatic cable describing the meeting with Jonathan, who was then still acting president. 'He observed that most extremists since September 11 2001, have not come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and "had stayed in some of the best cities in the world, but received some bad influences while they were there."'[20]

The analysis ignored the deep frustration, desperation and hopelessness among young people in his country, not to mention Nigerians' fervent religious beliefs. Such frustration, coupled with the chance for families to benefit financially and the promise of a better life achieved through martyrdom, would prove to be a recipe for disaster in Nigeria, as it has elsewhere.[21]

So much would change in 2011, when low-grade, homemade explosives and gun battles would give way to a frightening new reality that the Nigerian authorities were utterly unprepared to confront. The insurgents would use new weapons and strategies, selecting targets that seemed meant to deliberately inflame religious and ethnic tensions. There would be signs of an emerging new offshoot that included members with ties to Al-Qaeda's arm in northern Africa and which would seek to imitate foreign jihadist groups. But perhaps worst of all, Boko Haram would begin to use suicide bombers with devastating results.

A first glimpse of what lay ahead occurred in June 2011. In photographs and video later distributed to journalists by purported Boko Haram members and posted to a website which was later taken down, a smiling man holding an AK-47 waved from the driver's seat of a car. He was identified as Mohammed Manga, a 35-year-old with five children who had been a follower of Mohammed Yusuf when the Boko Haram leader was still alive.[22] According to those who distributed the images, he was also Nigeria's first suicide bomber, and the pictures showing him waving goodbye were taken just before his attack.

On 16 June 2011, Manga manoeuvred his car on to the grounds of police headquarters after a convoy that included the national police chief at the time, Hafiz Ringim. It was late morning, about 11 a.m., the building crowded, the car park filled with vehicles. A police warden was said to have intercepted Manga's car and directed it into an area of the car park to undergo an inspection.[23] It was

there that the blast would occur, killing Manga, the officer and at least one other person, while destroying rows of cars and leaving a fire blazing in the car park. The police chief's convoy was not hit, and it was not clear why the bomber had not sought to reach the building or whether the explosives had gone off prematurely. There were also suggestions that the bomber had sought to get out of the car before the blast, raising questions over whether it was intended to be a suicide attack. An initial police statement, however, flatly called it a suicide bombing – Nigeria's first – and it has since been generally accepted as being such.

A message had been sent. It seemed Boko Haram was now ready to employ suicide attacks, and one of its 'martyrs' had barely missed either blowing up Nigeria's police headquarters or killing the country's police chief. A man claiming to be a Boko Haram spokesman said the group was ready to deploy more bombers and that the explosives had been brought in from abroad – a possibility, though homemade bombs, even powerful ones, do not require much expertise and explosives are readily available in Nigeria. In a story written by Nigerian journalist Ahmad Salkida, known for having sources within Boko Haram, the spokesman who identified himself as Abu Zaid said Manga acted as something of a runner for Boko Haram when Yusuf was still alive, travelling to neighbouring Benin and also Dubai while helping with an 'arms build-up'. It was not clear if Zaid meant he purchased arms in those places.

'Abu Zaid also confided in this newspaper that Manga left a will of over four million naira [$24,000 dollars] to his two daughters and three sons and urged fellow believers to sacrifice their lives for the sake of Allah', Salkida wrote in his story. 'This, the group said, is evident in the last-minute pictures of Manga, believed to have been taken at a camp somewhere in Borno state.'[24]

The extremists were now threatening to take their fight directly into the heart of the Nigerian state. The response from the authorities was, however, little more than the same pattern that would become so familiar and frustrating: condemnation, empty promises about bringing those responsible to justice and then little else. In the days after the attack, Jonathan issued a statement similar to other government responses. The president said, 'the explosion was an act of terror, which had become a global trend, but assured that the administration was taking steps to ensure the safety of all Nigerians, adding that no incident should be overlooked, no matter the circumstances or location of its occurrence.'[25]

Two months later, a suicide bomber would seek to drive into police headquarters in Maiduguri in the north-east during screening of potential new recruits, with about 1,500 on site at the time. He would be stopped, police shooting him dead before he set off his explosives and as he tried to drive into the complex.[26]

The attack on the UN building in Abuja would occur less than two weeks later, instantly transforming the image of Boko Haram, making it a dangerous new threat with unclear aims. It showed how far the extremists had advanced their planning and bomb-making abilities. A source who has seen the security video from the day of the attack said it seemed that advance surveillance had been done on the location by the attackers since the bomber knew to drive his car through the exit gate, which was less closely guarded than the entrance side. An investigation that included FBI agents from the United States also found that the bomb had been manufactured as a ‘shaped charge’, intensifying the force of the blast, and included 125 kilograms of explosives, according to Reuters news agency, which saw a copy of the classified report. It was made with both TATP and PETN, common for both military and commercial purposes, and regularly used by extremists worldwide to carry out attacks.[27]

Nigeria’s intelligence service said the mastermind of the attack was a man named Mamman Nur, who was by some accounts Boko Haram’s third-in-command at the time of the 2009 uprising, behind Yusuf and Shekau. His nationality has been debated, with some claiming he was from Chad or perhaps born in Maiduguri to Chadian parents, while others said he was Cameroonian. He was believed to be among the Boko Haram figures who formed links with AQIM and Al-Shebab, having recently returned from Somalia before the UN attack.[28]

Nigerian authorities said they received intelligence six days before the bombing that ‘Boko Haram elements were on a mission to attack unspecified targets in Abuja’ and arrested two suspects on 21 August named Babagana Ismail Kwaljima and Babagana Mali. They did not say, however, why they were unable to stop the attack.[29]

Vinod Alkari, the UNICEF official caught up in the bombing who struggled to help rescue others who were trapped, questioned why more was not done to secure the building ahead of time given the vague warnings. Alkari said that, during UN security meetings he attended, intelligence from the Nigerian

government indicating attacks may be in the works against unspecified high-profile targets was discussed. He was not aware of any specific changes put in place on the ground to further guard against such a possibility. UN officials in Abuja did not respond to my requests to discuss the attack, and a spokeswoman at the secretary-general's office in New York declined to comment on security matters.

Boko Haram would claim credit for the attack. In the alleged bomber's 'martyr' video, a recorded message, purported to be Shekau's voice, played over an image of him, bearded and wearing a red-and-white keffiyeh and white robe. An AK-47 leaned against the wall behind him, tape wrapped around its magazine. He said that one of the group's main goals was establishing true sharia law, and that his followers were prepared to die for it.

> My Muslim brethren, you should be happy with this incident in Abuja, which is a forum of all the global evil called the UN. May the wrath of God be on them. This forum is better called the United Nonsense, as we've been calling it even before we went to war, because this is a centre of Judeo-Christian plots. My Muslim brethren, you should obey Allah. Allah has in many places in the Qur'an forbade Muslims from cooperating with the Jews. And Allah has told us that any Muslim who goes into partnership with the Jews and the Christians is one of them [...].
>
> We feel the agony of what is happening to us year after year, month after month, in many towns. How many years has it taken when our brethren are being killed in many places and everybody knows this is being carried out by Christians? Besides, our mosque was demolished, our brothers killed and we were chased out. We had to leave the city. We raised up and picked up arms to defend ourselves and our religion. In this regard under the pretext of fighting us, they are killing you on all fronts. If you can understand under the pretext of fighting us and naming us Boko Haram, how many people have been killed? [...]
>
> [P]eople should understand that we are not after worldly things. Our main concern is the way the country is being run under the constitution and democracy, where Christians are given the opportunity to demean us. We are out to achieve two aims: one is seeking Allah's help to establish sharia so that Muslims will have peace to practise their religion, and the second mission, even if we don't achieve this, there is a higher goal than this; may God cause all of us to be killed, to be wiped off the earth, instead of being alive while Allah's laws are not adhered to. Don't take pride in killing us. To us, killing us is a source of pride. What we seek is martyrdom. [30]

* * *

When a helicopter landed in Maiduguri in September 2011 carrying former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo, there would be a fleeting moment of hope. With the UN building blown up, hundreds killed across northern and central Nigeria, and the violence showing no signs of abating, it became obvious to many that some form of negotiation would be needed as part of any serious bid to end the insurgency. Obasanjo had flown to Maiduguri for that reason, and

after meeting other organisers at the air force base in the city reeling from months of bombings and shoot-outs, he drove with them to the ruins of the mosque where Mohammed Yusuf once preached. A meeting had been arranged and it was to include an audience of about 60 people, a mat spread out under a tree at the site of the destroyed mosque for this purpose. According to an organiser of the meeting, northern-based rights activist Shehu Sani, those in attendance included relatives of the late Boko Haram leader and those identified as insurgents. The main speaker apart from Obasanjo would be Babakura Fugu, Yusuf's brother-in-law and the son of Baba Fugu Mohammed, the elderly man killed by security forces at the conclusion of the 2009 uprising. Despite a court ruling awarding Mohammed's family some $600,000 in damages over his death, the government still at that point had not paid.

'We sat down and had a frank talk', Sani told me one afternoon a couple years later at a cafe in the Hilton hotel in Abuja, where he had gone for meetings. 'President Obasanjo told them that he is here on a peace mission [...] and he is passionate about peace and he wants an end to this violence, and he wants to hear their grievances. And now it was then that they came out with a list of their – the "crime", in quotes, that was committed against them by the state.'

They showed him pictures of supposed Boko Haram members they said had been killed by the security agencies during the crackdown in 2009 as well as documents related to their case against the government.

'They didn't ask for court money, but they showed how even a secular order from a secular court could not even be obeyed by even the president himself, by the government', Sani said. Other points they raised included 'the need to release some members of the Boko Haram group and also to stop the raiding of houses and arresting of people, and then to look at the possibility of rebuilding the mosque, schools and homes that were [...] demolished by security agencies, and to end the harassment of their wives and children'.

The meeting lasted around four hours, according to Sani. He said he sought to have Obasanjo act as mediator for a few specific reasons, including the fact that he was a Christian from the south, making him less vulnerable to accusations of 'sponsoring' the violence, as some northern politicians had been accused of doing. Sani said he also chose him because Obasanjo remained highly influential in Nigerian politics and could speak directly with the president. On top of that,

Obasanjo and Sani knew each other, having both been held in the same prison under the regime of Sani Abacha in the 1990s.

Obasanjo, whose commanding presence stands in sharp contrast to Jonathan, accepted the documents and photos presented to him and told them he would speak with the president. Others in the audience took turns speaking, including some who ‘said clearly that they will not stop fighting until justice is done to them’, Sani said. The ex-president listened, but also told them the violence had been counterproductive.

‘He was saying they should stop killings, that it is destroying the image of Nigeria – it is destroying democracy – and that he has listened to their grievances and he will do something about it’, Sani said. ‘He said it is demonising the north as a region, it’s demonising the country, it’s giving us a bad name, and they should stop all these killings.’

There were doubts then, and there continue to be, over whether those Obasanjo met with had any real influence over the Boko Haram that had re-emerged after Yusuf’s death. Babakura Fugu was a relative of Yusuf’s, but it was not clear by any means whether he still had any contact with the group. In any case, Sani said he believed those at the meeting, based on their own assurances, could have exerted influence over Boko Haram as well as arranged contact with Abubakar Shekau.

After the meeting, Obasanjo and Sani travelled back to Abuja. According to Sani, Obasanjo met personally with his one-time protégé, President Jonathan, and presented him with the documents while describing the meeting. After that, it seems the government did nothing, and Sani said Obasanjo made no secret of his anger over his efforts having gone to waste.

‘What he told me is that he is not happy with the way the president has not taken seriously what he has done’, said Sani, relaying what he says Obasanjo told him. ‘From my own thinking, the security chiefs at that time were those who were putting pressure on the president not to agree to the documents which president Obasanjo brought that may help in ending the insurgency.’

It may not have mattered anyway. Two days later, Babakura Fugu was shot dead in Maiduguri. There were suspicions over whether a faction of the insurgents opposed to negotiations was responsible, while others questioned whether the security forces may have been behind it. A man believed at the time to be a spokesman for Boko Haram’s main faction denied they were responsible,

while the military and police also said they had nothing to do with it.

Another short-lived attempt at negotiations would occur several months later in March 2012, this time with an Islamic cleric acting as mediator. When word leaked to journalists that talks were moving ahead, the mediator, Ibrahim Datti Ahmad, quit, issuing a statement questioning the government's sincerity. Some had accused those within the government who were opposed to negotiations of leaking the story to sabotage the talks.

'To our shock and dismay, no sooner had we started this dialogue, Nigerian newspapers came out with a lot of the details of the meeting held', Ahmad said in his statement. 'This development has embarrassed us very much and has created strong doubts in our minds about the sincerity of the government's side in our discussion as the discussion is supposed to be very confidential to achieve any success. In view of this unfortunate and unhelpful development, we have no option but to withdraw from these early discussions. We sincerely regret that an opportunity to negotiate and terminate this cycle of violence is being missed.'

Asked why members of the security forces and government would want to sabotage a legitimate attempt at ending the insurgency, Sani, the organiser of Obasanjo's visit, repeated what many others have also said. He named pride among members of the security forces who continue to believe the insurgency can be defeated militarily, but also a factor that comes into play far too often in Nigeria: money. The national security budget would rise to some $6 billion by 2013, or about 20 per cent of the country's total spending, providing many opportunities for corruption. No one could ever prove whether anyone would go so far as to prefer violence over peace because of the financial benefits, but the way in which that perception spread was telling in itself of how little trust Nigerians placed in those who were supposed to be protecting them.

4

‘That Is How Complex the Situation Is’

The president, apparently attempting to comfort the nation, would end up doing something else entirely. It was January 2012, at the end of a Christmas season that had been so bloody it had led some to again question whether Nigeria was careening toward a second civil war. Boko Haram insurgents had changed tactics and targeted churches in an onslaught of bombings on Christmas Day. In the worst of the attacks, a suicide bomber drove up outside a Catholic church in Madalla, near the capital Abuja, as Christmas morning mass was ending and set off his explosives near the entrance. The force of the blast ripped through the crowd, a combination of churchgoers making their way outside, motorcycle taxi drivers and passersby, killing 44 people. Some who were badly injured ran to the priest for a final blessing. ‘It was really terrible’, Father Christopher Barde told my AFP colleague Ola Awoniyi. ‘People ran towards me, [saying] “Father anoint me.”’[1]

After at first issuing statements with the usual condemnations and promises to track down the masterminds, President Jonathan made two speeches on New Year’s Eve that would be his most forceful yet related to the insurgency. The first came as he visited the church in Madalla where the bomb attack had occurred. While there, he said Boko Haram ‘started as a harmless group [...] They have now grown cancerous. And Nigeria, being the body, they want to kill it. But nobody will allow them to do that.’[2]

On the heels of that visit, Jonathan would later in the day give a nationally televised address to announce he was declaring a state of emergency in areas hit particularly hard by the violence. ‘While the search for lasting solutions is ongoing, it has become imperative to take some decisive measures necessary to restore normalcy in the country especially within the affected communities’, he said.[3] He provided few details on what exactly the declaration would mean on the ground, and as the days wore on, it seemed that little had actually changed. However, while the announcement may have been light on substance, it

provided some relief in the country, since the government seemed to finally acknowledge the dangerous situation it was facing.

That relief would give way to more confusion only a few days later. On 8 January, Jonathan would give a speech that would have been extremely alarming had it not been so baffling. It occurred on Armed Forces Remembrance Day at the National Christian Centre, a cathedral-like structure in the capital Abuja, near the national mosque. It generated little interest beforehand, seeming to be one of the many functions and events a president shows up for, says a few words and departs. Jonathan seemed to speak off-the-cuff, ranging from the recent attacks on churches to corruption, but it was his comments about Boko Haram that were so startling. He suggested that the group had infiltrated the government and security forces, but in such vague terms no one knew what to make of it. 'The situation we have in our hands is even worse than the civil war that we fought', Jonathan said. The speech continued:

> During the civil war, we knew and we could even predict where the enemy was coming from. You can even know the route they are coming from; you can even know what calibre of weapon they will use and so on. But the challenge we have today is more complicated [...] Somebody said that the situation is bad, that even if one's son is a member, one will not even know. That means that if the person will plant a bomb behind your house, you won't know.
>
> Some of them are in the executive arm of government, some of them are in the parliamentary-legislative arm of government, while some of them are even in the judiciary. Some are also in the armed forces, the police and other security agencies. Some continue to dip their hands and eat with you and you won't even know the person who will point a gun at you or plant a bomb behind your house. That is how complex the situation is. [4]

The comments were so stunning that when they were sent to me by a journalist who occasionally worked for us in Abuja, I immediately questioned whether they were accurate, even though I knew him to be a solid reporter. I called him to stress the importance of the story and the need to quote the president with absolute precision, telling him that the comments were surely going to cause a stir. He assured me that it would withstand the scrutiny and told me that he had a recording of the remarks which he had double-checked. Satisfied with his assurances, I began trying to write a story that would shed some light on what the president had said. I was not particularly successful. I was flummoxed, and so were my editors in Paris, who were asking me to interpret these remarks against some coherent context. Was he saying the insurgency was political? Did he mean it was a conspiracy by his enemies? Was he simply trying to make exaggerated excuses for why his government had been

unable to stop the violence? What could possibly be made of such pronouncements? Above all, and perhaps most frustratingly, they posed a simple question: if Boko Haram members were in the security forces, judiciary and government and the president was aware of it, why had they not been arrested? That question would never be answered, and Jonathan would give no further explanation. Whatever he meant, an attack less than two weeks later would show that Jonathan was at least right to be concerned about the threat Boko Haram now posed.

It seemed clear from the start that the attack on 20 January was going to be like no other Boko Haram violence before it. It occurred in Kano, the largest city in northern Nigeria, an important commercial centre dating back to the Middle Ages and where Frederick Lugard's men had begun their final conquest of the region for the British. The bomb blasts began to tear through the Friday afternoon bustle and simply kept exploding, one after another, so many that residents lost count. Gunfire rang out and residents in the city of about 3 million people rushed to take cover. Wellington Asiayei, the police officer shot and paralysed at his barracks whom I met in the hospital, was the victim of one of the cruellest individual assaults, the trigger pulled by a man dressed as one of his colleagues, but his story was one of many.

