Radicalisation in northern Nigeria: stories from Boko Haram

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Abstract: This paper explores the limits of the 'conveyor-belt' conception of radicalization, by analysing the life histories of (former) members of one of Africa's most notorious 'radical' movements, northern Nigeria's Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad (a. k. a. Boko Haram). Through the stories of six people who in some way became part of the organization, the paper complicates the intuitive conveyor-belt narrative that violence is driven by ideological indoctrination. It shows that there are many different pathways that end up in violence, many of which are less intentional and more contingent than the conveyor-belt model suggests. Of course, religious conviction is often an important element of these pathways, as are family and friends, opportunistic incentives, and coercion. But the sequencing of organization membership, conviction, and violence can vary immensely, with serious implications for what it means to 'radicalize'. Moreover, pathways into violence are often characterized by information gaps on the part of the 'radicalizing' individual, rapidly changing circumstances, and—perhaps most importantly—irreversible decisions with unforeseen consequences.

Introduction

Radicalization, or the process through which people end up committing acts of violence, is often viewed as an intellectual process, an ideological journey by which individuals become increasingly convinced that violence is a justifiable course of action. The European Commission, for example, describes it as 'people embracing radical ideology that could lead to the commitment of terrorist acts' (EC 2016). Derived, perhaps, from stories of lone-wolf terrorists and religiously inspired suicide bombers, this intellectual representation of radicalization is combined with a persistent two-part narrative. First, this narrative holds that radicalization is driven by individual indoctrination to the point where a person becomes convinced that violence is the best way forward. Second, it suggests that violence, and often membership[1] of a violent organization, follows after

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[1] To 'join' an organization, or to become a 'member', is understood to involve working towards furthering the aims of the organization, as well as being both a measure of self-identification with the organization and a measure of acceptance of membership by existing members. The

this change in conviction. In other words, it suggests a one-directional causal chain, much like a 'conveyor belt' (Moskalenko & McCauley 2009), in which the decisions to join a violent group and commit violent acts are the direct consequence of people's shifting ideological conviction.

This paper explores the limits of this conception of radicalization by analysing life histories of members and former members of one of Africa's most notorious radical movements, northern Nigeria's Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad, or Boko Haram. Ever since its rise to prominence in the early 2000s, Boko Haram has been one of the world's most poorly understood radical movements. Through the stories of six people who in some way became part of the organization, this paper complicates the intuitive conveyor-belt narrative of violence as driven by ideological indoctrination. It will show that there are many different pathways that end up in violence, many of which are less intentional and more contingent than the conveyor-belt model suggests. Of course, religious conviction is often an important part of these pathways, but the sequencing of organization membership, conviction, and violence can vary immensely. Moreover, pathways into violence are often characterized by information gaps on the part of the 'radicalizing' individual, rapidly changing circumstances, and—perhaps most importantly—irreversible decisions with unforeseen consequences.

Many of these arguments are not new and in fact resonate with empirical studies of radical violence all around the world (e.g. Jonsson 2014; Neumann 2015; Mercy Corps 2016). Yet both theory and policy discourses have been slow to adjust to these empirical findings. In a recent theoretical contribution to the radicalization debate, Khalil (2017) makes an attempt to acknowledge the variation of pathways to radical violence by suggesting three ideal-typical trajectories into radical violence. His model allows for a flexibility that is a step in the right direction in terms of analysing the stories presented below. At the same time, the Boko Haram stories suggest that even more analytical flexibility might be required, in particular to account for and include the patterns of recruitment into (potentially violent) radical organizations. Theoretically, the paper therefore suggests an analytical approach to radicalization that focuses on identifying the conditions under which different sequences of recruitment, membership, conviction, and violence occur.

Methodologically, this paper is an exploration of six life stories of individuals who have at some point been members of Boko Haram. These stories were

specific meanings of membership of Boko Haram have likely varied tremendously among individuals, as well as in space and time, and further research could be undertaken to illuminate these variations.

selected from 59 life histories of former Boko Haram members collected by a team including the author,[2] with the purpose of covering some of the diversity of members' experiences. They are illustrations of the varied nature of the paths that have led people to Boko Haram and were collected in a somewhat unconventional manner—through interviews with friends and family—due to the security risks of conducting primary research in north-eastern Nigeria at the time (late 2014). In many ways, this period was the peak of Boko Haram violent activity, and it led to the establishment of a so-called caliphate that was defeated only in late 2015. As such, it was a dangerous time for fieldwork in the region. In response to this challenge, the life histories were collected through interviews with family members and close friends of the Boko Haram members. This strategy has obvious weaknesses, but it also has several strengths that suggest the insights drawn from these stories are valuable.

