

Peace



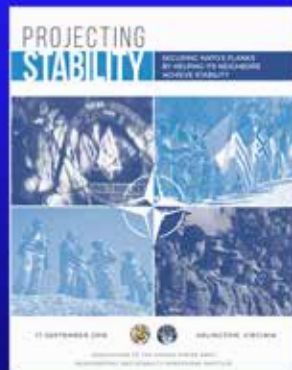
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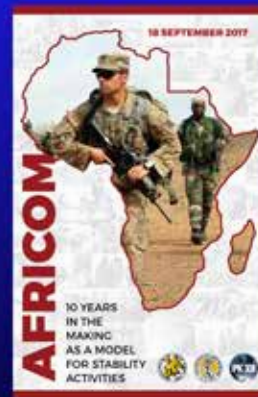
2018



2015



2017



2016



2014



STRATEGIC STABILITY SEMINAR ANNUAL SERIES

Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses

by Whitney Grespin



In her first book “Women and the War on Boko Haram: Wives, Weapons, Witnesses”, Hilary Matfess documents the origins, evolution, state, and future potential of Boko Haram, paying particular attention to the gender perspective through which women have been observers, participants, and mitigators to the conflict in Nigeria. A quote from an interview with Governor Kashim Shettima of Borno State, succinctly captures the comprehensive nature of the requirements to combat the group’s ideological and military advances: ‘If someone says there is a military solution only to Boko Haram, they are being economical with the truth.’

Matfess sets the scene for the book through her treatment of the roots of the group and the origins – and incentives – for its expansion. Her discussion of the sociopolitical environment that eventually grew to host Boko Haram solidly grounds the group in its local context. Matfess noted,¹ “Before sharia was officially implemented across the north, an estimated three in four cases were adjudicated by local courts, many of which were governed by customary laws that often included sharia.”² Instead of supplanting the corruption and patronage networks that dominated Nigeria’s political sphere, sharia merely provided another version of patrimonialism.³ The push for sharia was, in essence, a demand for more responsive governance.⁴ This fact - as well as that many of Boko Haram’s precursors held similar grievances against the inadequacies of existing local political and religious elites – is notable. This supports the assertion that desire for a consistent and reliable rule of law should be prioritized by those combating Boko Haram, and speaks to the importance of a whole-of-government approach to addressing the societal ills that allow for the sustainment of such groups as Boko Haram.

Matfess’s attention to in- and post-conflict gender fragilities is particularly relevant to the current interests of the USG regarding the application of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda. As March 2018’s Joint Publication 3-07.3 Peace Operations doctrine explains, “Women, peace, and security is an internationally recognized term that includes protective and participatory dimensions and addresses the disproportionate and unique impact of conflict on women. Sexual violence, and other gender-based violence, frequently occurs during conflict and in fragile societies. It is usually, but not always, directed against



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women and girls... Gender issues also include women’s participation in a nation’s political, economic, and security sectors and institutions, as women are vital to establishing peace and maintaining future stability.”

Although addressing the victimization of women at the hands of Boko Haram, Matfess also focuses on women’s agency, roles, and options for self-determination in the group’s hierarchy once absorbed (willingly or otherwise) into the group structure. This recognition of the agency of women – whether in a small subgroup or society writ large – is critical, given that studies have demonstrated that advancing women’s status in society is one of the most effective ways of preventing a relapse into conflict.⁵

Further, Matfess’s field experience positioned her uniquely to explore avenues of inquiry on the ground, which would not

have been accessible through remote interviews alone. Her observation that humanitarian intervention outside a few urban pockets is next to impossible given the extent to which the insurgents still control territory and maintain the capacity to engage in raids and attacks, despite reported Nigerian state military gains,⁶ is insightful as “Protection here is a huge issue, because the insurgents kill, the soldiers kill, there is massive displacement [of the civilian population].”⁷ Matfess’s field work provides valuable insight into a largely non-permissive environment.

Matfess thoroughly treats a myriad of challenges to affected communities in Chapter 6, but chooses to view the future in a positive light given that, “The post-conflict environment presents not only an array of challenges, but also a valuable opportunity to lay the groundwork for gender equality through thoughtful, inclusive programming.”⁸ The concluding chapter continues, “Although the post-conflict era is not a tabula rasa in which history, cultural practices and political economies are erased, reforms made in this period can provide the foundation for more stable, less oppressive societies. Disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes, legislative reform and transitional justice programmes provide valuable venues for these reforms to be implemented.”⁹ Truer words have not been written.

Overall, this book provides even-handed analysis of a breadth of issues, including a discussion on the merits of Boko Haram’s organization through the provision of social and educational services – even if the efforts are self-serving and propagandistic – thus allowing practitioners to understand the forces that must be equalized to disincentivize participation in similar groups. The further exploration of broader sociopolitical and economic factors that plague Internally Displaced Persons and analysis of continued marginalization, offers lessons valuable not only in Nigeria, but in complex environments worldwide.

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Notes:

¹ Matfess 37

² Kendhammer, Brandon (2016) *Muslims Talking Politics: Framing Islam, Democracy, and Law in Northern Nigeria*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.

³ Matfess 37

⁴ Kendhammer 2016

⁵ Matfess 186

⁶ Matfess 180

⁷ Interview with UNHCR field staff, Maiduguri, Borno State, June 2016.

⁸ Matfess 185

⁹ Matfess 201