The assault may have been set in motion the month before, in December 2011, when a message purported to be from Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau was addressed to the Kano state government. It claimed that Boko Haram members had been arrested over the previous five months following allegations that they were armed robbers. 'We are therefore compelled to write this letter to inform Kano residents of this development so that when we launch attacks in the city as we have been doing in Maiduguri, they should not blame us', it said.

Kano Governor Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso would later acknowledge having seen the 'open letter', but sought to distance himself from any arrests, saying that the state had no policing powers, with the police force a federal agency.[5] The police commissioner in Kano state at the time, Ibrahim Idris, would say later that a number of people had been arrested ahead of the January attacks, but he declined to provide any further details, calling it 'sensitive'.[6] Kano up to that point had mostly escaped the kind of serious attacks that had so badly hit Maiduguri and other cities.

The first blast would occur at around five in the afternoon at a regional police

administrative office, where a suicide bomber sought to crash into the building. His vehicle exploded outside, ripping off a chunk of the roof. A police corporal who was stationed at the building at the time tried to explain to me what had happened from his hospital bed before trailing off, unable to speak. Corporal Muazzam Aminu, a 37-year-old father of one, his wife seated next to him, spoke briefly in clipped phrases, saying he saw a motorcycle enter the compound first. There was shooting, then an explosion. He was unable to continue any further. According to police, three suicide bombers drove a car on to the grounds of that building, called a zonal headquarters, and detonated a bomb. As security forces arrived to assess the damage, it began to become clear that they were facing an assault far larger than that attack.

‘We rushed there, and based on the assessment we made we discovered that it was a sort of a suicide bomber that drove into that compound’, Idris, the police commissioner, told me and a group of other journalists at Kano police headquarters in the days after the attacks. ‘It was there then that we heard of another two attacks on two of our police stations.’

Even that was an underestimate. In fact, dozens, possibly hundreds, of attackers were swarming through the streets in an incredibly coordinated set of assaults. Many were on motorcycles, while others drove cars loaded with explosives. Their weapons included AK-47 rifles, drink cans transformed into tiny bombs, larger powdered-milk tins also designed to explode and powerful IEDs built with 350-kilogram drums. They would run amok, hitting an immigration office, a nearby police station where detainees were set free, a girls’ secondary school, Kano police headquarters and several others. Part of their strategy included throwing the drink-can bombs at the buildings they were targeting, then opening fire on those who ran away.

‘That’s what started the fire, and the whole place went up in flames’, Idris said of the drink-can bombs. ‘And as people are running helter-skelter, they now come – you know, these terrorists attack now with weapons, and they’re just killing’.

Some wore uniforms resembling those of police or military divisions, and they would approach officers and civilians on the streets and gun them down.

‘Some of our police officers who saw them on the streets, they thought they are their colleagues, and that’s how they now identified them to be police officers, and that’s how they shot – they just shot them in cold blood’, said Idris.

‘And it’s true, we have some of the incidents like that in some locations in the city where [...] they were wearing uniforms resembling that of the mobile police and the military. They used that to deceive the members of the public, and in the process shot some of these civilians and some of our police officers. In fact, like I said, most of the casualties of the police are not killed at the police stations, but they are killed on the street where they saw them.’

At state police headquarters, a bomber who sought to enter crashed into one of the drums used as a security measure outside the gate and his explosives went off, killing at least one policeman on guard and four civilians at shops along the road. Several of the market stalls that line the street outside the headquarters were reduced to piles of splinters. While the bomber was not able to make it past the gates, others penetrated inside and roamed freely, which is what led to Assistant Superintendent Asiayei being shot and paralysed as he sought to lock the door to his room in the barracks before fleeing.

One 29-year-old man who was shot in the leg while on his way home from his job at a tannery told me the four friends who were with him at the time were all killed. He said they had been driving near the Palm Centre police station, one of those targeted by the attackers, and after hearing a bomb explode, everyone began to run.

‘I’m the only one who survived’, Monday Joseph said from his hospital bed. ‘We heard a bomb, but what I felt in my body was a gun [...] Once I’m shot, I’m just down flat.’ He said a friend arrived about 30 minutes later and brought him to the hospital.

The morgue at the city’s largest hospital, Murtala Mohammed Specialist Hospital, filled with bodies piled on top of one another. My colleague Aminu Abubakar was allowed inside and counted at least 80 before stopping.[7] At the smaller Aminu Kano Teaching Hospital, the morgue would also fill to capacity. Dr Aminu Zakari Mohammed, chief medical director at Aminu Kano, told me that he went to notify the emergency room when he heard about the first attack.

‘Even before I finished, already I heard another explosion [...] then a second and a third one’, Mohammed said. ‘I felt this was something out of the ordinary. I kept hearing the explosions.’ He and his staff worked until 2 a.m. to treat the victims being brought in. He said one family arrived later in the night after their house collapsed from the force of the blasts.

There were at least five suicide bombers, according to police. The authorities put the death toll at 185, but many people suspected it was higher. Bodies were scattered on roads the next morning, particularly near state police headquarters. Police said they discovered 10 cars with unexploded IEDs along with about 300 drink cans, eight powdered milk tins and eight 350-kilogram drums – all loaded with explosives. Some of my colleagues and I were allowed to see what the police had seized and taken back to headquarters, and the cans and various bomb-making materials were spread out across the floor of a storage room. There was even at least one meant to be a time bomb wired to a conventional wall clock, the kind you might see in a kitchen.

A mobile-phone seller near the immigration office that was attacked, 35-year-old Abdulrazak Murtala, told me, ‘we just heard a bomb blast and people started running. Some people are just shooting, shooting guns [...] Some are on bikes, some are inside cars.’ He was unsure what to make of the people who carried out the attack. ‘We don’t even know what they want’, he said. ‘I don’t think these people are fighting for religion. I just think they are fighting for their own selfish interest.’

Abubakar Shekau would deliver a message posted on YouTube a week later, claiming responsibility for the violence and threatening further attacks. He said security forces were to blame, alleging Boko Haram members had been arrested and tortured, while women and children had also been detained. Perhaps sensing that the group had taken the violence too far, he also falsely claimed that civilians had not been targeted.

‘We attacked the security formations because our members were arrested and tortured’, Shekau said in the audio message played over a picture of him.

> Our women and children have also been arrested [...] They should know that they also have wives and children. We can also abduct them. It is not beyond our powers [...] Soldiers raided an Islamic seminary in Maiduguri and desecrated the Qur’an. They should bear in mind that they also have primary and secondary schools and universities, and we can also attack them [...] After we finished our war, policemen stuck around and started killing civilians and later blamed us. We are not fighting civilians, but security forces. We only kill soldiers, policemen and their collaborators. [8]

The message was posted as the situation spiralled even further out of control. Another police station in Kano was attacked a few days after the 20 January wave of violence, while a couple of days after that, gunmen kidnapped a German engineer working for a construction firm on the outskirts of the city. The

kidnapping signalled that earlier abductions of a Briton and an Italian from Kebbi in north-western Nigeria were not isolated incidents, with yet another new and different phase of the insurgency ahead. In the case of the German, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb would at one point claim to be holding him and demand the release of the wife of an Islamist leader in exchange for his freedom, signalling murky links between AQIM and kidnappers in northern Nigeria. He would eventually be killed by his abductors during a raid to free him in Kano.[9] There were also more bombings over the following months, including a suicide attack on the Abuja office of one of Nigeria's most prominent newspapers in April 2012.

* * *

Blood covered the floor of the bathroom in the unguarded and now empty house, its walls pocked with bullet holes, children from the neighbourhood entering and exiting at will. Crowds were still gathering outside on the morning of 9 March 2012, intrigued by what had happened the previous day in the quiet residential neighbourhood of unpaved roads and modest houses in the city of Sokoto, the home of Nigeria's highest-ranking Muslim spiritual leader and the former capital of Usman Dan Fodio's caliphate. They spoke of a chaotic raid that sparked a shoot-out, with the men inside refusing to surrender and around 100 Nigerian soldiers, who had been supported by British special forces, surrounding the house. The soldiers were pursuing them because they had been holding two Western hostages, Franco Lamolinara, a 48-year-old Italian, and Chris McManus, who was British and 28. The two men were kidnapped almost a year earlier, in May 2011, while working on a construction project in Kebbi state in north-western Nigeria, near the border with Niger. At one point during the intense gun battle at the house in Sokoto, according to some of the residents, Nigerian soldiers asked people in the neighbourhood to bring them old tyres. When they did, the soldiers set them alight and tossed them over the wall of the complex, a single-storey series of structures with a zinc roof and a courtyard. They wanted to smoke the kidnappers out.[10]

Unlike AQIM, which had collected millions of dollars in ransom payments by abducting Westerners, Boko Haram had not yet used kidnapping as a tactic. Abductions were in general rare in northern Nigeria, unlike in parts of the south, where ransom kidnappings had become big business. That began to change when a group of Boko Haram members seemed to break off and create their own

faction, called Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan, or Vanguard for the Aid of Muslims in Black Africa.[11] It would later come to be known simply as Ansaru, and it would be blamed for the kidnappings of the British and Italian engineers and a number of other abductions.

Several theories were offered as to why they had split, with some arguing that they had grown frustrated with the killing of civilians and particularly fellow Muslims by Shekau's Boko Haram. Others reasoned that the dissidents wanted to more forcefully pursue an international agenda, in line with Al-Qaeda affiliates in northern Africa and elsewhere. A third reason put forth was more opportunistic: those in Ansaru had the connections and the will to try to create a kidnapping market in northern Nigeria and wanted to profit from it as their extremist colleagues elsewhere had done. It is certainly possible that the true story was a combination of all of those factors. Some experts said Ansaru's leader, or one of them, may have been Khalid al-Barnawi, long a Boko Haram figure who may have run a training camp with AQIM in Algeria and had some form of relationship with the Algerian extremist Mokhtar Belmokhtar.[12] The US government would later label al-Barnawi a 'global terrorist' along with two other Nigerian extremists: Shekau and Abubakar Adam Kambar, who was also said to be linked to AQIM. Nigeria's military claimed Kambar was Boko Haram's main link with Al-Qaeda and Al-Shebab in Somalia.[13] How separate Boko Haram and Ansaru truly are has been heavily debated, and it seems the two overlap, particularly when it comes to their foot soldiers. It has been described by some as an umbrella-like arrangement that includes both Boko Haram and Ansaru.

After the May 2011 abductions of the Briton and Italian, there had been no word from the kidnappers or the victims for months, fuelling speculation that they had been carried out by Islamist extremists whose agenda was more complicated than simply collecting a ransom. Abductions in the Niger Delta in the south had tended to follow a pattern, with a ransom demanded shortly after the kidnapping and victims usually released unharmed after it was paid, often following negotiations to lower the price. The silence surrounding McManus and Lamolinara would be broken in August 2011, when a video emerged showing the two men blindfolded and on their knees. They were forced to read a statement in which they said their abductors were from Al-Qaeda and that their governments should meet the kidnappers' demands. The demands were, however, not listed – a clear set of demands would in fact never be issued,

according to the British government – and after the appearance of the video, there was another long period of silence with no word on the victims' health, where they may be located and what exactly their kidnappers wanted. A second video emerged in December 2011 in which gunmen threatened to execute McManus.[14]

Britain's participation in a potential rescue operation had taken root when Prime Minister David Cameron visited Nigeria and held talks with President Jonathan in July 2011. The two men discussed the hostages during the visit, 'and as a result agreed a package of UK support for Nigeria's counter-terrorism efforts', Britain's defence secretary, Philip Hammond, would tell the UK House of Commons. 'As part of that package, a sustained operation was conducted to identify members of the group responsible for the kidnapping.'[15]

By March 2012, after the arrest of three people accused of having conducted surveillance on the victims before their abduction, authorities had discovered that the man behind the plot was someone named Abu Mohammed. Nigeria's Department of State Services (DSS), a secret police and intelligence unit, described Mohammed as the leader of a faction of Boko Haram.[16] A Nigerian security source told a reporter for my news agency that Mohammed had links to both Boko Haram and AQIM and had masterminded the kidnapping with the aim of collecting ransom money, which would be used to finance more operations.[17]

Nigerian authorities learned that Mohammed's hideout was located in the city of Zaria in north-central Nigeria, several hundred miles away from Birnin Kebbi, the site of the kidnapping. On 7 March, the authorities launched a raid on the hideout. The DSS said the raid was carried out while Mohammed and his faction were holding a meeting of its 'shura council', or consultative body, but that description may imply a more sophisticated level of organisation than the group actually had. During the raid, a number of gang members were believed to be killed, while five were arrested, including Mohammed, who had been shot and injured in the gunfight. A soldier had his throat slit. Those who were arrested, according to the DSS, then began providing information to the authorities that would lead to the raid in Sokoto. The information was said to include a warning: Those keeping watch over the two hostages had been instructed to kill them 'in the event of any envisaged threat'. The British government would decide a rescue attempt was not only necessary, but that it also required the backing of its

special forces, who would participate in the operation.

‘After months of not knowing where they were being held, we received credible information about their location’, Cameron said later in a televised address. ‘A window of opportunity arose to secure their release. We also had reason to believe that their lives were under imminent and growing danger.’

The British government has never said publicly how many members of its elite Special Boat Service were dispatched for the raid, though reports in the British media put the number at around a dozen and perhaps as many as 20. There were also reports of the commandos being stationed in Nigeria for up to a couple weeks before the operation, and British intelligence operatives at one point may have managed to begin listening in on the kidnap gang’s phone calls.[18]

On the night of 7 March, one of those arrested – the man who killed the soldier, according to Nigerian authorities – led security forces to Sokoto, but any element of surprise may have been sabotaged by the military itself. Before the security team’s arrival the next morning, Nigeria’s military decided it would have to search and cordon off the neighbourhood where the hostages were believed to be held to make sure the kidnappers could not escape ahead of time.[19] Residents also said they saw two helicopters hovering overhead in the morning, which would obviously raise suspicions as well.

British forces became concerned that the Nigerian soldiers deployed throughout the neighbourhood had tipped the kidnappers off and decided they could wait no longer. It seems that, before that time, a final decision had not been made to go ahead with the raid since the Italian government had not been notified. The raid would begin shortly before noon, with the British government having given its final approval at 11.15 a.m.[20]

British commandos were among those who entered the walled-in compound and would be faced with gunfire from someone with an AK-47. They would spot and kill one of the gang members almost immediately after entering, but could hear more gunshots, except now they were muffled and seemed to come from inside a room. Two men then escaped, climbing a ladder over the wall. This all happened within six minutes after the start of the raid.

The soldiers then searched the premises, and after arriving in one section covered by tarpaulin, they went inside. When they entered a room with two beds,

they spotted a Manchester United shirt that resembled the one Chris McManus wore in videos released by the kidnappers.

‘They called out for Franco and Chris but received no reply’, Detective Chief Inspector Grant Mallon said when reporting the findings of a British inquest into the death of McManus. ‘To the right there was a metal door to a toilet and they noticed there were bullet holes to it, and the team noticed there were 7.62mm munitions and cases on the floor. The door was partially open and when the soldiers looked inside they could see two white males on the floor and they immediately recognised them as Chris and Franco. Chris was lying to the left of the toilet. Both men had visible gunshot wounds. It appears they were killed fairly quickly into the engagement.’

The inquest found that the two men could not have been hit by the rescue team’s bullets because those that killed them were a different type. McManus had been shot a total of six times, but died from a single gunshot wound to the head, while Lamolinara was hit four times and also died from a bullet to the head.[21]

They were eventually able to carry out the bodies, but the operation was far from over, however. At some point, a fierce firefight broke out between Nigerian soldiers and the kidnappers who remained. Residents said the gunfire lasted up to seven hours, though Britain’s defence secretary said it was 90 minutes. According to residents I spoke to in the neighbourhood the day after the raid, there were about 100 Nigerian troops as well as a tank. As the gun battle raged, soldiers asked residents for the old tyres that they set on fire and tossed over the wall. A huge hole could be seen in one of the walls the next day, and residents said the tank had fired a shell into it. Three members of the gang were killed and ‘none were taken alive’, according to Defence Secretary Hammond.[22] Nigerian authorities said the wife of one of the gang members was wounded by a bullet and treated at hospital.

Every resident I spoke to claimed they did not know who occupied the house or that the hostages were being held there. The local chief of the Mabera neighbourhood, Umar Bello, told me the same and added that he did not believe the kidnappers were members of Boko Haram. ‘It is just kidnappers. It’s about money’, he said. ‘Their major priority is money, and once they don’t get the money, they have nothing to lose.’

On the day after the raid, with dozens of people circulating through the

compound, by then picked clean by looters, and viewing the blood-splattered bathroom where the men were killed, Nigerian authorities had apparently had enough. Three truckloads of agents, including those wearing DSS helmets, arrived in the afternoon and began firing their guns into the air, forcing the crowd to scatter.