Problematically, the partial and limited viewpoint of an external observer is imperfect as a measure of people's internal motivations. As such, we have to be cautious in the extent to which we trust the stories to represent the entirety of the Boko Haram members' experiences. Memories are also notoriously unreliable, and many of the stories collected were about events that happened years before the interview took place. We therefore need to interpret the stories cautiously and accept that they are probably neither representative of nor comprehensive for the experiences of radicalization into Boko Haram. At the same time, the stories do tell us important, and often new, information. Many of the interviews were about basic aspects of the members' lives, such as family background, education, and occupation, which are details friends and family are likely to know and remember correctly. Moreover, I do not use the stories to build a full description and explanation of Boko Haram's radicalization; rather, this study is an early, and partial, descriptive step in a cumulative effort that it is hoped, over time, will build a more complete picture of the origins and dynamic development of this organization and its membership.

What is Boko Haram?

Before turning to the stories, a brief sketch of the organization under analysis may be helpful. Referred to by its members as Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'Awati

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2 I would like to thank Professor M. S. Umar, Professor Raufu Mustapha, our research team in Borno State, and other members of the Nigeria Research Network for their great contributions to this project.

Wal-Jihad (JAS) but more commonly known to the public as Boko Haram, this insurgent movement was formed in the early 2000s around reformist Islamic teachings and deep, local political grievances. Since then, it has gone through at least four stages of organizational transformation:[3]

–   a youth-based offshoot of a mainstream Salafi[4] movement, which over time became an increasingly politicized religious sect (1998–2009);
–   an underground terrorist organization (2009–2013);
–   a full-scale insurgency aiming to take control of the north-eastern part of Nigeria (2013–2015);
–   an underground organization aimed at committing acts of terrorist violence (2015–today).

At the time of writing, in the fall of 2017, Boko Haram remains a serious security threat in north-eastern Nigeria. Its members still coordinate violent attacks with some regularity, and their tactics have evolved to include suicide bombing, sometimes employing women and children. Its territorial control is limited, although people say that some rural parts of the north-east are still not secure enough for the internally displaced people to return. Official estimates of the number of victims of the insurgency have risen to 100,000 (Tukur 2017), but the real figures are likely higher. On top of the violence, the region is now under threat of serious food shortages resulting in part from the incessant political insecurity; the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that around 5 million people in the region are in need of urgent food assistance (UNOCHA 2017).

What motivates people to join Boko Haram and contribute to such violence and destruction? This question is particularly puzzling given the current negative reputation of the movement across northern Nigeria and the alleged 'insanity' of Boko Haram's leadership (Iroegbu 2016). As background to the stories presented below, this section aims to describe what Boko Haram may have had to offer its prospective members. In other words, it aims to identify some of the positive reasons why, at different points in the movement's history, individuals may have

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3 There are several good overviews and analyses that describe in some detail the movement's historical trajectory (e. g. Adesoji 2010; Muhammed 2010; Ohuoha 2010; Loimeier 2012; Agbigoa 2013; Higazi & Brisset-Foucault 2013; Mustapha 2014; Perouse de Montclos 2014; Amnesty International 2015; Comolli 2015; Smith 2015; Varin 2016).

4 Salafism, following Ostien (forthcoming), is understood here as an orthodox stream in Islamic thinking that aims to return to the Islam as it was practised when the Prophet was alive. Salafis base their religious beliefs on the Quran and the *sunnah* from the hadith and reject all subsequent 'innovation' (*bida*).

chosen to join them. More specifically, I will focus on three dimensions in which Boko Haram provided opportunities: first, faith and reformist ideologies; second, opportunities; and third, violence. Throughout this analysis, it is important to keep in mind that the movement transformed fundamentally over time. As a result, what Boko Haram had to offer its prospective members also transformed, and the decision to join in the early 2000s was quite different from the decision to join in later years.

Faith and reform

Boko Haram, to many of its members as well as to the public, is first and foremost a religious organization. Most people place the starting point of the movement in the 1990s or early 2000s, and Mohamed Yusuf is generally considered the first leader (Loimeier 2012; Comolli 2015). Yusuf was educated in the tradition of Izala, a northern-Nigerian Salafi movement that came up in the 1970s as a force for Islamic reform against the mystical Sufi brotherhoods that had long dominated the regional religious landscape (Loimeier 1997; Kane 2003). Yusuf was a young and charismatic preacher who managed to quickly gather a substantial following among the youthful population of Maiduguri, capital of Borno State, and the surrounding areas. Mixing Izala beliefs with Saudi Wahhabism and some of his own theological inventions, Yusuf presented his followers with a radical and anti-establishment doctrine that turned out to have a wide appeal. He preached in the centre of Maiduguri, in a compound named the *Markaz*; and while there were occasional tensions with the state authorities, under Yusuf's leadership (ca. 2000 – 2009) Boko Haram was long considered a more or less normal, albeit ideologically extreme, Islamic sect.

