



Seminar on "Boko Haram and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: From Local to Global Jihad" by Associate Professor David Cook, Department of Religious Studies, Rice University, USA

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David Cook's presentation focused on the beginnings of Boko Haram and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), as well as the roots of Islam and radicalism in Nigeria.

Cook explained the history of the state of Nigeria, explaining that Nigeria was a result of three separate states being stitched together: Firstly, the state of the south, where the ethnic Ibo people live, who are predominantly Catholic; secondly, the state in the south west where the Yoruba people live, whose population is partially Christian and partially Muslim; and finally, the Hausa-Fulani people of the North who are predominantly Muslim. He highlighted that Islam is well-rooted in western Africa and has been present in northern Nigeria for over 1000 years. One defining factor of Islam in West Africa is the jihad, accomplished between 1803-1812, by the reformist Sheikh Usman dan Fodio. Dan Fodio created an empire in north-western Nigeria which was ruled by the Hausa-Fulani ethnic group which continue to occupy the area. He commented that today descendants of Dan Fodio constitute the Muslim aristocracy of Northern Nigeria.

Cook then continued to say that the defining feature of Nigeria from the 1980s until today has been its religious transformation. From 1999-2003 Sharia law was adopted in 12 northern states (Nigeria has 36 states), which was an unsuccessful attempt by the Muslim elites of the north to protect against encroaching Christian values sweeping across country from the south. The beginnings of Boko Haram can be traced back to an attack in 2004 by security forces on a group known then as the 'Nigerian Taliban,' – a group that was centered in the north-east of the country. In 2009, the group began conducting moral policing and the government retaliated by killing approximately 200 of its members as well as their leader Mohammed Yusuf in a public murder.

Cook de-constructed the recent history of Boko Haram into three stages. Firstly, the period between September 2010 and August 2011 when the group engaged in local activities, including staging a prison break, conducting morality policing, as well as revenge attacks on police. Secondly, the period from September 2011- December 2012 – a time which constituted a transformation for the group as they began utilising suicide attacks and martyrdom videos in Arabic – a sign, Cook says, that indicates some influence by larger globalist radical Muslim leaders. Cook commented that targets of these suicide attacks were usually high profile in the Nigerian capital Abuja, including police headquarters, UN headquarters and holy sites for



Christians. The third period is from December 2012 to present when Boko Haram has been contained to north-east corner of Nigeria due to the discovery of its bomb factory which has prohibited the group from continuing suicide attacks.

On the topic of AQIM, Cook said that this group was a direct descendent of the Algerian radicals that fought in the Algerian Civil war from 1990-2003. In 2007, the Salafist group which adopted the doctrine of preaching and combat, amalgamated with Al-Qaeda and began a different methodology of carrying out operations, mainly that of kidnappings, where funds came from ransom payments. These payments allowed Al-Qaeda to survive and spread in the region. In January 2012, AQIM took over Northern Mali and demonstrated to other groups in the region that it was possible for extremists to take and hold their own territory. Cook argued that despite the French intervention into Mali, AQIM will return to Northern Mali once the French withdraw.

During the discussion, one participant asked from where Boko Haram is funded. Cook responded by saying that funds come solely from Nigeria in the form of collecting taxes from parts of the population. Another participant asked whether Boko Haram was global in its recruitment of soldiers and at leadership level. He also asked whether AQIM was more trans-nationalised in comparison. Cook replied that Boko Haram is solely Nigeria-focused and not a globalist radical movement, his evidence being that attacks are still within Nigerian borders. Cook said there is no proof that any non-Nigerian person has ever influenced Boko Haram. To the second question, Cook responded that AQIM, unlike Boko Haram, has many foreign followers, though its popularity has waned in the recent past due to the crisis in Syria. Cook hypothesised that when the French leave Mali, the popularity of AQIM will again increase. Another participant asked about the Nigerian diaspora and whether Boko Haram had attracted Nigerians to join the cause of Boko Haram. Cook answered that this was not the case, most likely because Boko Haram had failed to create a political movement in drawing upon shared grievances in the general Nigerian population. A participant asked where Boko Haram was getting their weapons. Cook answered that most weapons come from the police as the police often sell their weapons. Cook also said that, due to the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, as well as the porous borders between states, weapons are easily transported to Nigeria and made accessible to the population.