The kidnappings would have repercussions beyond Nigeria. It would spark a diplomatic dispute between Britain and Italy, with Italian President Giorgio Napolitano saying that 'the behaviour of the British government, which did not inform or consult with Italy on the operation that it was planning, really is inexplicable'.[23] Britain said there had not been time, since there was a need to act urgently. Underlying the dispute may have been differences in how each country handled such situations. Britain refuses to pay ransoms, while Italy has been willing to do so.[24]

Beyond that, it would lead to Britain saying that Ansaru was likely responsible for the kidnapping, listing it as a banned terrorist group and proclaiming it as 'broadly aligned with Al-Qaeda'.[25] The supposed kidnapping ringleader, Abu Mohammed, would, however, not be able to answer questions on the group. He died in Nigerian custody a day after the operation from, according to the DSS, 'severe bullet wounds' he suffered during the previous raid that led to his arrest in Zaria.[26]

In the following months, Ansaru would be blamed for a series of other kidnappings as well as attacks, with the new group's methods becoming more ruthless and its rhetoric increasingly taking on an international tone. It would claim credit for a raid on a police unit in the capital Abuja in November 2012 where a number of Islamists were believed to have been detained in a jail known as the abattoir because it was inside a warehouse formerly used for slaughtering cattle, chains still hanging from the ceiling.[27]

An attack on a planned contingent of Nigerian troops expected to be deployed to Mali occurred in January 2013, with a homemade bomb exploding as the soldiers' convoy passed near Okene in Kogi state, located in central Nigeria and where a number of extremists tied to Boko Haram were said to be from. The attack killed two of the soldiers to be deployed to Mali, where a French-led offensive had begun targeting Islamists who had taken control of a huge swathe of the nearby country. Ansaru claimed the attack, and in doing so said it was targeting troops who aimed to 'demolish the Islamic empire of Mali'.[28]

One particularly audacious raid in February 2013 saw abductors storm a construction site in the northern city of Bauchi, blow a hole in the gate with explosives, kill a security guard and kidnap seven foreigners, including one Briton, one Greek, an Italian, two Lebanese and two Syrians. An email to journalists purported to be from Ansaru, written in English, said that the attack occurred because of 'the transgressions and atrocities done to the religion of Allah [...] by the European countries in many places such as Afghanistan and Mali'. It seemed doubtful those were the true motives behind the kidnappings, with ransom money often the ultimate goal, but the statement again showed that the group was seeking to take a more international stance, at least in its rhetoric.[29]

The following month, on 9 March, another statement would be issued, in both Arabic and English, claiming that the seven hostages taken in Bauchi had been killed. It was accompanied by images of some of the hostages appearing to be dead, and had been distributed by an arm of the Sinam al-Islam Network, which runs an online jihadist forum.[30] The process by which the statement was distributed again indicated Ansaru had cultivated some form of relationship with foreign jihadi groups. In the statement, it said it killed the hostages because of attempts to rescue them. It provided a link to an obscure website that carried a story on whether British planes had landed in Nigeria to attempt a rescue, with aircraft having been spotted in Abuja. According to the British government, the planes that were spotted were there to help airlift troops and equipment to Mali and had nothing to do with a rescue bid.[31]

A shocking kidnapping would occur in February 2013, when a French family of seven were abducted while visiting a national park in northern Cameroon, near the Nigerian border. The victims included the mother and father as well as four children, aged between 5 and 12, and their uncle. The French government said it was believed the victims were taken across the border into Nigeria after the abduction, and a video emerged later in which Abubakar Shekau claimed responsibility for the kidnappings on behalf of Boko Haram. The video also showed images of the family and included the father, Tanguy Moulin-Fournier, reading a statement for the camera. Shekau and the family were never shown in the same frame and it was unclear if they were ever in the same location.[32]

It marked the first time Shekau's Boko Haram had taken credit for a kidnapping. In the video, Shekau demanded the release of Boko Haram prisoners

in both Nigeria and Cameroon, though there were suspicions all along that what the extremists were really after was money. It was never clear whether criminals had kidnapped the family and sold them on to Boko Haram, whether it was a planned action or if members of the extremist group simply came across them by chance and decided to carry out the abduction. The border with Cameroon in north-eastern Nigeria is porous, and Boko Haram members – like many average residents – are believed to circulate back and forth.

France insisted throughout the ordeal that it would not pay a ransom, though it was an open secret that it had done so to free captives repeatedly in the past in other countries, drawing criticism since the money would obviously provide financing to extremist groups. In the end, someone paid. A Nigerian security source told me the payment was made through the Cameroon government, though the family had been held in Nigeria, but he said he did not know the amount. French news channel iTele reported that 16 detained Boko Haram members were released and $7 million was paid to free the family.[33] Another report from Reuters, citing a confidential Nigerian government document, put the ransom figure at some $3.15 million.[34] It was never clear who paid the money, whatever the final amount was. The family was released in April after being held for two months through an arrangement that saw them arrive back in Cameroon. They appeared thin and scraggly, but seemed to be in good health considering the circumstances.

The first half of 2013 felt depressingly brutal. Shekau, wearing a knee-length green caftan with an AK-47 dangling from a strap around his neck, appeared in one video denying rumours of a ceasefire deal that had been circulating. The camera then cut to another shot where a man identified as an informer was pinned to the ground by others who slit his throat. They beheaded him later in the video.[35]

In Kano, gunmen opened fire on two clinics where polio vaccination workers had gathered, killing 10 people.[36] The attack came after a radio programme revived old conspiracy theories that had previously circulated in northern Nigeria about polio vaccines being a Western plot against Muslims. It was never clear whether the attacks were directly linked to Boko Haram, but they added to the nightmare of death and destruction in parts of northern Nigeria.

The situation was also becoming murkier. A US official who spoke to me in February 2013 on condition of anonymity talked of how little was known of the

Nigerian extremists and their intentions. ‘Even in painting a picture of where the lines are between these different groups, and how much of the criminal overlaps into it, all of this stuff is very difficult to determine’, he said.

Beyond the mayhem in Nigeria, there were reports of Boko Haram members showing up in Gao and elsewhere in Mali to fight with the Islamist extremists who had taken control of the northern half of the country there. There were doubts over whether they were truly Boko Haram members, and such doubts continue to exist for some, but a Western diplomat told me in March 2014 that he believed they were.

‘I think they were probably Boko Haram or Ansaru guys, which wouldn’t be all that surprising because we’ve known since the early 2000s that you have Nigerian extremists travelling in ones and twos and fives and sixes up to northern Mali to train with, first, the GSPC [Algeria’s Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat], and then when it morphed into AQIM.’

The US official I spoke with in 2013 pointed out that foreign jihadists are often attracted to like-minded struggles elsewhere, while also raising an issue that would become salient in later months. ‘You will also probably see a certain number of people go, and a certain number of people come back’, he said. ‘A concern is when they do come back, because they can come back with a greater skill set than when they left.’ In other words, they would be better fighters.

From his work in previous assignments, the US official was familiar with Algeria’s GSPC, and he saw certain similarities in what was then occurring in Nigeria. The GSPC had broken away from the Armed Islamic Group in the 1990s after growing frustrated with the widespread killing of civilians in its insurgency against the government. Later, GSPC declared its allegiance to Al-Qaeda and became known as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, taking on a more international and especially anti-Western stance. Criminality and Islamist extremism also blended with GSPC and AQIM, with its leaders believed to have made fortunes through various forms of smuggling in addition to kidnappings. Speaking of Ansaru, the US official said that ‘they do seem to have a sort of different approach than (Boko Haram) writ large tactically [...] Kind of reminds me in some ways of how the GSPC originally broke out in Algiers because they didn’t want to see so much broad targeting of Muslims, wanted to go in a different direction. So these things are not unprecedented in this region.’

* * *

Dependable information from the Nigerian security forces was in short supply, and by that time, the allegations against them of outrageous abuses were piling up. On a road near the Borno state government compound, a group of women were gathering regularly in 2013 in hopes that the governor would hear their pleas. They had lost their husbands or sons or other family members and, beyond the sorrow of their loved ones turning up dead, had in many cases also been robbed of their household's main breadwinner. When I was there in October 2013, there were about two dozen women gathered under neem trees along the roadside, and when I began speaking to one, others quickly crowded around, raising their voices and demanding that I interview them as well in the hope that I could somehow help. One woman I spoke with said her husband and son were killed by Boko Haram, but others I talked to in detail as the crowd pressed against me and a colleague, who translated from Hausa for me, blamed the military.

One 30-year-old woman said her husband had been arrested in the restive Gwange neighbourhood of Maiduguri about 15 months earlier during a military sweep. About a week later, the military returned his dead body to her for burial, informing her that he had died in detention. According to her, he had been shot. She denied he was a member of Boko Haram and accused soldiers of killing him. 'He was taken away, then later they killed him', she said, describing him as a 40-year-old taxi driver. She and her 12-year-old son had since moved back to her parents' home. Another 20-year-old woman said her husband went out to 'look for daily bread' in 2012 when soldiers arrested him along with others suspected of being members of Boko Haram, later returning his dead body to her, leaving her to look after her two-year-old daughter alone. Those I spoke with denied that their family members were connected to Boko Haram and said their pleas for assistance had been ignored by the government and security forces.[37]

Their accusations were not a surprise since similar ones had been made repeatedly. Many of the alleged cases tended to follow a pattern: a roadside bomb would explode near a military post or convoy and soldiers would respond ruthlessly, rounding up men from the neighbourhood and setting homes, market stalls and other buildings alight. According to accounts provided to journalists and human rights groups, the soldiers would accuse residents of cooperating with the insurgents.

Beyond the destruction itself, the allegations would limit the kinds of military training Nigeria's foreign allies could provide. The United States was prevented by law from providing training to soldiers whose units were suspected of serious rights abuses. Any soldier who rotated through Nigeria's so-called Joint Task Force operating in the north-east could be barred, no matter if they themselves were guilty or not.

A powerful report from Human Rights Watch released in October 2012 set out a long list of alleged abuses by Boko Haram as well as members of Nigeria's security forces, questioning whether both were guilty of crimes against humanity.[38] A few weeks later, Amnesty International issued a report with similar accusations, alleging widespread extrajudicial killings and torture by the security forces, among other abuses.[39] Nigeria's National Human Rights Commission would report in June 2013 that it had 'received several credibly attested allegations of gross violations by officials of the [military task force], including allegations of summary executions, torture, arbitrary detention amounting to internment and outrages against the dignity of civilians, as well as rape'.[40]

A Nigerian official who has followed the situation closely estimated, when I spoke with him in May 2014 on condition of anonymity, that the number of 'Boko Haram' detainees was 'in the low thousands [...] about 3,000 or so detainees'. He said that appalling detention practices may be radicalising some prisoners who may not otherwise have turned to extremism, with 'lots and lots being held in ratholes'. Many of the abuses of detainees were said to have occurred at the notorious Giwa military barracks in Maiduguri, as described in the Human Rights Watch report:

> During raids in communities, often in the aftermath of Boko Haram attacks, members of the security forces have executed men in front of their families; arbitrarily arrested or beaten members of the community; burned houses, shops, and cars; stolen money while searching homes; and, in at least one case documented by Human Rights Watch, raped a woman. Government security agencies routinely hold suspects incommunicado without charge or trial in secret detention facilities and have subjected detainees to torture or other physical abuse. [41]

Untold numbers of young men seemed to have simply disappeared, with no indication of whether they had been killed or if they were being held somewhere by Nigeria's security forces. Since there had been no judicial process, there was no way of knowing whether any of them had anything to do with the insurgency.

Human Rights Watch interviewed one former detainee who said he saw other prisoners tortured or killed. His descriptions of what happened to them were stomach-churning:

> For example, he said that while he was being interrogated by security agents in an office at the barracks he saw soldiers at another table torture a detainee by pulling on his genitals with a pair of pliers. He also described seeing soldiers try to 'peel the skin' off a detainee with a razor and kill another detainee while he was suspended from a tree at the barracks. [42]

Perhaps the worst single incident of soldiers being accused of rampaging would occur in April 2013 in the town of Baga, located on the edge of Lake Chad in Nigeria's far north-east. On the evening of 16 April, attackers believed to be from Boko Haram shot dead a soldier serving under a task force in the region, apparently the latest in a string of incidents blamed on Boko Haram in Baga. Reinforcements from the task force arrived in Baga later the same night and, according to residents and a police incident report, unleashed fury on the town. The soldiers 'started shooting indiscriminately at anybody in sight including domestic animals. This reaction resulted to [*sic*] loss of lives and massive destruction of properties', the police incident report quoted by Nigeria's National Human Rights Commission said. Residents also accused the soldiers of setting entire neighbourhoods ablaze in revenge, and the police report said the troops 'completely razed down' at least five wards in Baga.[43] According to the Red Cross, 187 people were killed. A local senator put the death toll at 228. The military bitterly disputed those numbers as well as the assertions that soldiers set buildings alight, arguing that the fires would have been caused by insurgents. According to the military, 37 people were killed, including 30 insurgents, six civilians and a soldier.[44]

News of the violence was slow to emerge from the remote town, and when it did, access to the area was restricted by the military. My colleague Aminu Abubakar managed to enter Baga with a military escort more than two weeks after. One resident told him that the area where he lived 'was burnt the following morning in broad daylight by soldiers who went door-to-door setting fire to homes and everybody saw them'.[45]

As the military continued to deny abuse allegations, Human Rights Watch published satellite photos appearing to show wide swathes of the town destroyed by fire. It said that, according to its analysis, it had counted 2,275 destroyed buildings, 'the vast majority likely residences, with another 125 severely

damaged', and that the destruction was spread over about 80,000 square metres – roughly the area of 11 football pitches.[46] Nigeria's space research agency conducted its own analysis and disputed Human Rights Watch's findings, saying that the area affected was 54,000 square metres and the 'active zone of destruction' was 11,000 square metres. It also argued that the area analysed was not large enough to fit the 2,400 buildings mentioned by Human Rights Watch.[47]

While the multiplying allegations could lead one to believe that Nigeria had developed its own form of the old colonial-era punitive expedition, but against its own people, the military has maintained its denial of using excessive force. When I interviewed the defence spokesman Brigadier-General Chris Olukolade in May 2013, he firmly defended the military's actions. He also argued that insurgents wearing camouflage have confused residents and led them to believe that soldiers were carrying out violence. As for indiscriminate arrests, Olukolade said anyone detained would have been accused of being directly involved in the insurgency.

'Our position is every troop operating in this mission has been sufficiently briefed of the need to respect the rights of citizens, the need never to engage in extrajudicial killings, the need to observe all the laws of armed conflict, and not to execute anybody for whatever reason', Olukolade said. 'So they are very much aware – the briefing is going on every day as a routine – and so every troop in this mission knows the implication of such. If we have such allegation and it is credible, it will be investigated and proper trial would go on. But so far, there is no indication apart from allegations that are evidently meant to be propaganda.'

Specifically regarding Baga, he said that 'if I take you to Baga now, all along the route between Maiduguri and Baga is full of burnt villages. It is a pattern [...] In that same Baga, the whole burning that people are referring to did not take place during this encounter. It is accumulating. Every house that was identified by Boko Haram as not supporting, because they had invaded the community, they burn down the house. And they were doing this not in one day. It has accumulated for years.'

Later, the defence spokesman said accusations against the military had been made unfairly, either for propaganda purposes or simply because residents had been duped.

'It's not unlikely you get people who will testify that it is done by soldiers [...]

Sympathies vary, for whatever reason, and it depends on who is giving you testimony. It will reflect his sympathies.' He said insurgents have worn camouflage, sometimes of a different type from that worn by the Nigerian military. 'They found some camo that are not Nigerian camo – there is Chadian camo, there is Niger camo. But for civilians just seeing camo, what does he see? Soldiers.'

Olukolade told me during the interview that 'I have not confirmed that soldiers did the burning in Maiduguri or anywhere. No soldier will do that now. They know the implication. I can tell you no soldier is involved in any form of arson.'

5

‘I Don’t Know. They’re in the Bush’

The dead bodies lay under a scorching sun, at least 26 of them, some contorted and twisted, others seeming to have been set out, if not neatly, then at least in something resembling a row. One man’s head was tilted up toward the sky, his mouth open as if he were yelling. The smell was putrid, familiar to anyone who has smelled death before, but worsened by the intense heat, and yet somehow the workers in nearby medical units carried on, moving about the hospital grounds while occasionally covering their noses with their shirts or gowns. They seemed as if they had grown accustomed to it. One explained that the bodies had come from an area about 45 miles away called Benisheik and had been dumped either by security forces or residents who had recovered a corpse along the roadside. If relatives did not come soon to collect the bodies, the corpses would be buried in a mass grave like others before them. The hospital worker said that both victims of insurgent attacks and the insurgents themselves, or at least those labelled as such, were regularly dumped there in that manner, though dead soldiers were usually taken out of view inside the mortuary, steps away. Asked why all the bodies were not placed inside instead of on the dirt outdoors, she reasoned that the lack of steady electricity would cause them to rot even faster there. She said there was an electricity generator for the mortuary, but it didn’t always work properly. In any case, the mortuary was locked up tight on this Friday afternoon since the workers there had gone to pray. It closes at other times because the attendants are often ill, according to the hospital worker. The conditions apparently make them sick.

This was at a time when, if the military was to be believed, things were getting better. The truth was far more complicated, and the reason the bodies were rotting in the dirt at the back of Borno State Specialist Hospital complex in Maiduguri would attest to that. Another state of emergency had been declared in the region more than four months earlier, in May 2013, with President Jonathan having decided after years of attacks and mayhem that something dramatic must

be done. Additional troops were deployed into the region, tasked with taking back villages that the president said the insurgents had occupied. He told the nation in a televised speech that the extremists from Boko Haram had replaced the Nigerian flag with their own in certain remote border areas. Some estimates put the number of districts under Boko Haram control at 21 and described it as a gradual process, beginning around January 2013. Since Boko Haram had not been previously known to seek to take territory and had focused solely on insurgent attacks, the development would mean a sharp change in tactics. It came at a time when the world had been focused on a different Islamist extremist advance in nearby northern Mali, where rebels had taken control of around half the country, sparking a French military assault to chase them out. Jonathan's declaration led to worry over whether Nigerian extremists had gone to Mali and returned home battle-hardened, ready to emulate the strategy there, or whether insurgents who never left had simply taken inspiration from it.

Within hours of the president's emergency declaration, the military assault began, and it became clear almost instantly that determining what was really happening on the ground was going to be next to impossible. One of the army's first moves was to cut mobile phone lines in the north-east, ostensibly because the insurgents used them to coordinate attacks. Satellite phones would also be banned later for the same reason. Since landlines are virtually non-existent in Nigeria, this meant the region was cut off from the rest of the world. On top of that, visiting remote areas without a military escort was considered too dangerous – because of the insurgents, certainly, but also thanks to the presence of soldiers with ruthless reputations. Nonetheless, through a combination of military statements, limited visits to the region, accounts from local residents and, perhaps above all, the emergence of a new pattern of attacks, details began to filter through and a picture, however incomplete, gradually took shape.