Politics entered into Boko Haram's trajectory with the 2003 gubernatorial elections. Courted by one of the candidates for the governorship, Ali Modu Sheriff, Yusuf provided electoral support in exchange for a promise of government positions and a serious commitment to the implementation of shariah law. In 2000, Borno State had pledged to re-introduce the shariah criminal code as state law, but since then little substantive progress had been made on the implementation. Yusuf saw the elections as a way to get involved in shariah implementation—a position of considerable power due to the popularity of shariah among Borno's Muslim-majority population. Sheriff won the elections, with thanks to Yusuf's support, but failed to deliver on his promise. The resulting falling-out between the two leaders marked the starting point of Boko Haram's radically anti-government ideology. In Islamic as well as political terms, Boko Haram thus became an anti-establishment movement—a fundamentalist sect that called for ever-stricter adherence to

the tenets of Salafi Islam, as well as a radical anti-government movement that rejected the legitimacy of the Nigerian (multi-religious) federation. In a region and period in which religion was highly salient and disillusion with formal politics ran deep, this was a powerful combination capable of drawing in large numbers of followers.

Opportunities

Beyond its Islamic and political appeal, Boko Haram is also a social group that has offered its members opportunities for important network connections and economic opportunities for personal advancement. First, for supporters from younger generations, the sect created opportunities to rebel against their parents and choose a life outside the often constraining parameters of conservative northern-Nigerian family expectations. Second, for some women, Boko Haram opened up opportunities of religious learning and political activism that are inaccessible in many of the more conservative Islamic communities in the region (ICG 2016). For others, of course, Boko Haram was a rather infamous source of violence and terror—though most of these dynamics occurred only after the crisis of 2009 and the death of Mohamed Yusuf. Finally, Boko Haram was also a source of economic opportunities, at first largely through legitimate trade but later, as the violence increased, also through widespread criminality.

Boko Haram and its members have had a complex relationship with education, one of the major drivers of social mobility and, more broadly, economic opportunities and development. The movement's nickname, Boko Haram, is derived from the Hausa phrase for 'Western education is immoral,' underlining one of Yusuf's more controversial religious teachings against the proliferation of secular education. This, in combination with the recurrent attacks on schools and educational facilities in the later years of the movement, has given Boko Haram an image of being anti-education and, more generally, anti-modern. Yet the movement's real orientation has been more nuanced. For while Western education may be anathema, Islamic education was actively promoted both in traditional *tsangaya* Quranic schools and 'modern' *Islamiyya* ones; and in many cases, women's access to schooling was promoted, alongside measures for their financial empowerment (ICG 2016). Even in the field of education, therefore, Boko Haram could provide opportunities for advancement to some—even if those opportunities were heavily constrained by the movement's idiosyncratic religious doctrine.

Violence

As time progressed, Boko Haram became more than a religious–political organization with opportunities for personal advancement; it became a full-fledged insurgent military operation, specializing in large-scale collective violence against state security forces, traditional rulers, non-Salafi Islamic leaders, Muslims who criticized the movement, and non-Muslims. Most analysts identify the 'crisis of 2009' as the turning point of Boko Haram's move toward violence. What began as a heated exchange between police and Boko Haram members, over a controversial law imposing motorcycle helmets, escalated into a full-blown fire-fight that ended with the extrajudicial execution of many Boko Haram members, including the leader Mohamed Yusuf. After this crisis, the movement was decimated; but the new leader, Abubakar Shekau, managed to transform it into an effective underground terrorist organization. While many suffered from this transformation toward violence, both within and outside the organization, it also created its own perverse incentives for recruitment. First, many recruits were coerced into membership. Second, the increasing hostilities between Boko Haram and the state security forces increased the risk of remaining 'unaffiliated' for those caught in the crossfire. For some of them, joining Boko Haram may have felt like the 'safer' option than relying on patchy protection offered by the Nigerian security forces. Finally, Boko Haram's insurgent turn also provided clear incentives for 'specialists in violence', such as criminals or military and ex-military fighters from neighbouring countries, to join and collect wages and loot (Tilly 2003).

These sketches of the dimensions of faith and reform, opportunities, and violence can go some way in making understandable the kinds of positive appeal Boko Haram may have had for its prospective members. They also highlight how Boko Haram has been a different organization to different people and changed dramatically over time. The stories of radicalization, detailed in the next section, will expand on these sketches and begin to connect them to the lived experiences of individuals who actually made the choice to join.

Stories of radicalization

Over the years, many explanations have been proposed for the Boko Haram phenomenon, from structural variables such as the poverty and relative deprivation of the region, the dominance of traditional Quranic (*tsangaya*) schools, or the high number of unemployed young men, to more historical explanations such as the influence of international Islamic terrorism, the legacies of the pre-colonial Sokoto jihad, or the nature of reformist, fundamentalist Islam in the region.

