

Research Brief

# Education, Islamic Learning, and Northeast Nigeria's *Boko Haram* Conflict



# The issues at stake

Conflict related to *Boko Haram* and its splinter groups has ravaged northeast Nigeria and its neighbouring countries for well over a decade now. Destruction, bloodshed, and mass displacement have marked the region for years to come. The youthful base of the insurgency, as well as its high-profile attacks on secular schools and mass kidnappings of students have prompted questions about the role of education-related grievances for the conflict, as well as about the place of education for building lasting peace and addressing historic injustices.

In a global context of widespread fears over Islamic militancy, Islamic schools have often uncritically been declared 'breeding grounds' for terrorism, with little attention paid to the ways in which violent conflict affects such schools and their potential to help prevent conflict or contribute to peacebuilding.

This research brief steps into this gap. It explores what role disenchantment with secular education played in the recruitment of insurgency members, and to what extent critical views were nurtured and perpetuated during the insurgency.

The brief argues that their experiences of the conflict led many former members to consider secular education to be a desirable asset. Provisions need to be made accordingly.

The brief also scrutinises the widespread belief that Qur'anic schools (*sangayya*) were prime recruitment grounds for the insurgency. While our findings mostly confirm a large Qur'anic student presence among the insurgents, we highlight both the pervasiveness of forced recruitment and the harmful consequences for this education system of generalised suspicion, and call for more sympathetic approaches, notably in the context of crumbling community support structures, worsened by largescale impoverishment, and the breakdown of former rural livelihoods.

Finally, the brief surveys how experiences of the conflict have affected people's perspectives on education, including different types of Islamic education. We document increased demand for locally provided education that combines secular subjects with a broadened Islamic curriculum and recommend policies facilitating this.

## Methodology and data

This research was a collaboration between Prof Yagana Bukar at the University of Maiduguri and Dr Hannah Hoechner at the University of East Anglia, with assistance from Ali Galadima and Sadiu Idris Salisu. It was funded by the British Academy. Data for this brief come from a total of **7 weeks of fieldwork** conducted in July-September 2021 and April 2024 in Borno (Maiduguri and Bama) and Yobe (Damaturu and Buni Yadi), the States most heavily affected by the conflict.

We conducted a total of:

- **17 interviews and group conversations with former insurgents**
- **23 interviews and group conversations with Islamic teachers**
- **10 interviews and group conversations with parents**
- **7 group conversations with Islamic school students**
- **18 key informant interviews**

**7 WEEKS**  
of fieldwork

**75**  
interviews and  
conversations



# How former members view education

Much public and media attention has focused on the insurgents' apparent hostility towards secular education, starting with scrutiny of insurgency leader Muhammad Yusuf's preaching against the permissibility of secular education, which earned his movement the nickname '*Boko Haram*' or, as it is commonly translated, 'Western education is forbidden'. High-profile attacks on secular schools such as the massacre of 59 teenage boys at the Federal Government College Buni Yadi, Yobe State, in February 2014, and mass kidnappings of students, including 276 schoolgirls from the Government Girls' Secondary School Chibok, Borno State, in April 2014, furthered perceptions of the insurgency being fuelled by opposition to secular education.

While Muhammad Yusuf's rejection of secular education resonated with some of our interviewees, opposition to secular education was not discussed as a major factor driving recruitment. When making sense of this it is important to know that most of our respondents joined the insurgency during its expansionary phase (2013-15), when many members were conscripted by force and by when many of the original members had been arrested or killed by security forces. Our respondents mostly discussed material incentives, perceptions of the insurgents as doing 'God's work' (*aikin Allah*), the pull of

family members and peers, and fear of retaliation as the reasons why people joined the insurgency. Forced recruitment was another key theme. This largely corroborates the findings of other researchers (e.g., Mercy Corps, 2016; Mustapha & Meagher, 2020; Nagarajan et al., 2018).

What is more, secular knowledge occupied an ambiguous position within the insurgency. The practical and tactical requirements of running an armed insurrection meant that people with relevant knowledge and skills (e.g., computer skills, English language skills, medical training) were often solicited and enjoyed high status among the insurgents, even if that was at odds with proclaimed ideology. Most of our respondents concluded that secular education was an advantageous asset and sought it for themselves and/or their children.

Our respondents' views of education were also shaped by their experience of having been led to believe in an ideology they later discovered to be misguided. While some were reluctant as a result to engage with education altogether, most argued that being well educated could protect people against indoctrination and manipulation in the future.