Early on in the offensive, the military claimed to have cleared out insurgents from camps, often in forests or on the outskirts of villages. It said it had done this with aircraft providing cover for ground troops. How many insurgents were involved, how many died, how many were arrested and where those who fled escaped to were questions the military was refusing to answer in any coherent fashion. The lack of publicly known information also led to concerns that soldiers were again killing civilians whom they accused of cooperating with Boko Haram or simply to instil fear.

There were also doubts about what exactly the offensive was achieving.

Sporadic military statements made grandiose claims of having taken over almost all of Boko Haram's remote camps, but no one knew for sure who had really been there or what the soldiers had done. Besides that, while the number of insurgent attacks seemed to have diminished since the start of the offensive, they had by no means stopped altogether. Shekau, dressed in camouflage, appeared in a video that surfaced at the end of May, claiming that Nigerian troops were retreating and being killed in the fight against Boko Haram, while also showing weapons and vehicles he said were taken from the military.

A couple of weeks in, with the military under pressure to give some account of what it claimed to be achieving, it arranged a tour for journalists into an area of the north-east said to have been taken over by insurgents before soldiers chased them out.

A first attempt was a disappointment. Defence officials invited a mix of local and foreign journalists on the tour a day and a half before it was due to occur, and we scrambled to arrange to be there. We were told to meet in the capital Abuja, where we would take an air force transport plane to Maiduguri, but further details were unclear. Our photographer and I, like other journalists, flew from Lagos to Abuja ready for any possibility, as we had no idea what to expect once we arrived in the north-east. I had not visited the region for about a year by that point, long before the president declared his state of emergency. When our flight landed in Abuja the night before we were to meet the soldiers and I turned my phone back on, I saw that a text message had come through from the army officer who had been arranging logistics. The trip was cancelled, he said. He later assured me by phone that there would be another one scheduled soon.

The trip was indeed rescheduled about a week later, so we again packed our bags and headed to Abuja, all the while doubting whether it would actually go ahead. This time it would, and along with the other journalists we piled into a military transport plane at an airbase in the capital Abuja and took off for Maiduguri. I had visited Maiduguri twice before, and as the insurgency intensified, it had become a city under lockdown. My previous trip there had been in May 2012, and certain neighbourhoods had eerily seemed like ghost towns, with burnt-out buildings, the carcasses of torched cars and bullet-pocked walls. Schools had been hit by arson, but children were still attending classes in what remained of at least one of them, scampering around the rubble in green and yellow uniforms, one of the teachers telling me that parents insisted that learning continue. A night-time curfew caused a scramble to get home and off

the streets toward the end of the day or face the wrath of soldiers. Shop owners and traders said they could no longer support their families. While most Maiduguri residents were Muslim, it was also home to a substantial Christian population, whose churches had been attacked so many times that they were forced to erect large concrete walls topped with razor wire. Some were protected by small military posts, where soldiers with AK-47s stood behind sandbags near the church entrance. Worshippers attending Sunday mass were scanned with metal detectors and women were forced to leave their handbags outside. On the roads throughout the city, there were regular military checkpoints, causing excruciating traffic jams that left drivers waiting in fear over whether yet another homemade bomb targeting soldiers in the area would explode or a gun battle would break out. I visited retired army general Mohammed Shuwa, known for his role in Nigeria's civil war, at his home in the city and he showed me the Beretta handgun he carried because he feared that even he could one day be targeted. He was right. Later that year, gunmen shot him dead.

After we landed in Maiduguri for the military tour in June 2013, it was difficult to draw any firm conclusions about whether the situation in the city had significantly changed, with soldiers keeping us on a tight leash. We were corralled on a military base and an erratic form of show-and-tell began, with military officers making presentations that were haphazard and contradictory. Inside a meeting room, they first showed us slides that explained characteristics of the region as well as aspects of Boko Haram. We were then rushed around to different areas of the base so soldiers could present weapons to us supposedly seized from insurgents. They included rudimentary weapons such as daggers and bows and arrows, but also AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns to be mounted on 4×4s that one military official called anti-aircraft guns. Asked repeatedly where the insurgents were obtaining these weapons, military officials informed us that they did not know, but said most of the arms seemed to have been of the type that would typically come from the former Soviet bloc. There had also been concern that the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in 2011 and resulting chaos had led to looted weapons being sold across the region, helping further arm extremist groups. Boko Haram elements may have benefited. A Nigerian military arms depot at a barracks in the town of Monguno had been raided as well.

We were hurried along, limiting the number of questions that could be asked but assured there would be time for further discussion later, then told to board

buses for the drive deeper into the north-east towards the villages of Marte and Kirenowa, the area where insurgents were said to have set up a camp later cleared out by soldiers. The road would pass through increasingly remote territory as we travelled in the direction of Lake Chad, and we were soon moving through flat, semi-desert landscape, only acacia trees, shrub and occasional patches of grass breaking up the dull, grey sand for long stretches at a time. A tiny village sometimes made of thatched huts, others with homes of concrete or brick, would periodically come into view. It felt in some ways as if we were travelling back in time. The silent, wide-open savannah can seem like a separate country altogether compared to a place like Lagos, the heaving economic capital in Nigeria's south-west, or even nearby Maiduguri. As we moved closer to Lake Chad, the patches of grass became more frequent, the trees more prevalent. The rainy season had not yet fully begun, though it would soon come and would alter the landscape.

During the journey, the military asked that we wear flak jackets as a precaution, but, to our surprise, the route seemed to pose little risk. We reached a military base after driving for a few hours, the road having become so eroded in one stretch that we veered off to the side and rumbled across the sand, dust billowing around our convoy. When we entered the base, Lieutenant-Colonel Gabriel Olufemi Olorunyomi stood before maps and a large, hand-drawn diagram, then launched into a choppy explanation of how the army had retaken control of the area from Boko Haram. According to the narrative he laid out, Boko Haram members arrived in the area and preached to the local people that 'everything that has to do with government is haram' and forced girls to marry them. Later they sought to forcefully take control of areas of Marte, burning a local government secretariat, the governor's lodge and a church, while also destroying a hospital and looting drugs from it. He said they even raised their own flag in place of Nigeria's – an echo of one of the points made by the president in his state of emergency declaration. The lieutenant-colonel was unsteady when pressed for details, however. He could not say what the flag looked like, and his description of the military assault that reclaimed the area left many details open to interpretation. He did not want to say how many extremists had been arrested or killed. He said that some had scattered when soldiers cleared out a camp they had used. Asked where they had run to, he said, 'I don't know. They're in the bush.' The day would continue in this manner.

We were hurried back onto the buses to be driven to a second base, but along

the way stopped in an area known as New Marte so we could be shown the blackened cement walls of a bare-bones church. There was only time for a few pictures before the soldiers began ordering us to board the buses again, saying it would be dark before we knew it and we must move quickly. We grudgingly followed the orders, aware that we were being made part of a ham-fisted attempt at public relations, but also understanding that even a glimpse of villages such as this one was worth the trip. We made another stop at a spot which military officials said would usually be planted with crops, but Boko Haram had caused farmers to flee.

At the next base, we were given another presentation, this one declaring how the villagers of Kirenowa had been rescued from Boko Haram and the nearby Islamist camp had been cleared. However, it seemed again that the military was cobbling together details that were contradictory. We held out hope that the next stop on our tour, a visit to Kirenowa itself, would shed some light.

We rode in military trucks and our convoy manoeuvred closer towards Lake Chad before crossing a canal, then into the village itself. We piled out of trucks and followed fast-walking military officials across the dusty ground broken up by patches of dry scrub. The soldiers provided varying explanations of what had happened and why as they led us back to what they said had been the Boko Haram camp. Whatever had been there, it seemed that it had not been much.

Set within a clearing between trees and tangled scrub, we were shown burnt-out cars, empty food containers and abandoned clothes. Soldiers told us the insurgents had burnt the vehicles before they fled because they did not want the military to recover them, but the explanation did not seem to add up: why would they bother? They seemed to be just cars. Under the shade of a stand of trees, we were shown empty boxes of medicines and medical supplies such as surgical gloves, apparently looted from the hospital in Marte. There were also condoms – a reminder of a military statement several days earlier proclaiming that ‘more of the dirty sides of the insurgents’ lifestyle are being revealed as troops continue to stumble on strange and bizarre objects such as several used and unused condoms’. Needless to say, we were sceptical, and not only about the condoms.

We were led back to the village, where a gathering awaited us in the heart of Kirenowa. A local chief, wearing sunglasses and a light-green traditional robe, praised the soldiers for their work as hundreds of residents looked on and applauded. The chief told us that residents had been forced to flee when Boko

Haram members arrived and took up residence nearby. Where they had gone or when they returned was not clear. Some residents told local journalists that girls in the village had been forced to marry Boko Haram members and that the insurgents had stolen from them.[1]

Such details were to be treated with caution, as with almost all aspects of the day's tour, since residents could have been coached on what to say before our arrival, but they were certainly worth noting and seemed plausible. As the brief gathering ended, we were again hurried aboard the trucks, taken to the nearby military base, then driven back to Maiduguri aboard buses, many of us left pondering what to make of it all. We would not be given much help from the military. The next morning, after repeatedly asking military officials to allow us the chance to ask questions for clarification, they finally relented, so we gathered in a circle around Brigadier-General Chris Olukolade,[2] the defence spokesman, as he stood in a car park, powered on our recorders and video cameras, and sought answers. They were not exactly forthcoming. Asked why the offensive was different from what occurred in 2009, when the military insisted Boko Haram had been wiped out before the group re-emerged, Olukolade said it 'involved not just the military but the security agencies of the country. The network this time is perfect, I mean near-perfect, in the sense that the operation was planned to ensure their bases were dislocated – not just dislocated but completely wiped out.' Pressed on how many Boko Haram members had been arrested, he said, 'I can just tell you that hundreds of them.' How many Boko Haram members had been charged or sentenced? 'Well, several of them.'

Sporadic bursts of information and disinformation from the military would continue in a similar manner in the weeks following the tour. It began to feel like a repeat of previous military operations: a flurry of activity, scattering the insurgents and temporarily reducing the number of attacks, only for the Islamists to return to fight another day. An unexpected development would, however, soon cast the crisis in a different light, one that offered a degree of hope, but which also presented severe dangers.

In mid-June 2013, word began to filter out that vigilante groups had formed in Maiduguri to fight the insurgents. One of the early signs came in the form of road checkpoints. Maiduguri residents had long become accustomed to security roadblocks as their city descended into violence, but the new checkpoints that began to materialise were different. They were now being manned by the vigilantes, a motley collection of mainly young men carrying homemade bows

and arrows, swords, sticks, pipes and charms they said were powerful enough to stop bullets. They would peer into cars as drivers moved slowly past, stopping those they deemed suspicious, or wait for orders from the military that they were needed for a raid aimed at arresting Boko Haram members. Some of the vigilantes admitted that they sometimes killed people during these raids – though specifying only when they had to – and handed over those they arrested to the region's Joint Task Force, a security deployment run by the military. The task force was known across Nigeria by its initials JTF, and the vigilantes adopted this name, calling themselves the 'Civilian JTF'. The military encouraged the groups' formation, assisted them and spurred them along, apparently fed up with seeing their own men killed in a conflict that seemed to have no end. Military officials also reasoned that because the vigilantes were members of the community, they would know who were Boko Haram members and who were not. Rumours spread that some of the vigilantes were in fact also former insurgents. They at first denied being paid anything, insisting they were only a volunteer force interested in peace after years of upheaval, but it was widely believed that either the security forces or state government, or perhaps both, were somehow financing them. Later, the state government would seek to normalise the unwieldy force, providing training, light-blue uniforms and regular payments for a number of them.[3]

Several weeks into the formation of the vigilantes, there were signs of improvement. Attacks in Maiduguri itself were becoming increasingly rare, a stark turnaround considering the city had been wracked by incessant violence for much of the previous four years, causing thousands to flee, shutting down businesses and killing hundreds. Residents also seemed to be welcoming the vigilantes, relieved that they could venture outside again, reopen their market stalls and even send their children to schools with less worry. The phones were still cut, but there did not appear to be a major uproar over it in Maiduguri itself as many residents saw it as a legitimate sacrifice for peace.

The insurgents' response to the military offensive and formation of vigilante groups appeared to be to largely abandon the city of Maiduguri. They were said to have fled to border areas near Cameroon, Chad or Niger, particularly in the region's Gwoza hills. The border with Cameroon was considered especially porous, and local residents spoke of Boko Haram members crossing back and forth, sometimes carrying out robberies and attacks on the Nigerian side, occasionally slitting the throats of their victims in a show of force. Unconfirmed

rumours spread over whether Shekau had been killed, while the military later claimed he ‘may have died’ after being shot in a clash with troops and taken over the border into Cameroon for treatment, but provided no proof. Shekau had been rumoured or declared to be dead several times before, only to later appear in video and audio messages. A man who seemed to be Shekau would repeatedly appear in more videos after the military statement on his supposed death. Yet another resurrection had occurred, it seemed.

Earlier hints of a new pattern of attacks would later prove to be true, with a terrifying series of civilian massacres beginning to unfold. It was widely believed such attacks were partly in revenge for the formation of the vigilante groups and for residents’ cooperation with them in reporting insurgents’ movements. Two attacks on schools in June saw gunmen shoot dead 16 students and 2 teachers.[4] They were similar to an attack the previous March in Maiduguri at the Sanda Kyarimi Senior Secondary School. Months later, a security guard walked the school grounds at Sanda Kyarimi with me and explained how it occurred.

According to the security guard, 35-year-old Ahmed Jidda, he and the school disciplinarian were at the school’s front gate on a Monday morning trying to usher in stragglers who were arriving late when two people with AK-47s forced their way in and began shooting sporadically. He said the attackers looked like teenagers, guessing they were between 15 and 18 years old. They were not wearing masks. They made their way across the large open yard ringed by single-storey buildings housing classrooms on the school grounds, at one point throwing a homemade bomb that did not explode. Students and teachers panicked, taking cover or running to find a way out, as the attackers continued to fire their weapons. At one classroom, they shot inside at a teacher, killing him. Jidda showed me the classroom, and on the day I visited there were lessons on the English alphabet written neatly on the blackboard, with classes having since resumed at the school after a temporary closure. Jidda said he had managed to climb over a part of the wall surrounding the school, then run to a nearby military outpost to alert the soldiers. By then it was too late. The gunmen left after their brief flurry of violence. Besides the teacher they killed, four girls who were students were wounded, one of whom later died.

By July 2013, Nigerians had seen several such school attacks, but one that would occur in the town of Mamudo in Yobe state would lead to widespread disgust. The attackers stormed a secondary boarding school in the town, opening

fire and throwing explosives inside a dormitory, burning students to death. A total of 42 people were killed, mostly students. President Jonathan's spokesman would break from the usual condemnations and promises of action, saying those responsible 'will certainly go to hell'.[5]

It began to seem that nothing was off limits to the attackers any more. As if to prove the point, the following month in the town of Konduga, gunmen stormed a mosque and killed 44 people.[6] That, too, was thought to be revenge for the actions of the vigilante groups.

Up to that point, the deadliest of the so-called revenge attacks would occur in an area known as Benisheik, a town on the road between Maiduguri and the city of Damaturu. On 17 September 2013, a group of insurgents dressed as soldiers, well-armed with AK-47s, homemade bombs and other weapons, stopped cars and buses, singled out residents of Borno state and shot them dead. They burned vehicles and set buildings on fire in the area. The military was slow to arrive – possibly because of the lack of a phone network, possibly for more ominous reasons, such as a reluctance to confront the killers. When soldiers did show up, according to some reports, they were overpowered and ran out of ammunition trying to fight the attackers.

When it was finally all over, bodies were strewn across the road. Travellers along the same route in the days that followed reported seeing surreal scenes as they passed through, their horrifying descriptions almost too gory to be believed, the capacity to inflict so much violence and death in such a cold, calculated manner hard to comprehend. State workers said they had counted at least 142 bodies.[7] Some of those apparently ended up at the Borno State Specialist Hospital in Maiduguri, among the bodies dumped on the ground at the back of the sprawling complex outside the morgue. This is where I stood about three weeks after the attack, covering my nose with my shirt to block the intense odour of rotting human flesh.

The hospital had been known for its overcrowded morgue. Neighbours had reportedly complained about the smell. Even before the start of the military offensive in May 2013, there were reports of sometimes dozens of corpses arriving daily, feeding fears that the military was simply resorting to extrajudicial executions for those suspected of being Boko Haram members, though such accusations have always been strongly denied by the security forces.[8] As I followed the covered concrete walkway back to where the morgue

was located, a security guard with choppy English who saw me looking at the bodies on the ground said, ‘Boko Harams’, seeming to indicate they were dead insurgents. When I asked whether they were Boko Haram members, she seemed to say yes, but it was not clear if she understood my question. A medical worker then appeared from a nearby ward and began to speak to me calmly in English as we stood on the sidewalk near the bodies. We eventually moved slightly further away, since the smell was so strong. She told me that the bodies were in fact those of civilians killed in Benisheik and brought here, either by soldiers or by residents. After we spoke a few minutes more, I thanked her, then made my way back to the front of the hospital grounds, where a colleague I was working with waited.

Later that day as I reflected on what I had seen, I began to think that I needed to return. I had admittedly not moved off the sidewalk into the dirt to get a closer look at the bodies. From where I stood, I could not tell what types of wounds had been inflicted on them. I had been reluctant for a combination of reasons, including the smell, the fear of being kicked off the property or even arrested, not to mention the disturbing thought of walking between scattered corpses and studying them up close. I had not been able to speak with morgue attendants, either, since no one was there. As awful as it may be, I had to at least attempt to find out how these people died.