The case studies presented below will showcase some of these variables in their context. They are real, anonymized stories from Boko Haram members. Some of the members may still be alive and part of the organization; others have managed to leave the group, or they are no longer alive. Around each story, I highlight certain salient aspects and connect them to the wider context of northern Nigeria, as well as the more general patterns we found in our analysis of the 59 life histories (Umar & Ehrhardt 2014). The stories are clustered into four sets, organized around some of the more common reasons for joining Boko Haram: faith, family and friends, coercion, and opportunism. Overall, the picture these stories paint is a complex and often ambiguous one, and the questions they raise do not allow for straightforward answers or silver-bullet solutions. Rather, they serve to humanize the people analysed here and suggest that the choices and decisions that made them 'violent radicals' may not have looked that way when they made them.

Faith

Whatever the full scope of Boko Haram's activities and the motives of its leaders, it is at least in part a religious organization, under the general banner of Islam. It stands to reason, therefore, that many of its members joined for religious reasons—that is, because the faith propagated by Boko Haram leaders matched their own ideas about true Islam and the good life. Intuitively, this idea—that people join religious organizations for religious reasons—is often extended to motives for violence: what could better motivate the violence perpetrated by members of religious organizations than religion itself? While this idealist line of reasoning may hold a grain of truth, the stories told below will also show its limits. In particular, the stories will suggest the importance of analysing religious motives as embedded in broader political ones and in meaningful social connections.

Abdul's story is in some ways a classic narrative of finding religion: a risk-taking, seemingly careless young man finds inspiration in Islam to change his life. Such stories can be found all over the world, yet Abdul's also has elements that have to be understood within their specific, northern-Nigerian context. The organization that Abdul joined at first, Izala, is an Islamic movement with religiously reformist, anti-Sufi roots and a modern, Salafi orientation (Loimeier 1997; Kane 2003; Ostien 2018). When Abdul joined Boko Haram, Mohamed Yusuf's charismatic qualities likely were important and set this movement apart from the others; but it is also good to realize that movements such as Boko Haram have been a constant feature of northern-Nigerian society in the past century

(Last 2014). Religion, to many young Nigerians, is not merely a set of beliefs or ritual practices but also an ideology of great attraction, given that most secular ideologies (such as Marxism, liberalism, or nationalism) have done little to improve people's lives. In this context, Abdul's choice was perhaps not only a choice to 'seek knowledge' for reforming his personal life but also an expression of politically progressive, reformist ambition.

> Case study 1: Abdul, male, early thirties[5]
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> Abdul became a member of Boko Haram in the days that Mohamed Yusuf started preaching, sometime in 2007. He was enrolled in primary school as well as an *Islamiyya* school, and after his secondary school he went on to obtain a National Certificate of Education (NCE). Abdul started business or working in the market immediately after his secondary school days, to help his father take care of the house and his siblings. Before he joined Boko Haram he was a very good footballer and a dangerous drug addict and a criminal at the same time. It was believed that Abdul had problems with his employer because of the bad habits that he adopted and was fired for this reason. From the small savings he had, he established his own business as a trader; however, it kept failing due to his bad habits. His drug habit also made him interact with criminals; people suspect he was engaged in criminal activities himself. The business was largely run by his junior brothers.
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> Before joining Boko Haram, Abdul was a member of Izala. From the time that Abdul joined the Izala sect, he started abandoning some of his bad habits and concentrating on religion and a desire to know more about Islam. He was seen more frequently in the mosque and started looking after his business, which would have died if not for his younger brother and some of the employees who were dedicated to the business while he was a drug addict. It was during the time that he was seeking knowledge in Izala that Boko Haram members came to his town and started preaching. Out of curiosity, he was always there when they came around, which made them notice him and make him a contact person. That was how he became a member. Owing to his dedication as one of the pioneer members, Abdul later became part of the council of leaders in his area.

There is a certain irony in Abdul's choice to reform his life by joining an organization that would become as notorious as Boko Haram. But at the time in 2007, this irony was impossible to foresee, as Boko Haram was more of a radical religious sect than a violent insurgent movement. Moreover, beyond Abdul's religious and reformist reasons for attending sermons and joining Boko Haram, his story also highlights another dimension of the process of joining: interactions with existing members—for as Abdul became a common presence at local reli-

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5 The case studies are lightly rewritten versions of the stories that were collected by the research team in Borno State. Most of the words are verbatim citations from the interview transcripts, reorganized and revised only to enhance their legibility.

gious gatherings, existing members took notice and led him into the movement by giving him a function.

The second case, which tells the story of Aisha, also underlines the importance of such social connections in the process of joining, even if religious motivations are present. Aisha's connections are family-based: her sister, with whom she has a strong relationship, convinced her to attend Boko Haram sermons. At this point, it seems religious motivations played a role in convincing Aisha to keep returning to Boko Haram's base, the *Markaz* compound; and, in the end, Aisha's decision to also marry a Boko Haram member, against the will of her parents, sealed the deal.

