

Can't...? Or won't? – The Nigerian Government and the Boko Haram Conflict

Nigeria is situated in West Africa and is with approximately 177 million inhabitants the most populous country in Africa, and the eight most populous country in the world. In 2014, it became clear that in 2013, Nigeria surpassed South Africa as Africa's largest economy, with oil being a major economic drive (CIA World Factbook 2015). It further has 80,000 active military personnel, compared to Uganda's 45,000 active military personnel, and South Africa's 62,100 (International Institute for Security Studies 2015a).

However, despite this at first sight seemingly positive picture, the country has been dealing with a rebellion in the north since 2009, which carries the name Boko Haram. Boko Haram has managed to enter its sixth year of existence and it does not seem to have reduced in strength since its start. It is arguably even gaining strength, as it began seizing territory, is generating a vastly increasing civilian death toll, and started attacking Nigeria's neighbouring countries (Sergie & Johnson 2015). The government, however, after postponing the elections scheduled on February 14th, 2015 for security reasons, claimed it would defeat Boko Haram before the new elections scheduled March 28^h. And indeed they were able to make gains on Boko Haram they did not make in the years before, even recapturing Gwoza, where Boko Haram had its headquarters (Iroegbu & Andrews 2015). The question arises why the government has not managed to win the fight against Boko Haram for more than five years, but practically managed to do so in the weeks before the election.

The puzzle is translated into the following research question: "What explains Nigeria's persisting conflict with Boko Haram?" This research question is more neutral than the puzzle it proposes to investigate. The research question is less biased than the puzzle, which focuses from the outset more on the state's side. It takes a step back, so as to open up the question more to the wholeness of the conflict. A conflict in which two sides, the state and the rebel group, are in a contest with each other and the one tries to win from the other.

Or do they? And is this 'contest' paradigm a helpful, or even a correct one? David Keen, Professor of Complex Emergencies at the London School of Economics is sceptical. In

his book *Useful Enemies: When Waging Wars is More Important than Winning Them*, he states that "While there are frequently significant reasons to want to win a war [...], very often it is war itself - rather than winning - that is most useful" (Keen 2012, 92). According to him, while wars certainly can have winning as the primary priority, by no means should be assumed that this applies to every war. The reason that many wars do not seem to end is that "powerful actors (both local and international) do not want them to end" (Keen 2012, 8), because they have a "vested interest" in continuing the conflict (Keen 2012, 168). Throughout his book, Keen names a range of different interests, mechanisms and dynamics that are part of something he calls the "functions of war", which can be economic, political or psychological (Keen 2012, 10). The idea is that the war serves as an instrument to attain certain economic or political goals.

This angle might throw a different and maybe more revealing light on the Nigerian government's persisting conflict with Boko Haram. In addition, selecting the conflict between the Nigerian state and Boko Haram as a case has four other reasons. First, the case has not been studied in Keen's book. Second, a number of observations made by Keen in other cases are observed in this case, suggesting the theory might have some explanatory power. An example is the postponement of elections (Keen 2012, 238), which is what the Nigerian government did for the 2015 presidential elections. Third, the case is very recent, making it a challenge as well as contributing. Lastly, Nigeria's official language is English, which makes a range of national sources easily accessible.

Unfortunately, in his book Keen uses a relatively anecdotal approach. This is an attractive way to present the argument, but runs the risk of the precise theory remaining vague. Indeed, this is precisely what seems to be the case with this book. The theory is present throughout, but is never made exceptionally clear as a more abstract theoretical approach. Keen uses his angle as a mindset from which he writes on numerous cases, from which he then derives specific behaviour or interests that can be categorised in either economic, political or psychological functions of war. This makes it hard to take this approach and apply it to other cases, so as to test whether it can be used to explain these cases also. This is unfortunate, since the approach certainly has the potential of providing a better understanding of complex conflicts.