The next morning, a Saturday, our first stop was back at the hospital. My Nigerian colleague who was helping out as my guide and translator during my stay in Maiduguri parked his car out front and said he would wait there, unwilling to participate in the gruesome task ahead. I understood, of course, and began walking straight back toward the morgue, not wanting to waste any time and hoping not to be stopped. As the morgue came within view, I could make out some of the bodies, still lying on the ground, and I pushed on reluctantly towards them. I would not, however, get much further. A yell – ‘hey!’ – punctured the air and I knew it was for me. At first I tried to ignore it and keep walking, but I heard it again a couple seconds later and decided I should turn and see who it was. As I spun around, I saw a guard holding his rifle – a soldier not in full uniform, I believe – angrily yelling at me to stop as he moved toward me. I now had no choice.

I had learned through experience in such situations that it is best to seek to defuse the tension rather than appear confrontational, and I tried to do just that. When the guard, a young man who actually appeared more nervous than angry

when we met face to face, asked me where I was going, I told him in a conciliatory voice that I was a journalist and wanted to speak with the morgue workers. When he asked why, I said that I was hoping to get information about what happened in Benisheik. The explanation was reasonably truthful, as I had been told that the bodies were from there and I did want to speak with morgue workers, though I was of course also wondering if some of the dead had been killed by the military. He relaxed almost instantly, possibly because it was the insurgents who were accused of horrific acts in Benisheik and not the military, then told me calmly that the morgue attendants were not there today. As we spoke, however, a middle-aged man in civilian clothes approached with a stern look, unhappy about my presence. He too asked me what I was doing, then told me I had to leave. He said I was not allowed to simply show up at the hospital and wander around. 'Can you do that in your own country?', he asked. He said that if I wanted any information, I had to speak with the state commissioner of health. I asked whether there was anyone at the hospital I could speak with, and he said no. Out of options, I turned and walked back to the car.[9]

The sight of the corpses symbolised so much of the Boko Haram conflict for me – bodies brutally dumped, nameless people dead for unclear reasons, the lack of even a working morgue to store them in. It was not only the sight of the bodies themselves that was so troubling, but also the grim combination of circumstances that led to them being there and the question of whether such a spiral of killing and neglect could ever be brought to an end.

Yet at the same time, it was certainly true that Maiduguri itself had changed. With the sharp decrease in attacks inside the city after the deployment of additional soldiers and the formation of vigilante groups, life had begun to regain some semblance of normality. Markets that had been burnt down – either by soldiers or insurgents – were being rebuilt and reopened. The roads were busy, and the curfew had been relaxed.

It was tempting to see all of this as a ray of hope, and to a certain degree it was, but there was also the feeling that it was a mirage. There were regular instances of mayhem not far outside the city gates, while in Maiduguri, reminders of the conflict were everywhere. Rubble remained amid the overgrown weeds at the site of Mohammed Yusuf's former mosque, destroyed by the military more than four years earlier. Burnt cars and buildings could still be seen in neighbourhoods badly hit by insurgent attacks and the military's heavy-handed raids.

There were also members of the ‘Civilian JTF’, the vigilantes who gathered along the roadsides near military posts or who set up checkpoints, sometimes wearing masks. One young man who positioned himself in the middle of a busy street as two-way traffic meandered past him wore a gold-coloured carnival-type mask covering the area around the eyes. They were dressed in street clothes – mainly jeans and T-shirts. Some looked especially young, but vigilantes themselves insisted they recruited no one under 18. I cannot say I was convinced. They could be rowdy and menacing at times, peering into cars as they passed while holding pipes or bows and arrows fashioned from scrap wood and metal. At one point around the middle of the day during my stay in October 2013, a group gave chase on to the grounds of a courthouse in pursuit of someone they wanted to arrest as a crowd gathered around them. The commotion eventually subsided, the man apparently being taken to the military.

One group of around 20 vigilantes waited near a military post, saying they were to be taken for a raid into ‘the bush’ around the town of Damboa because they had been told that Boko Haram members were hiding out there, causing trouble for the farmers. When a convoy of cars pulled up later, apparently returning from such a raid, the crowd that had been waiting began to cheer them and ran toward the vehicles. Some followed them on foot as they pulled into the security post guarded out front by soldiers. One man told me that sometimes they kill their suspects if they have to, at other times they capture them. It was easy to see how the vigilantes’ raids could end up turning community against community, unleashing a new demon in a region with too many. The same pattern continued in the months after my visit to Maiduguri. There was another school massacre, and an attack on the infamous Giwa military barracks led to allegations of vigilantes helping round up hundreds of escaped detainees who were then executed by the military.[10]

One young man I met in October 2013, a raggedly dressed 21-year-old named Umar Mustapha, described himself as chairman of one ‘sector’ of the Civilian JTF. He held a sword that was about waist-high in length and showed me small leather amulets he said were given to him by the chief imam of Borno state. The amulets had supernatural powers and would protect him from injury, he insisted. They would stop weapons from firing. ‘Any AK-47 or any gun, you will not use it’, he said. ‘They want to shoot us and the gun refuses to work.’

6

‘Our Girls Were Kidnapped and They Did Not Do Anything’

The man dressed in a pearly white outfit wanted to speak with me. I knew this because one of his hangers-on insistently sought to direct me toward him, as if I were being summoned. His card, with a green and white background, Nigeria’s national colours, provided his name as ‘Hon. Amb. Jude Tabai’. The abbreviations stood for honourable ambassador, a title he said had been granted to him by the first lady.[1] Underneath his name was written ‘director’ and ‘strategic team’, while in the top left corner of the card was a picture of President Goodluck Jonathan’s face.

‘So you’re working for the president, his team?’, I asked him.

‘Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah’, he said.

‘So what do you do for them, for him?’

‘Well, that’s undercover actually. So more like security […]’.

We had met nearby just a few minutes earlier, across from Nigeria’s Unity Fountain in the capital Abuja, where a counter-protest was gathering for a second day. The counter-protest had drawn heavy criticism because it appeared to have been a paid-for crowd designed to disrupt another peaceful demonstration being held in the same location. The original protests had been occurring daily for nearly a month, demanding that the government and military take action over an issue that had suddenly brought Nigeria into the world spotlight: the abduction of nearly 300 girls from their school in the north-eastern town of Chibok. The original protests were not large – dozens of people – but it seemed that the government, or at least supporters of the government, were rattled by them. The campaign under the banner of Bring Back Our Girls had by then gained traction globally, helped along by social media. Moral support had come from a long list of famous names, including Michelle Obama, the American first lady, who tweeted a sad-faced picture of herself while holding a

sign with the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag.

When I first met Tabai earlier, he had been seated among organisers of the counter-protest, the one in support of the government. We were now standing in the afternoon heat next to a car parked in the grass, a handful of young men next to us. He told me that he was not an organiser of the counter-protest and had simply been passing by, saw the crowd and decided to stop. ‘If I am involved, I will tell you’, he said, ‘I am not in that business.’ At one point while we were speaking, one of the young men said something to someone else, and Tabai turned on him, telling him sharply, ‘my friend, keep your mouth shut’. The young man listened, a shamed look on his face. Besides claiming to hold some unspecified ‘security’ role for the president, Tabai, who looked to be in his fifties, also explained to me that he held the title of king of the youths in the Niger Delta, President Jonathan’s home region.[2] There were many people like him in Nigeria who laid claim to such titles. The local media had also at times referred to him in that way, though his true influence would remain a mystery to me. He had also worked as an adviser in Bayelsa, President Jonathan’s home state.

‘But this protest, it seems sponsored, to be honest’, I said, referring to the counter-demonstrators.

‘That’s what you think?’ he asked me.

‘It looks that way, yes.’

‘OK, if you say “seems sponsored”, I don’t know from what angle, because these protests have been going on for like two, three weeks now’, Tabai said, apparently hoping that I would not know the difference between the two separate demonstrations. He spoke clearly and articulately.

‘Well, it’s been the other people who’ve been protesting’, I said.

He had taken his chance and failed, but he was undaunted. He changed tack and moved on to other arguments. It would turn out to be a lengthy conversation, filled with the kind of conspiracy theories one hears often in Nigeria. The gist of Tabai’s argument was that the Boko Haram insurgency was political, backed by Jonathan’s enemies and geared toward 2015 elections. But he did not stop there.

‘As I speak to you, those girls have been released’, he declared about midway through our conversation, referring to the students kidnapped in Chibok.

‘You think they’ve been released?’

‘Yes.’

‘By who?’

‘Their collaborators and co-sponsors have released those girls. Ask me why.’

* * *

Stories have varied and a precise account of what happened will probably never be unravelled, but there are common threads that run through the descriptions provided by parents, school officials and girls who escaped. They have described an attack that began like many others before it. At close to midnight, deep in the savannah scrubland of north-eastern Nigeria, dozens of armed men, at least some in military uniforms, arrived in pick-up trucks and motorcycles and opened fire, battling a handful of overwhelmed soldiers and targeting government buildings. As gunfire crackled and fires set by the attackers raged, residents fled through the darkness and took cover in the scrubland surrounding the town of Chibok. Armed men then stormed their way toward a boarding school, where several hundred teenage girls had turned in for the night. ‘We are sleeping’, an 18-year-old girl who was there at the time told me. ‘We hear when they shoot their guns in Chibok. We thought they were playing with guns.’ Over the next several weeks, what had started as the kind of insurgent raid Nigerians had sadly grown accustomed to hearing about would set the world on edge.

In the north-east of Nigeria, where Islam is by far the dominant faith, Chibok stands out as an anomaly.[3] It is mostly Christian, though it includes a large number of Muslims as well. Its Christian heritage involves missionaries from the Church of the Brethren, a Protestant denomination, who began arriving in Nigeria in 1923.[4] Its population is largely people from the Kibaku ethnic group, separate from their rivals the Kanuris, who dominate the region. Gerald Neher, an American who lived in Chibok as a missionary between 1954 and 1957, in 1959–60, then again in 1968, remembered the town being isolated at the time, its dirt roads leading to the outside world cut off by streams in the rainy season. He worked with farmers using oxen and ploughs, while his wife taught, her students writing in the dirt with sticks. Religious education and conversion were of course part of the missionaries’ activities as well, and many Chibok residents slowly embraced Christianity in place of their ancient beliefs – on the surface, anyway, since the two would likely have existed side by side. Such conversions

would strike many today as objectionable given the paternalism it implies, but Neher, now in his eighties, makes no apologies for it. He told me he firmly believes he helped improve lives in Chibok and remains proud of his work, including its religious aspect. Travelling Muslim teachers also made their way to Chibok and sought to convert residents, gathering students under trees to teach the Qur'an, Neher remembered. Girls did not go to school at the thatched mud-brick classrooms when Neher was first there in the 1950s, but when he returned a decade later, some had begun attending. Today, its people are mainly farmers, its population estimated at around 70,000.[5]

In March 2014, about a month before the students were awakened by gunfire coming from outside their dormitory, Borno state, where Chibok is located, announced that it would be forced to close its secondary schools until further notice after repeated attacks.[6] The assaults that prompted the closures were far more deadly than what would occur later in Chibok, but they had not received sustained attention from the outside world. They included two massacres of dozens of boys at boarding schools in neighbouring Yobe state. School officials in Chibok would suggest later that their institution had simply closed for vacation, but they appear to have been telling only part of the story. As one government official I interviewed, as well as parents, explained, the closure was a forced vacation since no one wanted to see any other students killed.

While the reason for the closures may have been noble, the decision nonetheless drew concerns. Education is badly lacking in north-eastern Nigeria, and the situation is even worse for girls. About one in ten females aged six and older are considered literate in Borno state. That compares to a nationwide rate of 47.7 per cent and a rate in Lagos of 92 per cent. Shutting down schools would obviously threaten any progress made toward addressing the problem.[7] The school where the girls were taken had previously been called Government Girls Secondary School Chibok, and it was run by the Borno state government. Its name had recently changed, dropping the word 'girls' after it began accepting boys. The boys, originally from around Chibok, had been relocated from their schools in particularly dangerous areas of Borno state. They attended school in Chibok during the day and were not boarding students, unlike the girls. A total of 530 students were enrolled, 135 boys and 395 girls, according to the principal, Asabe Kwambula.

Though the schools had been closed in March, administrators and government

officials faced a dilemma about what to do with the students in their final year, who were set to take their examinations and move on. According to a government official I spoke with, discussions were held with the Nigerian ministry of education and the West African Examinations Council, which administers the final exams, about how to proceed. The official told me that it was decided through the discussions that a number of schools in Borno state would be allowed to serve as examination centres, including the secondary school in Chibok, and that they would call back final-year students to complete the tests. Before that could be done, however, officials were to petition the authorities to provide proper security for the schools to ensure they would be as safe as possible. The story from that point on becomes increasingly murky.

Borno state and school officials say they met with the police and delivered a letter to the state police commissioner requesting additional security for the examinations period. Afterwards, according to one school official, four policemen were sent, but they were only to be on duty during daytime hours, when the exams were being taken. There would be no additional security at night. The military presence in the town itself was also light, with a contingent of 17 soldiers said to have been stationed there.[8] It would not be nearly enough, and the debate over whose fault it was that more security was not provided would later become an intense, politically charged dispute. There were also allegations that the students should not have been called back at all given the potential danger. The federal government blamed state officials in Borno, which is run by an opposition party, while the state said the opposite. It should be noted, however, that while the state-run school and Borno's government should have taken far more precautions, both the police and the military are federal institutions beyond their direct control. 'This thing happened due to the lack of proper security', the school official who did not want to be named to avoid antagonising the federal government told me. 'If there is proper security, I think this thing would not happen. But, you know, the security is not in the hands of the school.' There were also allegations, however, that the state had refused requests to relocate the exams to Maiduguri and that it had guaranteed that adequate security would be provided.[9]

According to the principal, a night-watchman was on duty at the time of the attack, but apart from that, there did not appear to be any adult supervision at the dormitory where the girls slept, such as a monitor to oversee them. The secretary to the Borno state government, Baba Ahmed Jidda, told a Nigerian news channel

of the girls, who were generally between 16 and 18 years old, that 'literally, they were on their own because it was night and the principal and teachers live outside the dormitories of the students'.[10] There were initial reports that the principal was there and had been duped by the attackers since they were wearing military uniforms. She told me she was far away, however. She said she had gone to the state capital, Maiduguri, to see her doctor, who had been treating her for diabetes.[11] At least one vice principal remained in Chibok.

Boko Haram had been blamed previously for abducting girls, forcing them to convert to Islam, marrying them and making them work as slaves.[12] Human Rights Watch in November 2013 quoted a commander of one of the vigilante groups targeting Boko Haram as saying that the extremists had left their wives behind when they were forced to flee Maiduguri because of increased security. As a result, they began kidnapping girls to take with them. In addition to that, suspected members of the group had for some time been kidnapping wealthy Nigerians in and around Maiduguri in order to earn money from ransoms.[13] Such abductions received little attention, as the families preferred to quietly handle ransom negotiations on their own to best ensure safe release. One particularly high-profile victim was a 92-year-old former petroleum minister, Shettima Ali Monguno, who was released a few days later. Those abductions were of course in addition to the kidnappings of foreigners Ansaru and Boko Haram had been involved in throughout the previous months, either executing their victims or releasing them for vast sums of cash.

Despite the insecurity, Nigeria was in preparations to host the World Economic Forum on Africa in May 2014, a gathering of global heavyweights that the government hoped would showcase the country's potential as an investment destination. It had recently announced the results of a long overdue rebasing of its gross domestic product, which pushed its overall GDP figure above South Africa's, making Nigeria the continent's biggest economy. Finance Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala had been seeking to promote her country as a solid place to do business despite all of its challenges, often repeating to potential investors what had in some ways become her catchphrase: 'If you're not in Nigeria, you're not in Africa.' On paper, she was right. Nigeria now boasted three distinctions: Africa's biggest economy, its largest population and its mightiest oil industry. Unfortunately, anyone familiar with the country knew that those three titles meant little for average Nigerians, whose troubles included contending with the violence that would intrude on preparations for the global

gathering.

In a further sign of how out of control the insurgency had become, the Chibok assault that took place on 14 April 2014 was not the only horrific attack that day. During the morning rush hour, a bomb tore through a bus station on the outskirts of Abuja and killed at least 75 people.[14] That, too, was a shocking attack, the deadliest yet in the capital and occurring only weeks before Abuja was to host the World Economic Forum event. However, the death and destruction left behind by the bomb would soon be overshadowed by concern over the fate of the Chibok girls.

According to some accounts, word began to spread that a band of attackers were on their way to Chibok. Amnesty International, citing local officials and two senior military officers, said warnings started to filter in shortly after 7 p.m., more than four hours before the attack.[15] According to the rights group, vigilantes in the nearby village of Gagilam alerted authorities 'when a large group of unidentified armed men entered their village on motorbikes and said they were headed to Chibok'. Nigeria's under-equipped and demoralised soldiers were apparently unable to respond effectively. One of the military officers told the group that 'the commander was unable to mobilise reinforcements'. Amnesty quoted the officer as saying: 'There's a lot of frustration, exhaustion and fatigue among officers and [troops] based in the hotspots […] many soldiers are afraid to go to the battle fronts.'

A government official familiar with details of the investigation into the incident provided a similar account to me, saying local residents had relayed word of an impending attack far in advance. 'They were told three to four hours before the attack', the official said of the military, adding that the response was hampered by 'capacity problems'. Nevertheless, the military has strongly denied the claims. Defence spokesman Major-General Chris Olukolade said troops in the state capital, Maiduguri, were not given advance warning and were instead notified of 'an ongoing attack on Chibok community' by troops in the town who fought the attackers and needed reinforcements. 'As the troops on reinforcement traversed the over 120-kilometre rugged and tortuous road from Maiduguri to Chibok, they ran into an ambush by terrorists who engaged them in [a] fierce firefight and a number of soldiers lost their lives', the defence spokesman wrote in a statement. 'Another set of soldiers also mobilised for the mission arrived after the terrorists had escaped due to a series of misleading information that slowed down the pursuit.'