> Case study 2: Aisha, female, early twenties
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> Aisha was widely considered a 'decent girl', living with her parents and waiting for admission into the university after she had finished secondary school. Aisha's father liked her a lot because she was always concerned about his welfare. Whenever he worked late, she waited for him to serve him food. Aisha was also loved by all her siblings, and she liked them in return. Her family is considered to be average in socio-economic terms, with her father working in a state ministry and her mother a primary school teacher.
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> Aisha's elder sister married a Boko Haram member without the family knowing the new husband was a member. Aisha liked her sister very much, so she would go to her sister's house to see her at any opportunity she got. After the husband had converted her sister, the sister in turn convinced Aisha to start going to Boko Haram lectures. With support from her sister and her constant visits to *Markaz*, the Boko Haram compound, Aisha joined in 2008. There she met her husband, whom she married without her parents' consent and, in fact, in the face of their serious opposition. Due to this gross disobedience, her father was really angry and hurt. Aisha became so deeply involved in Boko Haram that her husband forced her to stay in the Boko Haram compound, to help in volunteering work for the leader.
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> After marrying a Boko Haram member, Aisha started despising her parents. She no longer visited her family; and even if she did, you would hardly recognize her because she always wore a black veil to cover her face, in the Boko Haram style. After joining, Aisha also became very aggressive and unfriendly toward everyone outside the movement, including her parents.

What role does religion play in the radicalization of members of a religious radical movement such as Boko Haram? The stories of Abdul and Aisha give important clues about this puzzle, but they also raise further questions. Both stories suggest that religious motives matter, as Mercy Corps (2016) has also found; but these motives are also connected to political ambitions and often embedded in social connections. For Abdul, the social connections arose from his attendance at sermons and took a formal, organizational form as they made him a contact person; for Aisha, the connections comprised her sister and, subsequently, her husband—even as they destroyed her relationship with the rest of her family

outside the movement. Moreover, Aisha's engagement in volunteering suggests that women may have specific opportunities in Boko Haram which perhaps exceed those outside the movement. This point will come up again in later stories, particularly for Khadiya's case. For now, suffice to say that religion, while important to the radicalization of some, rarely operates in the absence of wider political or social factors.

Family and friends

In all the stories we have collected about Boko Haram members and former members, the single most common factor is the role of family and friends in leading new members into the movement. Virtually all the stories suggest that strong social ties are crucial in understanding processes of radicalization—with the exception, perhaps, of those who have been forced into the movement. For most others, radicalization appears to be at least as much a social process as it is an ideological or opportunistic one. Family and friends serve as entry points, as trust builders, as ways of cementing weak or sporadic ties, and as communicators of the movement's ideological messages. In the case of Khadiya, below, she was forced to join Boko Haram under pressure from her husband, since 'it was a known rule that all Boko Haram members must come with their wives during preaching'. But as time went by, Khadiya appears to have accepted and internalized the movement's rules and beliefs, as she rose in the movement's ranks and acquired leadership positions—even as these activities separated her from her family.

> Case 3: Khadiya, female, early thirties
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> Khadiya is a full-time housewife, married with five children, and does not go to the mosque like the men except for special occasions. She does not have an occupation. She is the first-born among the girls and a very quiet person. In the kind of home she comes from, girls are usually not allowed to go anywhere and so do not know anywhere in town until they are married off.
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> Her family is based here in town and her father is a small-time businessman in the market. Her father takes only the male children to conventional primary school and the local Quranic *tsangaya* school, while the female children are not taken to any school but *tsangaya*. It is after the *tsangaya* that they are married off very young; only the ones that do not get married, like Khadiya, are taken to Higher Islam School, a conventional secondary school that has a special class for *tsangaya* graduates. Khadiya met her husband in the secondary school. The relationship between Khadiya and her parents was very good until she joined Boko Haram, after which she began to have serious problems with them.

Khadiya joined Boko Haram as a result of her marriage, under pressure from her husband. It was a known rule that all Boko Haram members must come with their wives during preaching, and when a wife refuses she is forced to attend or even join. Owing to her marriage, Khadiya's husband forcefully introduced her into the sect. She was ordered to go to all the preaching as their house was near the *Markaz* compound where her husband spent most of his time.

Before the 2009 crisis, Khadiya was in charge of coordinating women in one area—because whenever the women go for preaching, they usually converge in her house before they are escorted by the military wing (*hisbah*) of the sect. After the 2009 crisis, she was put in charge of caring for the wives of Boko Haram members who had been killed in action. This she used to do in secret. She also organized weddings between widows and members that wanted to marry; moreover, she eventually became a very strong advocate for the sect among women, sometimes even to the point where she was allowed to preach.