Sometime between 11.30 and 11.45 that night, dozens of the attackers driving motorbikes and pick-up trucks stormed the town. The soldiers stationed there were no match for them and fled, and the Boko Haram members burned down houses and buildings. Enoch Mark, a pastor at a church in Chibok who had two daughters – one by birth, the other adopted – sleeping in the school dormitory, said he could hear the explosions and gunfire from his house. He decided to flee along with his other children. 'Unfortunately, I have some little children at home. I tried to grab the little ones and rush with them to the bush', he said. Another Chibok resident, Lawan Zanna, who had one daughter sleeping in the dormitory, said that 'we heard gunshots and bomb blasts [...] Some people are going out and leaving their houses.' Zanna told me he could not say how many attackers had arrived in the town that night, though the government official said estimates had put it at around 100.

Either all or some of the Boko Haram members – no one seems sure – set their sights on the school where the girls were sleeping. When they arrived, they at first used deception to gather the students. 'They are saying to us, "Don't worry, don't worry, come. We are security, we are soldiers, nothing can happen to you. We are here"', the 18-year-old girl, whose father did not want her name used, told me by phone. When the men began shooting and shouting 'Allahu Akbar', they realised that they were not soldiers. By then it was too late for most, though a school official told me some of the girls managed to slip away. The girls were told to follow them to a spot less than a mile outside the school and were forced aboard pick-up trucks – estimates of how many vary between around 10 and 20 – while the extremists burnt down the school buildings, though by some accounts, they first sought to raid the food supplies. They were also said to have spoken in the Kanuri language, more common in other parts of Borno state.[16] The 18-year-old's father said his daughter told him they spoke in various languages, including Kanuri, Hausa and Kibaku. The girls were then driven away from the town and toward the Sambisa forest. According to Chibok residents, the extremists remained in the town until around 4 a.m., possibly later, but military reinforcements were still nowhere to be found. One of them told me on condition of anonymity: 'These people, they are coming around 11.40-something. They were still in Chibok up to 4 [a.m.] [...] So I think if the security men are serious, they would have sent security men to come and stop them.'

On the road out of Chibok, some of the girls decided to risk an escape and jump out of the trucks. The 16-year-old niece of Dauda Iliya, who lives in Abuja

but whose family roots are in the Chibok area, was among them. ‘One of the trucks actually stalled, got into trouble, engine trouble, stalled, and when they tried to get it to move, it wouldn’t. So they abandoned it’, Iliya told me. ‘So the convoy had to slow down and [...] turn away from that disabled truck.’ When it did, the truck in which his niece was riding passed beneath a tree. ‘She held on to a tree branch and the truck drove off, and that was how she made her miraculous escape. She told me this’, he said. He said she and others hid until they felt it was safe enough to walk back toward Chibok. His niece hurt her ankles during the escape, but has since recovered. Other girls escaped in a similar manner. Two of them told a *New York Times* reporter that they were among several who jumped out and ran through the bush when a truck of guards at the end of the convoy slowed down and fell behind.[17]

Either because they did not see the girls who escaped or because they did not care, the attackers pushed on, directing the convoy toward their camp inside what some of the girls and their parents believed was the Sambisa forest, a patch of about 200 square miles – some nine times the area of Manhattan – originally set aside as a game reserve by the British. Boko Haram had been using the forest, about 50 miles away from Chibok, as a hideout for some time along with the nearby Gwoza hills, which are close to the Cameroon border. After the government’s state of emergency declaration in 2013, the military claimed to have cleared out extremist camps in the Sambisa reserve with the help of air power, though it was never clear whether soldiers had dropped bombs or fired machine guns from helicopters. Like much of the region’s scrubby savannah, the reserve is not heavily forested or jungle-like, though it becomes more dense in its southern half, especially in the rainy season. At the time the girls were taken, it was the end of the dry season. As for wildlife, there is not much left there. A 2006 survey found no elephants and only a smattering of antelopes and warthogs, while noting that there was ‘extensive clearing of the reserve for farmland and charcoal burning’.[18]

The convoy drove on for some seven hours before reaching the camp, and after arriving there the Boko Haram members ordered the girls to prepare their food for them. A few of the girls then thought they could slip away. Over a terrible phone line, the 18-year-old sought to explain to me how she escaped, but only some of her words came through. ‘I run, I run, I run’, she said. ‘I run far [...] We are running, we are running, we are running in that bush.’ Her father said she had been at the camp about two hours when the opportunity for an

escape arose. ‘When the other students were chopping that food, that is how she escaped’, he said, using a common Nigerian term for eating. He said she told them she was going to the bathroom and made a run for it. After running for some time, she encountered locals from the Fulani ethnic group who agreed to help her. ‘She said, “I am asking to show me the way to Chibok. They said OK.”’ She travelled with them on motorcycles, arriving back home on Wednesday following the Monday night kidnapping. ‘I was very, very surprised how she escaped [...] She looked very very well’, her father said. She was not alone on her journey; at least two girls, possibly more, managed to escape in that way.[19]

At daybreak, parents rushed to the school to check on their daughters and found burnt buildings. One mother described her anguish when she arrived and realised her 16-year-old daughter had been taken along with the others. ‘After reaching the school, I was scared. I was shaking’, said the mother, who also asked that her name not be used out of fears for both her and her daughter’s safety. ‘This school is our hope. This school is our hope [...] After reaching the hostel, I was shocked [...] I just burst out crying. I said, “Lord, why? Lord, why?”’ Almost two months after the kidnapping, with no sign of her daughter, she lashed out at the government and military. ‘It is real’, she said, referring to the conspiracy theories floating around the country. ‘Our girls were kidnapped and they did not do anything at all.’

Some of the parents decided to take matters into their own hands. On the day after the abductions, 15 April, they sought to follow what they believed were the girls’ footsteps, but did not make it far before they were persuaded to turn around and seek a security escort because it was considered too dangerous. Two days later, there still seemed to be little help, so they either hired motorcycles or used their own vehicles and sped off in the same direction again in search of the girls. This time, it was an estimated 300 parents, relatives and sympathisers on their trail. They made it to a village near the Sambisa forest, and it was there that vigilantes and others told them to turn around, that they were no match for the insurgents. ‘They told us it’s better for us to go back’, said Lawan Zanna, a 45-year-old Arabic teacher in a primary school whose 18-year-old daughter Aisha was taken in the raid. ‘We don’t have anything to face these people. They have sophisticated weapons. They will gun us down.’

The parents returned home, their daughters lost somewhere in the savannah, held captive by gunmen and with no sign that Nigeria’s military was prepared to

find them. A range of reasons existed for why the kidnappings had occurred. Boko Haram was opposed to Western education in general, and Shekau would later claim that he believed he was justified in taking slaves. He would also say girls should ‘go and get married’, and that he would marry them off as young as the age of nine. But there were also strategic reasons since the abductions would serve to embarrass the government, while a hefty ransom could also be demanded for the girls’ release.

It seemed that the abductions at first barely registered on the world’s radar. Part of the reason may have been confusion over what exactly had happened. School officials initially could not even say how many girls had been kidnapped. An early estimate of the total number of girls taken was 129, and school officials would say later that it took several days for them to establish a reliable count of the missing and confirm it with parents. The absence of a clear explanation left a vacuum that was to a large degree filled by conspiracy theories. Some were spread by President Jonathan’s supporters, who said that the kidnappings were a hoax perpetrated by his northern opponents, designed to embarrass the president and perhaps force him to decline to seek re-election in polls less than a year away, in February 2015. As for the military, it claimed to be searching for the girls, but parents and activists said there was little evidence that soldiers were doing much at all.

An incident two days after the abductions would cut even further into the military’s credibility. Despite the confusion and lack of verifiable information, the defence spokesman, Major-General Chris Olukolade, issued a statement on 16 April that claimed a major breakthrough. Unfortunately, anyone familiar with Nigerian military statements knew to treat it with caution. The statement said that, somehow, all but 8 of the 129 girls taken had been freed or had escaped, citing the school principal as a source. There were no details about how that may have happened, and it is worth asking whether military officials bargained that they could swiftly silence the embarrassing story emanating from an extremely remote area of north-eastern Nigeria by making such a claim. If so, the plan backfired. The principal immediately denied it, leaving the military brass with few options but to backtrack. The following day, Olukolade was forced to issue another statement in which he withdrew his earlier claim and essentially threw his hands in the air.

The statement sought to explain how the military had come to announce the girls’ release, saying that ‘a report was filed in from the field indicating that a

major breakthrough had been recorded in the search. There was no reason to doubt this official channel, hence the information was released to the public immediately. Surprisingly, however, the school principal, one of the sources quoted in the report has denied all that was attributed to her for whatever reasons. This is an unfortunate development indeed, yet the Defence Headquarters would not want to join issues with anyone.'

It bizarrely added later that 'the number of those still missing is not the issue now as the life of every Nigerian is very precious', before completely disowning the earlier claim. 'In the light of the denial by the principal of the school', it said, 'the Defence Headquarters wishes to defer to the school principal and governor's statement on the number of students still missing and retract that aspect of the earlier statement while the search continues.'

The principal, Asabe Kwambula, had called what seemed to have been the military's bluff, but she, too, was coming under increasing criticism for different, competing explanations being attributed to her for how the kidnappings occurred. At least, finally, after more than two weeks, authorities managed to establish what they said was a precise count of the number of girls taken, arriving at a figure of 276. Of those, 57 girls managed to escape in one way or another, bringing the number missing to 219.[20] In other words, nearly 300 girls were taken from a school in north-eastern Nigeria and there was little understanding of how it had happened.

More than two weeks passed before much of the rest of the world took notice. A social media campaign would help spread the word, with the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag gaining traction among Nigerians. According to one version of the story, the hashtag began after a speech by Oby Ezekwesili, an anti-corruption activist, former World Bank vice president for Africa and ex-education minister. During an appearance in the southern Nigeria oil hub of Port Harcourt, Ezekwesili spoke of bringing back the girls, prompting one man who heard her to tweet it as a hashtag.[21] It gradually took off from there, and Nigeria's government was set to be hit by a tidal wave of criticism.

With authorities under growing pressure to act, President Goodluck Jonathan and Patience Jonathan, Nigeria's first lady, sought to show that they were engaged and that something was being done to find the girls. On 4 May, Patience Jonathan held a meeting with the Chibok principal and others, a part of which would be shown on a Nigerian news channel. The first lady, an evangelical

Christian like her husband, at one point broke down in tears during an odd discourse that saw her repeatedly declare a phrase that would be mocked relentlessly by Nigerians online. She punctuated it with the ‘o’ common when speaking in pidgin English in Nigeria. ‘There is God ooo!’ she said. ‘There is God oooo!’[22] If nothing else, it provided Nigerians with some comic relief amid the sadness.

The following day, Patience Jonathan was accused of ordering the arrest of at least one woman who had been protesting to call for the government to take action to free the girls. The woman had been accused of pretending she was one of the mothers of the girls during a meeting with the first lady and was arrested at the presidential villa, according to protesters, who said she was only representing mothers who could not attend the meeting.[23]

From there, the story gathered momentum globally. On 5 May, the first claim of responsibility for the kidnappings arrived in the form of a video purportedly featuring Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau.[24] Over the course of the 57-minute recording, the man identified as Shekau justified the taking of ‘slaves’ and made the shocking threat to sell the girls on the market – a claim to be treated with scepticism, however, since he would clearly be able to demand much more in ransom money in exchange for their freedom.

The first images of Shekau, or whoever this man was, showed him holding a rifle, his other hand raised in the air, exhorting his followers – a more ruthless, blood-thirsty and battle-scarred version of his predecessor, Mohammed Yusuf. As with Yusuf, they responded to him with shouts of ‘Allahu Akbar’, and he fired his gun into the air as if to punctuate his speech. The video then cut to another shot of Shekau, now standing on the ground, repeatedly firing his rifle as if he were engaging in target practice. He later spoke, reading from a piece of paper, while standing in front of two armoured vehicles and a truck, six men with their faces covered on either side of him.

‘My brethren, you should cut off the necks of infidels. My brethren, you should seize slaves’, he said in the video.

I abducted a girl at a Western education school and you are disturbed. I said Western education should end. Western education should end. Girls, you should go and get married [...] I abducted your girls. I will sell them in the market, by Allah. There is a market for selling humans. Allah says I should sell. He commands me to sell. I will sell women. I sell women.

He sought to justify his group's actions, saying:

> You arrested and threw people in prison. What is your justification? You do yours but you are saying we should not follow Allah's command [...] Jonathan, I will sell you when I seize you. Obama, I will sell you. Bush, I will sell you. I will put you [up] for sale. Your price will be low. Don't think I'm joking. [25]

Later, speaking in broken English, Shekau repeated his bizarre habit of naming dead world leaders as his enemies, and this time he travelled far back in history:

> In every nation, in every region, now has the decision to make. Either you are with us – I mean real Muslims [...] or you are with the Obama, François Hollande, George Bush, Bush, Clinton. I forgot not Abraham Lincoln. Ban Ki-moon and his people generally, and any unbeliever. Death, death, death, death [...] This world is against Christians. I mean Christians generally.

Shekau's threat to sell the girls in the market led to horror globally and began a brief period when the tragedy commanded the world's attention. The #BringBackOurGirls hashtag was used by celebrities and politicians intending to show concern, and Western nations faced pressure from their own citizens to act, particularly in the United States. Given the awfulness of the crime, it was understandable that the world wanted to help, but options were always going to be limited given the state of Nigeria's armed forces. Areas where nations with advanced military equipment and expertise could potentially assist included deploying drones for surveillance along with hostage negotiators. But comments from some in the United States were at times ridiculously jingoistic. Senator John McCain, declaring that he would send US Special Forces into Nigeria with or without approval from the country's government if the girls were located, said, 'I wouldn't be waiting for some kind of permission from some guy named Goodluck Jonathan.'[26]

The main problem with providing military assistance to Nigeria related to the country's mismanagement and the behaviour of its armed forces. Working closely with a military accused of such horrible human rights abuses could signal approval of its tactics, while bailing the Nigerian government out of a problem to a large degree of its own making would remove pressure on it to act on its own and look harder at the causes and potential solutions to the insurgency. Beyond that, even if Western nations could help, Nigeria's government must accept the assistance. Nigerians are suspicious of US military intentions and would not want to see their country turned into another battleground in the 'war on terror'.

‘It does seem that Nigerians are caught in the difficult position of having to welcome the help and be deeply wary of it’, Nigerian journalist Tolu Ogunlesi wrote in an opinion piece on CNN’s website.

> On the one hand we know, from the evident helplessness of our government, that we’re at the point where we cannot make any progress without the skills and knowledge and technology that Western countries will bring to this battle. On the other hand, there are questions (running the gamut of conspiracy theory to reasonable concern) about America’s motivations, and its track record. [27]

It was also a question of pride. Nigeria sees itself as a regional power in its own right that can handle its own affairs. In this case, it is also worth asking whether Nigeria’s government was reluctant to let the world in because it hoped the story would simply fade from public view.

The complications were on display in hearings before the US Senate’s foreign relations committee. A senior official from the US Defense Department said allegations of rights abuses had made it extremely difficult for the US military to find Nigerian soldiers it could train without violating American law. A US law prohibits foreign military assistance for units suspected of serious human rights violations. Beyond that, the United States was careful about the kind of intelligence it shared with Nigeria out of fears that it could be used against civilians. It did not end there. The official, Alice Friend, acknowledged there were concerns over whether Boko Haram sympathisers had infiltrated Nigeria’s military, but the larger issue involved something more basic.

‘I’d say an even greater concern is the incapacity of the Nigerian military and the Nigerian government’s failure to provide leadership to the military in a way that changes these tactics’, Friend, the defense department’s principal director for African affairs, told the committee. ‘The division in the north that mainly is engaging with Boko Haram, the 7th Division, has recently shown signs of real fear.[28] They do not have the capabilities, the training or the equipping that Boko Haram does. And Boko Haram is exceptionally brutal and indiscriminate in their attacks. And so, as heavy-handed as the forces on the Nigerian side have been, Boko Haram has been even more brutal.’

She later spoke of corruption contributing to the decline of the Nigerian military. ‘Another concern [...] is that the Nigerian military has the same challenges with corruption that every other institution in Nigeria does. Much of the funding that goes to the Nigerian military is skimmed off the top, if you will.’[29]

In the end, Nigeria accepted assistance from a handful of countries, including Britain, the United States, France, Israel and China, which essentially sent advisers, such as hostage negotiators and intelligence experts, and surveillance planes or drones. The US response was perhaps the most significant given its potential long-term implications. It deployed drones and manned aircraft to conduct surveillance, while stationing some 80 personnel in the neighbouring nation of Chad.[30] The choice was intriguing given the United States had recently opened a drone base in Niger, which also borders Nigeria, as part of efforts to battle Islamist extremists in Mali. It was never made clear why Washington did not simply use the same base or whether it intends to keep the base in Chad open over the long term, further expanding its drone programme on the continent.[31] Nigeria also had its own drones purchased years earlier from an Israeli firm – but they went unused. They had apparently not been maintained and were not operational.[32]

In any case, the hunt for the girls was now an international effort, at least in name, though foreign nations would stick to an arm's-length approach. It would not be wise to engage in on-the-ground operations with Nigeria's military given how badly such moves could end. Its reputation for ruthlessness was well known, and no nation would want the blood of hundreds of girls on its hands. Foreign forces would also face a lack of knowledge not only of the terrain, but also of the identities of those involved in the insurgency were they to become more directly involved. In Nigeria, things are very often not what they seem.

The first proof that at least dozens of the girls were still alive would occur on 12 May, nearly a month after they were kidnapped. Another video was distributed, and this one purported to show the students themselves. They were dressed in drab grey or black hijab-like outfits and sat in a tight group on the ground while others stood behind, including two who held a black jihadi flag. They all recited part of the Qur'an in Arabic together, as if it were a school lesson, and two of the girls said on camera that they were Christians who had been converted to Islam. A third girl interviewed on camera said that she was Muslim.[33] Shekau also spoke on the video, declaring that the girls had been liberated because they were now Muslim, and that they would never be released as long as Nigerian authorities were holding Boko Haram members. 'I will sell them. I repeat again. And by Allah you will never get them until the day you release our brethren you arrested [...] And the women you humiliate. There is a woman you held and her infant is still with you but you released her.'