Besides the importance of Khadiya's husband in her journey into radicalism, her story also highlights other aspects of religious radicalization in northern Nigeria. One is the connection between generation and radicalism: in all the stories we have collected, those who join can be considered 'young' people. Radicalization into Boko Haram, it would seem, is a young person's game. Second, Khadiya's story brings up the opportunities Boko Haram offered to some women: social and religious engagement, activism, and even preaching. These gendered dynamics are important to underline, particularly given Boko Haram's misogynistic actions and rhetoric that have received widespread media attention (ICG 2016). Finally, the story highlights the impact of religious radicalism on family relations. In many cases, particularly as the movement became increasingly violent, the choice to join Boko Haram came at the expense of good relations with parents and other non-member family members. In some cases, this may have been part of the reasons for joining; but in many others, in contrast, it appears that it was an unintended, and perhaps unforeseen, consequence of a choice made for different reasons. This pattern is important because it flies in the face of a common preconception that those who join are people with poor family links—in fact, it suggests that the causal arrow can also point from radicalism to the destruction of family ties.

Case 4: Shehu, male, mid-thirties

Shehu attended a local Quranic *tsangaya* school. His school was near his house, so he was not relocated to another town as is the traditional practice in Quranic education in northern Nigeria. His family is average in socio-economic terms, because their father already has an existing family business of buying, processing, and selling of hides and skins. Shehu started working as an apprentice in his father's business. After graduating from his father's tutelage, he started working for his father as a manager. He stopped working after some time and went on to start learning how to sew as a tailor. He came to be known as a very good

tailor before he joined the sect. All the male children of Shehu's family are involved in the family business. Apart from the family business, his father was also a *tsangaya ulama*, or Quranic teacher, with his own *tsangaya* school in the ward and a lot of students.

Shehu is married and has four children. He eventually left his father's business completely and went on to become a very good tailor with a lot of customers. It was his brother who influenced him to join the sect, before the 2009 crisis. When his brother joined, he was continuously preaching to him. He also kept inviting Shehu to the *Markaz*, the local base of Boko Haram before the 2009 crisis, for some time before he finally joined. But his brother's persuading was only one reason for Shehu to join: in addition, he was also under threat from the security agents as they were looking for Shehu's brother. In a few instances, he was arrested for simply asking questions about his brother, even though the security services were not aware that Shehu was also a member.

Shehu was made an official tailor of the sect and was highly respected among the members. Apart from the tailoring work, he is also involved in the terrorist activities of the sect.

Shehu's family relations were also at the heart of his radicalization: his brother, like Aisha's sister, was one of the driving forces behind his joining of Boko Haram; yet, unlike both Aisha and Khadiya, it is unclear whether his joining caused a rift between him and his other family members. But two other things also stand out about Shehu's story: first, the economic opportunities Boko Haram offers (in the shape of creating demand for tailoring services); and, second, the introduction of security forces and the threat of arrests and violence into his narrative of radicalization. For Shehu, it appears that the choice to join Boko Haram did not come at the expense of his tailoring business and may even have bolstered it. Moreover, there seems to have been a threat from the security forces, keen on finding and arresting his brother. As the literature on rebel movements suggests, such threats can in themselves be a reason for participating in radical and violent organizations if the threat from security forces seems at least as great as the threat from being part of a violent movement (Kalyvas & Kocher 2007). This connection between the threat of violence and radicalism is the theme of the next section.

Coercion

There is something intuitively compelling about the idea that radicalization can be coerced, in part because it absolves the radical perpetrators of some of the blame for their actions and it frees analysts from the obligation of trying to find positive reasons why people could radicalize. Yet, at the same time, the idea is problematic because, at heart, coercion and radicalism appear to be in contradiction: can someone be coerced to change their ideas? People can be

forced to act in ways that run against their conscience—for example, by committing acts of violence; but can they be forced to internalize radicalism—that is, to believe that violent acts are permissible in order to achieve their goals? While I have neither the ambition nor the evidence to tackle this complex question comprehensively, Maryam's story will help us to begin outlining a few parts of the puzzle.

> Case 5: Maryam, female, mid-twenties
>
> Maryam went to *Islamiyya* school and was a full-time housewife without occupation. Her father died when she was very young, so she was raised by her grandmother and her mother, who eventually married her off. This was because they were scared that a lot of young guys were always coming to see her. She was widely considered an attractive, decent girl until she was kidnapped by Boko Haram members on her way to the market. She was going to Monday market when she entered a taxi and was taken away at gun point in the *keke napep* (tricycle taxi). Eye witnesses say she screamed for help, but no one could help because her abductors were holding AK47 rifles. After about a year she came back with a Boko Haram husband to preach to her grandmother to follow Boko Haram teachings, but her grandmother refused. We hear that she now just follows her husband around, but most of time she is kept in captivity.