Shekau also again claimed there was justification in the Qur'an for taking slaves. 'I will seize a slave. The only person who is not a slave is he who believes in "there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet" and accepts faith and lives by all its dictates. This one is not a slave.'[34]

The video set off shockwaves and made it far more difficult for supporters of the government to make the claim that the abductions were a hoax or a conspiracy. However, it would by no means dispel such talk completely. For one, Shekau never appeared in the same frame as the girls.

On the day after the video became public, Borno state governor Kashim Shettima arranged for a group of parents and relatives, as well as some of the students who escaped, to travel to Maiduguri with the aim of having them watch it and identify the girls. They gathered in a room in a state government compound and went about the grim task, and by the end, 77 girls had been identified.[35] 'We went to Maiduguri and they showed us on a projector', Lawan Zanna, who was able to identify his daughter, told me, his voice sorrowful over the phone. 'She's not OK. She looks so sad [...] I was not happy when I saw her.' There were allegations later that some of the girls in the video could not have been students as they seemed to be much older. Shettima, however, told journalists that all of those in the video were students from the school, though it was unclear how he could know since only 77 of the more than 100 shown were identified. In any case, with many of the girls now identified, a clear claim of responsibility and foreign nations assisting with intelligence gathering, it would have seemed that the government and military would be poised to finally move quickly. If they did, there was little sign of it, and certainly there were no results to point to. The world would inevitably begin to lose hope and interest.

Indeed, international attention toward the kidnappings seemed to already be waning by the following weekend, when France organised a summit of leaders from Nigeria and its neighbours to discuss battling Boko Haram. The gathering was mocked by many who saw it as too reminiscent of the colonial era, with a European power summoning African leaders to discuss a problem that concerned Europe. At the same time, the reality was that France continued to hold strong sway over its former colonies in the region, including Cameroon, Niger and Chad, all of which bordered north-eastern Nigeria and were contending with Boko Haram members who navigated back and forth across the frontier. The aim of the summit was to encourage the countries to share intelligence and cooperate on defeating Boko Haram, and there would notably be an intensification of

military raids targeting extremists in north-western Cameroon afterwards. However, the summit also resulted in a certain amount of overblown rhetoric, including President Goodluck Jonathan's claim that Boko Haram had transformed into 'Al-Qaeda in West and Central Africa' – an assertion many who were familiar with the situation did not take seriously. Portraying the problem as global rather than a local one that Nigeria had failed to address would allow it to duck blame. In fact, it was Nigeria's inability to tackle the insurgency and gain the trust of its people that had allowed Boko Haram to grow into something larger, albeit no Al-Qaeda for West and Central Africa. 'Boko Haram is no longer the local terror group with some religious sentiment that started in Nigeria in 2002 to 2009', Jonathan said.

> From 2009 to date, it has changed and it is operating clearly as an Al-Qaeda organisation. It can better be described as Al-Qaeda in West and Central Africa. It's no longer the Boko Haram that came with the sentiments that Western education is prohibited and that women must not go to school – nobody should attend a formal institution based on Western education.
>
> He also sought to portray Nigeria as doing all it could to find the missing girls:
>
> We are totally committed to ensuring that these girls are found wherever they are, and make sure that they join their families. We will do all our best. Presently Nigeria has 20,000 troops in this part of the country, the northern part of the country, the north-eastern part of the country, where we have these terrorists. We've been scanning the areas with surveillance aircrafts and of course also using local intelligence sources. [36]

But as the days passed following the summit, there were still no results, and the government seemed to lose patience with the criticism it was facing. Meanwhile, as the fate of the kidnapped girls dominated coverage of the insurgency, more deadly attacks were occurring, including in areas near Chibok.

* * *

What appeared to have been a coordinated effort to strike back began in late May. The problem was that the target was not Boko Haram, but those demanding action from the government. Daily protests of around 100 or so people wearing red had been occurring in Abuja, organised by civil society activists and others, including some with links to the opposition. The demonstrations had been peaceful and restrained, mainly led by Oby Ezekwesili, the former World Bank official and ex-minister whose speech in April was said to have led to the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag. At each of the gatherings, Ezekwesili would marshal the crowd with a single-minded set of call-and-response chants:

Ezekwesili: ‘What are we demanding?’
Protesters: ‘Bring back our girls, now and alive.’
Ezekwesili: ‘What are we asking?’
Protesters: ‘The truth. Nothing but the truth.’

It all appeared well-meaning, but seemed unlikely to start a mass movement among Nigerians. Nevertheless, on 26 May, they would begin to be targeted, and whoever was pulling the strings seemed to be following the crudest and most unsophisticated dirty-tricks playbook. A new group of ‘protesters’ would appear, a rowdy collection of young men and women driven to their meeting point aboard buses.[37] Many people instantly saw it for what it almost surely was: a paid-for crowd designed to provoke, intimidate and sow confusion. On the first day of their protest, they marched holding placards in support of the military and were greeted by a delegation that included the country’s chief of defence staff, Air Marshal Alex Badeh, who used the occasion to make an extraordinary claim. He told a handful of journalists present that he knew where the abducted girls were located, then seemed to indicate that the government would negotiate a deal to free them, contradicting earlier statements that it would not bargain with Boko Haram. ‘The good news for the girls is that we know where they are, but we cannot tell you, OK. We cannot come and tell you military secrets here. Just leave us alone. We are working. We will get the girls back’, Badeh said. After referring to the kinds of weapons being seized from the Islamists that he said could not have come from Nigeria’s armed forces, he hinted at conspiracies and agreed with President Jonathan’s assessment that Boko Haram had become Al-Qaeda in West Africa. ‘There are people from outside fuelling this thing. That’s why when Mr President said we have Al-Qaeda in West Africa, I believe it 100 per cent, because I know that people from outside Nigeria are in this war. They are fighting us. They want to destabilise our country, and some people in this country are standing with the forces of darkness.’[38]

Addressing the crowd, he said that using force to rescue the girls would put their lives in danger, and the ‘protesters’ responded in support of him.

‘We want our girls back. But I can tell you we can do it [...] But where they are held, can we go with force?’ Badeh asked. ‘No’, the protesters said in response.

‘If we go with force, what will happen?’, Badeh asked. On cue, the crowd responded: ‘They will die.’

‘So nobody should come and say the Nigerian military does not know what it is doing’, Badeh explained. ‘We can’t go and kill our girls in the name of trying to get them back.’

The comments were obviously intended to deflect criticism from the military, but days later, news emerged that an Australian negotiator who had previously helped mediate in the conflict in the Niger Delta was in Nigeria and seeking to broker a deal to free the girls. Stephen Davis told journalists that he had arrived in the country around the beginning of May at President Jonathan’s request and had travelled to the north-east. In comments in early June, Davis said he believed that most of the girls had been taken over the border into Cameroon, Chad or Niger and separated into three different groups. He told Britain’s Channel 4 that he had come close to negotiating a deal three times, but that ‘vested interests’ sabotaged the talks. He did not provide details on whom he meant, and it was also not clear which Boko Haram ‘commanders’ Davis had been in touch with.[39] Attempting to talk to Boko Haram would be a formidable challenge for anyone. It has never been clear whether anyone can truly represent the group and speak on its behalf given its lack of a clear structure. Davis may have indeed been speaking with someone, but whether they were truly Boko Haram ‘commanders’ was another question.

The original Bring Back Our Girls protesters led by Oby Ezekwesili and others pushed ahead with their campaign. However, the counter-protesters and their backers, whoever they were, began to target them specifically. The site of the protests were the country’s Unity Fountain, a monument celebrating the coming together of such a diverse nation. Tellingly, however, the fountain, a series of white columns with Nigeria’s states listed on them, did not function, its black hoses strewn across an empty pool. One of Abuja’s major centres of power was located just across the street, the heavily secured Transcorp Hilton hotel, where politicians and businessmen hammered out deals in suites on the posh ninth and tenth floors and dined at a private restaurant whose windows overlooked the newly built city below.

The counter-protesters setting up at the Unity Fountain wore red shirts that mimicked the Bring Back Our Girls demonstrators, though with a slight change. The slogan written on the shirts was ‘Release Our Girls’ instead of ‘Bring Back Our Girls’ – in other words, they were not demanding that the government act; they were directing their plea to Boko Haram or, for the conspiracy-minded among them, to the northern politicians they believed were holding the girls as

part of an anti-Jonathan plot. At first, the legitimate protesters sought to continue their rallies at the same location despite the rowdy crowd gathering nearby. One of the protest organisers, a civil society activist and professor named Jibrin Ibrahim, claimed the counter-demonstrators had been paid 3,000 naira ($20) each to attend and questioned who was responsible.[40] A counter-protest leader, Abduljalal Dauda, said the demonstration was independent of the government, though he added that participants may have been given 1,000 naira or so by organisers to cover their transport since they lived outside Abuja.

The Bring Back Our Girls leaders urged their followers not to respond to the provocations, remain calm and ignore them as much as possible. It worked at first, but the counter-demonstrators were not going to go away easily, and some of their leaders were spouting badly misinformed conspiracy theories, hinting at a vaguely defined international plot against Nigeria. Dauda made reference to a widely believed rumour in Nigeria: that the United States predicted the country's break-up by 2015.[41]

'The truth of the matter is that even the same people in the United States of America said that Nigeria would disintegrate in 2015', Dauda, chairman of a Nigerian youth council who said the young men at the protests were his 'constituents', told me. Felicia Sani, head of an organisation of market women, chimed in at that point. I had earlier told her I was American. 'As we didn't disintegrate, you are trying to disintegrate us', she said. A short while later, Dauda sought to explain in more detail, though I had difficulty following his logic.

'So what I am trying to tell you is this', he said as we sat in chairs in the grass near the Unity Fountain surrounded by counter-protesters he was supervising:

> There is international conspiracy. Not only in Nigeria. There is international conspiracy. I'm not saying opposition is doing it. Opposition cannot destroy our country. Some people are interested in destroying this country. It happens in Arab Spring. It started with youths. We have seen it clearly. It is social media. Now the issue of Bring Back Our Girls – it has gone viral in the world. Why it has gone viral? Because you post it. But if you didn't give somebody anything, why would you ask somebody to bring it back to you? We said release. That is why we changed the language from bring to release. These people, we didn't give them these girls. You abduct them, and now we are asking to please release the girls healthy and alive. We have suffered enough. As a young person in this country, I would never want what I passed through [for] my children to go and pass through it. We have gone in a harsh situation [...] We have generals in the north, they are not saying anything. We have to come out and say something because the destiny of this country lies in their hands [...] You see these youths? We brought them, with the different ideology and different thinking. Our agenda is Save Nigeria Campaign. We are not interested in 2015 [elections] [...] What we are

saying is this: we need our country in the safe hands, so we need the country to be united. That is my point only.

I first met Jude Tabai, the man who presented himself as working in an unspecified security role for the president's team, while speaking with Abduljalal Dauda and Felicia Sani. It was a short time later, after one of his underlings insistently told me that Tabai wanted to speak with me, that we discussed the situation in more detail. We stood about 20 metres away from the counter-protest organisers, and the more we spoke, the more he seemed to relish explaining to me the sinister forces at work trying to bring down President Jonathan.

'Why and where are they?', I asked him after he claimed that the girls had been released by 'collaborators and co-sponsors'. 'Good', he said, his voice climbing, pleased with the chance to tell the story. 'Because, you know why they have been released? Because of the force the international community came with. Do you know that all those who never spoke against Boko Haram – the heavyweights, the religious leaders, the emirs who never spoke – all got up and start speaking now, that Boko Haram is this, Boko Haram is that, Boko Haram is this, Boko Haram is that. So it is like, why now? Because they now know the gravity of international community taking over this battle.'

His argument as far as I could tell was that the northern elites pulling the strings had got more than they had bargained for and must now find a way out before the plot is uncovered:

And basically their only bait to avoid that is to tell the people to push out those girls. And that is why you see them quickly saying that, 'Give us this and take your girls.' I'm a psychologist and I'm a security expert. No militant can tell you that, 'take your girls and just give me one person' [...] That is a big loss to them, you understand? They will never. If they are actually firm in what they are doing, they will say that 'give us our prisoners'. They know that nobody will release their prisoners. But they are asking for soft bargaining so that it will just be easy for them to just release those girls. And they believe that once they release those girls, that pressure on them, on both the northerners and all those things, will calm down, and then they can continue the other phase of the battle. But they will never go kidnapping on this level again because that has exposed a lot of things. And they know that if they don't do it and this thing gets out of this level, it's going to expose everybody.

We spoke for about 30 minutes before I left him to talk to the original Bring Back Our Girls protesters. They were outnumbered by the counter-demonstrators, who were about 300 in total compared to the original rally's several dozen. Hadiza Bala Usman, one of the organisers for the Bring Back Our

Girls rally, took the high road and sought to keep the focus on the Chibok girls when I asked whether she believed the counter-protesters were sponsored by the government. ‘Well, I’m not aware because I haven’t engaged them in any discussion. It’s just interesting to note that people are coming out after – this is our twenty-eighth day of protesting, twenty-eighth day of sustained protests, and it is important to know that the girls have been abducted for 47 days now’, said Usman, who has been aligned with the opposition in Nigeria and whose late father was a revered northern intellectual. ‘So for people to start protesting two days, 45 days after the abduction of the girls, is quite an interesting thing to note. But I don’t know who they are. I don’t know where they’re coming from. I hear them mentioning the fact that they are protesting for the release of the girls from the abductors.’

She continued as she kept an eye on the Bring Back Our Girls protesters assembling nearby since she was due to start the rally soon:

> It’s interesting to note that we are citizens that have a social contract with our leader, and we believe our leader, based on our constitution, is mandated to provide security for the lives of every Nigerian, and in the event that security is not provided, citizens would go up to the leader and demand for him to have decisive and concise effort towards providing that mandate given to him [...] We believe in a state; we believe in a nation; we believe in the institution of the federal republic of Nigeria, and we shall continue demanding for our federal government to do everything possible to rescue and return the Chibok girls.

The rally began shortly after we finished speaking, civil society activists, students, Chibok elders and sympathisers dressed in red, some bearing slogans such as ‘We are all from Chibok’ and ‘Bring Back Our Girls’. They chanted Ezekwesili’s call-and-response and listened as others addressed them on the latest news regarding the kidnappings. All remained peaceful, but there was an ominous sign later. The counter-protesters eventually moved toward the rally, trotting in a line, clapping and chanting. They circled the Bring Back Our Girls demonstrators, clearly attempting to provoke them, but no one took the bait. The counter-protesters gave up and returned to their spot on the other side of the Unity Fountain, but it was easy to see how the situation could degenerate if they were allowed to continue to gather there.

They were allowed to continue, of course, and what played out the next day was inane and brutal – simple thuggery designed to end a peaceful protest of dozens of people who were only asking what any citizen should expect of their government. According to journalists and others present at the time, young men who were among the counter-protest rushed over, sought to grab cameras

journalists were holding and smash them, broke plastic chairs being used by the rally and hit some of the demonstrators with sticks and bars. Then they were allowed to walk away. Some of those present at the time told me that the police briefly detained a couple of the youths, but later let them go. When I arrived at the rally after the madness had subsided, the pile of broken chairs was still there and the Bring Back Our Girls leaders were shaken. They had earlier warned the police that they were concerned about their safety given the thugs assembling near them and had delivered a letter to the authorities saying so. They explained this to a police officer at the scene and showed him a copy of the letter, but he seemed uninterested. He misunderstood and said he would deliver the letter for them, and they told him again that it had already been delivered. Rumours began to spread that more thugs were on their way, and Bring Back Our Girls demonstrators began warning that everyone should leave. I did not see Tabai, Sani and Abduljalal – the three government supporters I spoke with a day earlier – and cannot say if they were there when the violence broke out.

The same officer who misunderstood the protest leaders was later standing next to a police truck along with several of his colleagues. I walked over and asked him why they had not arrested those who attacked the demonstrators. He told me he did not know who was responsible. I suggested he could talk to witnesses to find out. ‘I didn’t ask them’, he said. It was clear that he had no plans to do so, that he was helpless. There would be no benefit for this man dressed in the uniform of a Nigerian police officer to protect his fellow citizens from harm.

Epilogue: ‘They Should Not Allow Me to Die in This Condition’

It was drizzling rain on a Thursday in September 2013 as I landed in Warri, a hub for the oil industry in Nigeria’s Delta state in the south, where gas-burning petroleum flares spew into the thick, tropical air. Along the bustling banks of the River Warri, flat-bottomed boats with outboard engines load passengers, food and supplies before winding their way deep into the creeks, past soot-covered makeshift oil refineries fed with stolen crude, where fuel is illegally produced for sale or survival. During a previous trip a couple years before, I had taken a boat and visited the village of Gbekebor, where I sat in a tiny community hall with a chief. He told me proudly that the plastic chairs there stamped with the words ‘Donated by Niger Delta Freedom Fighters’, along with goats and rice, were given to them by a prominent ex-gang leader who had participated in the oil militancy of the 2000s. A company believed to be controlled by that same ex-gang leader was later reported to be earning massive amounts of money through a government contract worth more than $100 million, ostensibly to provide security for waterways.[1] It was another reminder that the sleazy dealings with money belonging to the Nigerian people seemed to know no bounds.