Particularly in the later years of the Boko Haram insurgency and after the kidnapping of the 276 girls from Chibok, stories of forced recruitment accompanied by atrocious violence were common. In a recent report, however, Mercy Corps (2016) suggests that most recruitment fell somewhere in between completely voluntary and entirely forced. This is an important analytical starting point for understanding the influence of coercion on recruitment not as a binary variable, but as a scale from fully free to fully coerced. Maryam's story, on this scale, is likely closer to the coercive end than most; but it is unclear how much agency Maryam retained in the months after she was abducted. The fact that she returned to convert her grandmother suggests that she internalized Boko Haram ideology, but we know little about the process by which this internalization occurred.

What we do know is that violence and coercion were part and parcel of many people's decisions to join Boko Haram (or to resist them) and that such coercion could come in many different shapes. Shehu's story, above, illustrated the role security agents could play in pushing people toward Boko Haram; equally, though, other people were likely frightened away from Boko Haram membership by the violent interventions of the Nigerian state or the vigilante youth in the Civilian Joint Task Force. As Maryam experienced, Boko Haram itself also engaged in abductions and coercion in order to swell its ranks, including the kidnapping of women and children. And coercion could sometimes take a financial form—

for example, through loan sharks who enticed young, struggling businessmen with easy loans only to demand the beneficiary join Boko Haram when the loans could not be repaid on time (Mercy Corps 2016).

Opportunism

Beyond these heavy-handed forms of forced recruitment, Boko Haram also offered more positive, opportunistic motives for joining—for example, by providing access to wealth, weapons, or influence, or with the promise of acquiring education, status, or respect, or of being feared. Boko Haram was thus a source not only of religious inspiration or social connections, but also of opportunity—opportunities to make money and advance in economic terms, but also to get access to new networks, and an opportunity for adventure. What Verkaaik (2004) has argued for Pakistan, many have told us for northern Nigeria: joining radical protest movements and even engaging in violence can sometimes, particularly prior to the act, seem fun and adventurous. With hindsight, such an argument seems bizarre given the extreme violence and destruction that resulted from the Boko Haram insurgency. But the point is that choices toward radicalization are not made with the benefit of hindsight, and they are often made with very poor and biased information and high levels of uncertainty. Choices that seem a good idea at the time may turn out to have terrible, unforeseeable consequences; but they should be evaluated and understood in the context in which they were taken, not in relation to the consequences they produced. Musa's story may be a good example to illustrate this point.

Case 6: Musa, male, mid-twenties

Musa received no formal education, and his family is poor compared with the rest of the local population. He was known to engage only in odd jobs to make ends meet. He refused to join in the farming tradition of his family. Musa's father is a peasant farmer, who is well known here in town. His father also has more than one wife, and they are living in the same house. His mother is from one of the villages around, where she was a daughter of a *tsangaya* teacher (*ulama*). According to the story, his father did not take his children to any school because he could not afford it. But he has been a very good farmer. The other siblings of Musa are also involved in farming and some other kinds of trade. Musa has recently married.

Musa was a very popular person among his peers in the neighbourhood. As he was not enrolled in any kind of school, he practically grew up on the streets, which made him well known. As a young person in the area, there were a lot of his age mates who were also unemployed and also refused to learn a trade. As such they are mostly seen around the neighbourhood sitting around, doing nothing from morning until night. When the sect Boko

Haram came and established a new centre very close to the area where they spent their time, a lot of the youths started going to the centre, out of curiosity. Also, everything the sect did then was anti-government, so a lot of these youths joined the sect for that reason.

Musa joined Boko Haram as a member after the 2009 crisis, when the members had come back from the forced exile. When they came out from hiding and came back to town, they started convincing youths like Musa to join. He was made an informer in the beginning, and later he also started doing other activities, including killing. Many people saw him with a gun.

Why did Musa join? As a result of influence from friends—because some of these friends came back from their exile and stayed in town. He saw that the friends were gaining respect in the area; so when they invited him, it did not take long for him to join. Among these friends were a lot of the members of their 'gang', who used to play together before Boko Haram. It is these same friends that came back and helped in recruiting others like Musa. One of the things that convinced him was the way his Boko Haram friends were spending money. This was especially attractive since he knew they were very poor before they joined.

With every violent incident that occurs in northern Nigeria, pundits are quick to highlight how the large population of unemployed young men is likely one of the factors that can help to explain it (Onuoha 2014). Different analysts apply slightly different mechanisms to explain this hypothetical relationship, but it is often a variation on the idea that unemployed young men are cheap to recruit, have little else to do, and have little to lose (and hence few incentives to avoid taking risks). In some ways, Musa could be seen as an example of this idea, even though I should note that the other five stories are not, and neither are the majority of the stories I have not presented here. He was unemployed and is believed to have joined because he saw his friends benefit from membership with respect and money; and after joining, he was not only seen as an informer but also observed with a gun. It may therefore be the case that Musa chose violence and radicalized because he considered it was the best option he had.

Yet this requires us to make some pretty strong assumptions about Musa's information and motives, as well as the context within which he took his decisions. First, it suggests that Musa knew exactly what he was getting into when he made the initial choice to join his friends as an informer. Maybe he did, and maybe he did not—but what he certainly could not have known is how the movement would escalate and turn increasingly violent over the years after his joining. Second, therefore, timing and context matter: in the time after the 2009 crisis when 'members had come back from forced exile', likely around 2011, Boko Haram had not yet become the full-blown insurgency notorious for kidnapping, sexual violence, and large-scale killings. It was certainly a violent organization, partly underground but primarily aiming to attack the Ni-

gerian government (as well as local enemies such as traditional leaders and Islamic preachers who spoke out against Boko Haram) in revenge for the 2009 killings. Public support for the organization was likely already waning, but many could still empathize with their anti-government stance—even if they perhaps did not support the methods. Musa chose to join *this* organization, not the organization that it would become years later. Moreover, he initially joined as an informer; we do not know how the gradual move toward violent action transpired, and how freely he chose this path, or how free he was to leave the organization if he had wished to. Finally, we do not know how informed Musa was about the activities of Boko Haram at the time. Information about Boko Haram, since 2009, has been notoriously poor, and even many locals have to rely on gossip. Musa may have known what he was getting into, but he may also have trusted the wrong rumours.

Reflection

How do people end up fighting for organizations like Boko Haram? A persistent intuition suggests that it requires 'radicalization'—that is, a process of ideological conversion toward accepting the legitimacy of violence as a tool of politics. But what does it mean to 'radicalize' in the context of northern Nigeria? Some of the stories in this chapter could resonate with conveyor-belt-like conceptions of radicalization, where indoctrination leads individuals into gradually more extremist positions, ending up with an acceptance of violence. Particularly Abdul and Aisha, who joined the organization early and for whom faith was said to be an important motivation, may have gone through a process of 'learning' about the legitimacy and violence before they engaged in it. Of course, we would need more information to assess the validity of this interpretation; but what we do know is that in the other stories, 'radicalization' appears to have taken quite a different trajectory.

Khadiya, Shehu, and Musa likely joined Boko Haram for reasons other than deep ideological conviction (friends, family, money), meaning that group membership in these cases preceded—and perhaps precipitated—ideological membership and likely also their belief in the justification of violence (if they ever reached that point). For Maryam, then, it appears likely that she was forced to join the organization before she became convinced of its ideological principles; more likely than not, she was also forced to engage in violent acts prior to believing that this was the right thing to do. Here, group membership and perhaps even violent actions may have preceded any 'radicalized' beliefs that these actions were desirable or justified.

Together, the limited evidence presented in these stories suggests that radicalization may involve various trajectories, in which the sequencing of group membership, ideological conviction, and violent action can take all kinds of shapes. Moreover, the stories suggest that radicalization can be a slow, gradual process in which causal connections are varied and complex. They are deeply contingent on changing circumstances and characterized by uncertainty, poor information, and strong irreversibilities. Musa, for example, may have been poorly informed about the consequences of Boko Haram membership, particularly as the movement transformed and became increasingly violent. Once he had joined, however, there was no turning back: leaving Boko Haram was always an incredibly dangerous choice, given that neither the group nor the Nigerian military had a record of welcoming or protecting defectors. His choice, however imperfectly informed, had thus become irreversible.

These complications inherent in decisions along trajectories into, and out of, violent organizations also suggest one final caution for the analysis of radicalization processes: the simple idea that choices to join, avoid, or resist violent organizations should be evaluated in the *specific context* within which they were taken. Over the nearly three decades that Boko Haram has existed, it has transformed fundamentally. Those who joined in the early years likely did so for very different reasons from those who joined at the peak of the insurgency, or those who may still join today. In fact, the entire meaning and requirements of 'joining' Boko Haram have likely changed over this period. Yet given the near-irreversibility of membership, particularly as the group turned increasingly violent, today the early members may engage in the same violent actions as the late-joiners. Radicalization into violent groups such as Boko Haram thus involves not only diverse motivations at a single point in time, but also variation over time as well as complex interactions between the motivations and actions of those who are inside the group.

This chapter has interpreted six stories of radicalization into Boko Haram and highlighted the importance of faith, family and friends, coercion, and opportunism in explaining them. But given the long life of the movement, its transformations, the enormous contextual shifts within which the movement has had to operate, and the diversity of its membership, this is likely only the tip of the iceberg. Collecting fresh empirical information is the most important strategy to further develop our understanding of the movement. From its inception in the early 2000s, Boko Haram has been shrouded in mystery, and even today the amount of trustworthy empirical material on the organization's history remains limited. As a consequence, perhaps, scholars have found it difficult to identify causal mechanisms behind the movement's rise and nearly impossible to evaluate, and select from, the range of structural and historical theories that have been

suggested to explain it. New empirical material is therefore sorely needed to bring progress to the debate about Boko Haram's origins, its impacts, and ways of preventing its return.

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