I thought of that trip after I boarded a taxi at the airport and rode past an overgrown expanse of green brush and vines, dishevelled palm trees extending skyward like upside-down mops. Ramshackle hotels and storefronts stretched down the roadside along with shipping containers transformed into market kiosks. As we pushed our way through traffic, a billboard came into view wishing the former state governor, James Ibori, a happy fifty-fifth birthday. It called him ‘The Living Legend of Resource Control’, a phrase meaning he fought for Delta state to keep more of the revenue earned from crude oil pumped there. In fact, he has been accused of pocketing much of the money – or more precisely, using it to pay for an opulent mansion and luxury cars, among other

properties – according to prosecutors.[2] He is currently serving time in Britain for money laundering and fraud, having been tried there after a Nigerian court acquitted him of 170 different charges.[3]

I was not in Warri this time to explore the creeks or look into illicit profits being raked in by corrupt overlords, however. I was there to see Wellington Asiayei, the police officer shot and paralysed outside his barracks room during the Kano attacks in January 2012. It would be the first time we would meet since the days after he was shot, when he spoke to me from his hospital bed, still overcome by what had occurred. I had been given a rough set of directions by his brother, and my taxi driver pushed on through the sopping-wet streets, a tassel dangling from his rear-view mirror with an emblem reading 'Doctor Jesus' and music on the radio declaring, 'up, up Jesus'. I eventually arrived at a dirt road off a larger paved street in Wellington's neighbourhood and walked with his brother to the front door. We entered the flat inside a fading yellow and white building, and I was led to a room at the back, where I found Wellington, lying on a mattress on the floor, unable to stand.

I knew before my trip that he had not been in good condition, having spoken by phone to his doctor and his wife, as well as Wellington himself. Still, it was jarring to see him there that way, an assistant police superintendent helpless on the floor of his aunt's spartan home, appearing much weaker and withered than when we had met some 19 months earlier. I knew he had agreed to speak with me because he hoped I would get the word out about his condition since his repeated pleas to the government and the police force for further assistance had gone unanswered. I didn't blame him, though neither did I have much hope. When I telephoned a police spokesman several weeks before with the aim of tracking him down, the spokesman told me they had been trying to contact him as well so they could figure out when he could come back to work.

I took a seat in a chair next to his mattress, and Wellington, slowly but deliberately, took me through the odyssey he had endured since our last discussion, from road journeys across Nigeria to stem-cell treatments in India, followed by a desperate resort to herbal remedies back in Warri. 'They should not allow me to die in this condition', he said.

He had remained in Aminu Kano Teaching Hospital, where I first met him, for six months, when his doctors advised him that he should seek treatment abroad since they had done all they could there. At one point during his stay at

Aminu Kano, the national police chief, Mohammed Abubakar, visited those wounded in the attacks. According to Wellington, he promised the force would urgently look into his case. He did not hear back from the police force, but he was also not completely without help. The country's National Emergency Management Agency had covered the bills for his stay at Aminu Kano, and the Kano state government would later contribute 2 million naira, or about $12,000, to his expenses for seeking treatment abroad. He would also continue to receive his salary from the police force. It would not be enough, though, as further complications arose.

I should say clearly that the Nigerian police have a terrible reputation. Poorly paid, low-level cops find themselves reduced to shaking down drivers for bribes, while pay-offs are often required for investigations to move ahead. There have also been more serious allegations against police involving torture or rape. I could never know all the details of Wellington's life and his career; I do not know if he would have been considered a good cop or bad cop or something in between. But his path from his birthplace in a village in the creeks near Warri to his promotion through the ranks of the police, followed by his struggle to find adequate medical help, seemed to me typical of many in a country where the odds of succeeding are long.

He was born on 2 May 1964 in his grandfather's village of Asiayei Gbene. According to Wellington, his father had many wives and he does not know how many brothers and sisters he has. His father, an Ijaw by ethnicity, was in the army and moved regularly, so Wellington attended primary and secondary school in Ogun state in south-western Nigeria, where he was stationed at the time, many miles away from their home in the creeks of the Niger Delta. He said his father fought on the Nigerian side in the 1967–70 civil war, though Wellington did not seem to remember much from that period. When his father retired from the army in 1977, Wellington returned to the Niger Delta and finished his secondary education in the town of Ayakoromo, also located within the creeks near Warri. In 1982, while living with his uncle in nearby Rivers state, he heard an announcement on the radio that the police were recruiting, so he went to headquarters and signed up. After passing a test to join, he was sent for training at Oji River, slightly further north, and became a recruit constable on 1 September 1983, when he was 19 years old.

'I have this respect for uniformed personnel because they command respect', he said when I asked him why he wanted to become a policeman. 'Wherever

uniformed men – police, army, air force, navy – wherever they go, people respect them a lot.'

Later in the conversation, I asked him if that would have come from his father.

'Yes, yes.'

After some time on the force, Wellington began to realise he needed to do more if he wanted to continue to advance through the ranks. He decided to go back to school, and in 1999 he was admitted into Ambrose Alli University in Edo state to study public administration. He said he continued to work as a policeman during that time and was placed on night duty to allow him to attend classes. He graduated in 2004, and five years later he was accepted into the police staff college. After completing the course, he was posted to Kano. He had mainly been in the investigations department throughout his career, and he remained there in his new posting. Before his injury, he said he had never been shot at and the toughest situation he had dealt with involved armed robbers.

At around 6 p.m. on 20 January 2012, Wellington finished for the day at state police headquarters in Kano and took the walk back to the barracks. He had only a one-room flat since his wife was not there with him. She had remained in Kaduna, where he had been posted before attending officers' college. Back in the barracks that evening, he intended to prepare food for his dinner, but was interrupted by yelling and the sound of gunfire and explosions. When he walked out, he saw a man dressed in the green beret, black shirt and green trousers worn by the mobile police branch of the service, estimating he was between 15 and 30 metres away. He was thinking that both of them could run back to headquarters, or if that was not possible, to a church located inside the barracks to take cover.

'With the gunshots going everywhere, I just came out, and I wanted to lock my door, and as I turned to lock my door, I saw somebody in a mobile uniform from head to toe', said Wellington, still lying on his back on the mattress on the floor. 'I was thinking it was my colleague – the mobile men that are being posted to man the barracks gate and the armoury in the barracks. And I was trying to beckon on him so that we could all run to safety, and before I could say Jack Robinson, I didn't know myself again. I was already on the ground.'

'He is the one who shot?' I asked.

'He is the one that shot.'

'You thought he was police, but he was one of the —'

‘One of the Boko Haram members. I thought he was my colleague, and if he was my colleague, we would have run to safety. And maybe he would’ve shielded me while we were running. But I never knew he was an enemy. They have invaded the barracks. They have taken over the whole barracks [...] The one I saw was carrying [an] AK-47, because I saw him very vividly, very clearly, before he shot at me. I never knew that he was going to shoot at me. In fact, I didn’t even think in that direction. I did not.’

Later, as I asked him further questions on the details of what happened that day, he pleaded for me not to go on. ‘I don’t want to recall this incident, honestly speaking’, he said, his voice sorrowful. ‘I don’t want to recall this incident [...] In this condition today, it’s very traumatic, very, very traumatic. I know what I’m passing through. I know what I’m passing through. I know what I’ve suffered.’

After his six months at Aminu Kano Teaching Hospital, he decided to return to Warri and begin looking into how he could travel to receive treatment. He had bought a wheelchair for himself, and he chartered a vehicle to drive south from Kano, reclining the front seat so he could lie back for the 11-hour journey, enduring the rough ride over Nigeria’s poor roads. Once back home, his brother went on the Internet to research Fortis Hospital in India, which his doctors had recommended. He exchanged emails with doctors there who told him the cost of his treatment would be in the area of $10,000. With that in mind, Wellington calculated that he would have to come up with about $16,000. Including the money donated by Kano’s state government, he was about $4,000 short. He said his family went to work trying to pull together that amount and was eventually able to do so, and he began planning the specifics of his trip to India.

In November 2012, he took an Etihad flight from Lagos, and was able to sit in business class so he could be in a reclining seat. After a stop in Abu Dhabi, he and his wife landed in New Delhi, some 15 hours after leaving Nigeria. The hospital sent a van to pick him up at the airport, and once at the hospital, his consultant began a series of tests. The results were not good.

‘So finally, he now came out with this report and said that I have only one option now, that I did not come to Fortis in good time’, Wellington said. The spinal injury had apparently worsened, and the doctors informed him that the only option was stem-cell therapy, an experimental procedure. Plastic surgery was also needed to repair a worsening bedsore. The stem-cell procedure came

first, lasting about three hours, though Wellington said he felt no pain, thanks to the anaesthesia. Several days later, he underwent plastic surgery for the bedsore. He said doctors told him that if he did not begin to feel sensation in his lower limbs in six months or less, he should return for another round of treatments. After a period of recovery, Wellington flew out of India on 31 January 2013, hopeful that he would eventually be back on his feet.

There was more trouble just after he landed back in Nigeria. His wife, while tending to him at his brother-in-law's house in Lagos, noticed that the plastic surgery for the bedsore had ruptured. He had also begun to develop new sores since he had been lying in different positions to allow the surgery to heal. They returned to Warri, again by road, and he decided to enter a health clinic in hopes that they could deal with the sores. He remained there for six months, receiving antibiotic injections and with nurses cleaning and dressing the wounds, before leaving in July. He paid a bill of 650,000 naira, or about $4,000, but the sores had not healed.

'The wounds were infected, so they were giving me antibiotics, but the truth of the whole thing is that the doctor said that I need to get to a specialist hospital where they can handle the matter. They cannot handle it', Wellington said after having a relative assist him in showing me the worst of the bedsores as he lay on his mattress. 'I was spending money and I was not getting anything. I was spending my salary on treatment and drugs, and a few individuals, my friends, assisted me with money.'

He had also not regained any sensation in his legs and decided he should try to return to India, but to do so, he would have to raise thousands more dollars. While he was still in the clinic, a delegation from the ministry of health visited on a routine tour of private hospitals and were taken to meet Wellington. After hearing his story, they introduced him to newspaper journalists, who wrote stories on his plight. Features appeared in June 2013, including in two of Nigeria's largest newspapers, along with his contact information in hopes of donations. They ran pictures of him lying in his hospital bed alongside an older photo of him dressed sharply and standing proudly in his ceremonial uniform, taken at the police college in Jos in 2009. A headline in Nigeria's *Guardian* paper bluntly declared 'Boko Haram victim, ASP Wellington, dying gradually', while another in *ThisDay* newspaper said he was 'Dying to save Nigeria'. According to Wellington, police officials again looked into his case after the stories appeared, contacting him by phone and paying him a visit, but he did not

see any results. He was still receiving his monthly police salary, but he told me he was unable to access any insurance money.

Back at home in Warri, he sought herbal treatments for his bedsores, but they did not seem to do much good. He couldn't remember exactly what herbs were used when I asked him. Family members were caring for him when I got back in touch with him in September 2013. His wife was not there, and he declined to discuss why. I found out later that he and his wife had split, with different reasons offered by her and Wellington's brother. There was also an odd discrepancy in the number of children I was told he had, and he had begged off when I asked him about his kids in Warri. I had noted when speaking to him in the hospital after the attack that he said he had five children, but his brother and wife told me later he had one son.[4]

After visiting with him in Warri and returning to Lagos, where I was based at the time, I began making phone calls to try to find out if his case was being attended to by someone in government. I exchanged text messages with the minister for special duties, who was in charge of organising help for Boko Haram victims, providing him with Wellington's details. I spoke to someone in the health ministry, who told me that the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) had been put in charge of victims' assistance. I called that agency's spokesman and explained the situation, and he informed me that Wellington would have to submit an application. As a result, I asked Wellington's brother to send me a letter explaining the circumstances. He did so and also emailed a letter from Aminu Kano Teaching Hospital, where he was first treated, and a copy of one of the newspaper articles on him. I then forwarded the documents to a colleague in Abuja, who agreed to deliver the paperwork in person to the NEMA spokesman. The spokesman later confirmed to me he had received the documents and would look into it.

Months passed and there was no response. Wellington's brother contacted me a number of times to find out if I had made any progress. In February 2014, I called the NEMA spokesman and asked about the file. He remembered me, as well as our previous exchange, and told me he was unable to find out anything about Wellington. I told him I did not understand his response since the reason for providing him with the documents was to initiate action. He said he would look into it again and get back to me. He never did.

'Even if the government is going to spend 10 million on me, am I not worth

more than 10 million naira [$60,000]?', Wellington asked me that day in Warri in exasperation. 'Let's assume the government is going to spend 10 million on me to rehabilitate me so that I will get back on my feet. Am I not much more than 10 million naira? Is a life of a Nigerian citizen not more than 10 million naira?'

After not being in touch for some time, I sent Wellington's brother an email in February 2014 telling him he should also try to contact NEMA to see if he could get a response. I did not hear back, which I found to be strange since he had always responded before. The following month, I tried to call Wellington on both of his phone numbers but could not reach him. I then called his brother, who did answer. He told me he had received my email, but had some terrible news. Wellington had died in December. He was 50 years old.

The debate about Boko Haram, its international links and jihadi ambitions will and should go on, but for those faced with the everyday realties of the violence, it is almost beside the point. The problem is nothing less than the current state of Nigeria and the way it is being robbed daily – certainly of its riches, but more importantly, of its dignity.

Glossary

Ansaru: a splinter faction of Boko Haram that has kidnapped foreigners and with rhetoric more in line with global jihadist groups. Its full name is Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan, or Vanguard for the Aid of Muslims in Black Africa. Another possible translation is Support Group for Muslims in Black Africa. Whether Ansaru remains truly separate from Boko Haram has been debated and it appears they may work together in an umbrella-like arrangement.

Boko Haram: the Hausa-language phrase given to the Islamist insurgency in Nigeria. The most commonly accepted translation is 'Western education is forbidden', though it could have a wider meaning since 'boko' may also be interpreted as 'Western deception'. The name was given to the insurgents by outsiders and not by the Islamists themselves, and Nigerian authorities as well as the news media continue to refer to it as such. The insurgency has morphed into an umbrella-like structure in recent years with various cells that may or may not work together, and 'Boko Haram' has come to stand as a catch-all phrase to describe it.

Caliphate: a territory ruled according to Islamic principles, with a caliph as head. Usman Dan Fodio's nineteenth-century jihad in what is today northern Nigeria led to what has come to be known as the Sokoto Caliphate.

Civilian JTF: vigilante groups formed in north-eastern Nigeria to help soldiers root out insurgents. The name is a reference to the military's Joint Task Force, which was the main deployment assigned to battle Boko Haram before it was replaced by the 7th Division.

Emir: a Muslim ruler, sometimes within a larger caliphate. Also referred to as shehu or sultan in northern Nigeria. Various emirs ruled over areas of the Sokoto Caliphate and the title has been preserved and passed on to the present day.

Today's emirs of northern Nigeria officially have only ceremonial powers, though they retain substantial influence. The sultan of Sokoto remains Nigeria's highest Muslim spiritual and traditional authority.

Jama'atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad: Abubakar Shekau's faction of Boko Haram says it wants to be known by this Arabic-language name, which translates to People Committed to the Prophet's Teachings for Propagation and Jihad. Another possible translation is the Sunni Group for Proselytisation and Jihad.

JTF: Joint Task Force. Military-led security deployments assigned to contend with unrest in parts of Nigeria. The JTF in north-eastern Nigeria had been the main force assigned to battle Boko Haram and had been accused of major human rights abuses before it was replaced by the 7th Division in 2013.

Salafism: a strict, fundamentalist interpretation of Islam that advocates a return to a purer form of the faith. Boko Haram's original leader, Mohammed Yusuf, was a Salafist. Boko Haram under his leadership before his death in 2009 was a Salafist-like sect based at his mosque in Maiduguri.

Sufism: a mystical version of Islam. Usman Dan Fodio, the nineteenth-century jihad leader in what is today northern Nigeria, was a Sufi. Nigeria's Muslim establishment today remains mainly made up of Sufis in line with Sunni tradition. Opposition to Nigeria's Sufi establishment developed in the 1970s through dissident clerics who had embraced Wahhabi-Salafist or Shiite beliefs. Such clerics retain substantial followings today.

Notes

Prologue

1 Translation by Aminu Abubakar.

2 Another possible translation for the name is ‘Sunni Group for Proselytisation and Jihad’. Translation provided by Professor M.A.S. Abdel Haleem of SOAS, University of London.

1 ‘Then You Should Wait for the Outcome’

1 The ‘martyr’ video was originally obtained by AFP northern Nigeria correspondent Aminu Abubakar, who also translated it from Hausa to English. Some details from the video were included in a story he and I worked on together in September 2011 (Aminu Abubakar and M.J. Smith, ‘Nigerian “bomber” videos emerge as Islamist fears mount’, Agence France-Presse, 18 September 2011).

2 The details of the delay before the bomb went off were first reported by *Time* magazine (Alex Perry, ‘Threat level rising: how African terrorist groups inspired by Al-Qaeda are gaining strength’, 19 December 2011) and Reuters (Joe Brock, ‘Special report: Boko Haram – between rebellion and jihad’, 31 January 2012). I later confirmed these details and others with a source who has seen the surveillance video from the day of the attack.

3 There had been vague warnings in the weeks leading up to the bombing which are discussed in Chapter 3.

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8 Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 30.

9 Hiskett, *Development*, pp. 59–60.

10 Falola and Heaton, *History*, p. 32.

11 Hogben, *Introduction*, pp. 165–7.

12 Hiskett, *Development*, p. 67.

13 Falola and Heaton, *History*, p. 28; Hogben, *Introduction*, pp. 73–5. It should be emphasised that there are many different versions of the Bayajida myth.

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21 Hiskett, *Sword*, pp. 44–5.

22 Last, *Sokoto*, pp. 7–8.

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62 Lugard Papers, MSS Brit. Emp. s.62, ff. 107–11.

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2 'His Preachings Were Things that People Could Identify With'

1 The interrogation has been posted online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePpUvfTXY7w. Translation from Hausa to English was provided by Professor Abubakar Aliyu Liman of Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria. Professor Liman felt the best translation of 'boko' in this instance was 'Western education', though others may have a wider interpretation of the word, such as Western deception.

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6 ‘Our Girls Were Kidnapped and They Did Not Do Anything’

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3 I should stress that I have not visited Chibok myself and have relied on interviews with residents and others, as well as a history of the Chibok people written by Gerald Neher, the missionary I quote who lived there in the 1950s and 1960s. I sought to visit Chibok when I returned to Nigeria in late May and early June 2014 after the attack on the town, but decided against travelling by road because of security concerns.

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