Furthermore, our research found that personal connections to individuals with secular education played an important role for nurturing positive

views of this education system. Respondents explained that not knowing anyone with secular education personally had made them receptive to skeptical discourses. Similarly, several respondents highlighted how their views on secular education had changed after meeting and engaging with people who had such education. Reconstruction efforts should build on this insight by facilitating exchange and connection between people of different education backgrounds.

Finally, respondents paid close attention to the actual uses to which secular education could be put, and remarked on instances where it enabled social status (e.g., within the insurgency) or facilitated social mobility (e.g., by opening up job opportunities). Respondents also acknowledged however that many graduates struggle to find meaningful employment. This highlights that to avoid future disenchantment, education interventions must pay close attention to whether the skills they impart can indeed be translated into meaningful opportunities.

**“Opposition to secular education was not discussed as a major factor driving recruitment.”**

# Sangayya schools as recruitment grounds?

Qur'anic or *sangayya* schools where male students (*almajirai*) come to live with a teacher (*malam*) to study the Qur'an, often depending on charity to meet their daily needs, have frequently been considered key recruitment grounds for the insurgency. Our research participants mostly confirmed that *sangayya* students and teachers made up a significant share of insurgency members, while also highlighting that the insurgents recruited members from a range of educational backgrounds as well as among those without any education. What is more, many *almajirai* found themselves inside the insurgency not of their own volition. Our research suggests that *almajirai*, like their counterparts in secular schools, have been particularly vulnerable to forced recruitment post-2011. Our respondents had witnessed mass kidnappings of *sangayya* students from their schools, notably in rural areas occupied by *Boko Haram*.

Insurgents also attacked *sangayya* schools and their teachers for presumably teaching the 'wrong' Islamic knowledge, and to silence *malamai* speaking up against them. The religious practices commonly associated with the *sangayya* system of education (*Warsh* recitation, use of wooden boards/*allo*, drinking

washed-off verses/*rubutun sha*, etc.) were mostly dismissed as backward and forbidden within the insurgency. This evidence cautions against assuming too comfortable a relationship between the insurgents and the *sangayya* system.

This does not diminish the power of perceptions of such links though. Indeed, a key theme emerging from our research is that the view that *sangayya* schools supported the insurgency has seriously eroded trust in them, with tangible consequences. Respondents highlighted how conflating the *sangayya* system with *Boko Haram* made *sangayya* students and teachers vulnerable to violence by the security forces, with many *sangayya* students being harassed, detained, and even killed, notably during the early phases of the insurgency (see also Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Going forward, it will be important for policy makers to steer clear of simplistic victim/perpetrator dichotomies that risk eroding empathy for the other. Trust building exercises between *sangayya* school stakeholders and the security forces can help safeguard against rights abuses in the future.



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# How the conflict affected *sangayya* schools

Historically, many Qur'anic schools were embedded in the rural economy, with farming being a key source of livelihood for teachers and students. With many schools and teachers being displaced from rural areas due to the insecurity, these livelihood structures have also broken down. Similarly, Qur'anic schools have historically been embedded in seasonal migration circuits where urban schools absorbed rural youths during the agriculturally idle dry season. We found limited evidence of such migration circuits surviving the conflict. Several teachers told us that they were reluctant today to accept students/aspiring teachers without a proper referral and had themselves received lukewarm welcomes when engaging in such migration. If we accept that seasonal migration circuits served as a safety valve releasing pressure off rural households during times of scarcity, we should be concerned about their breakdown.

Community support for *sangayya* schools has also declined because of both mistrust and widespread impoverishment. The teachers in our study found it more difficult than before to find accommodation and assistance for themselves and their students. *Almajirai* struggle today to find enough to eat from begging. Teachers who historically lived off support received in exchange for providing spiritual services and contributions from their students' parents, reported such income drying up.

Parents from communities that had previously relied heavily on the *sangayya* system expressed new reservations, highlighting the risk of children being kidnapped or led astray, or going hungry, and preferred to keep them close-by, leading to a decline in full-time enrolments. The Qur'anic teachers in our study confirmed that most of their students nowadays are day students living with their parents.

The bigger questions these changes raise are about the capacity of the *sangayya* system to offer a way forward in constrained circumstances to poor rural families as well as to youths with limited prospects within the formal economy. Historically, and notably during the post-independence period, the *sangayya* system has been relatively open to even the poorest members of society and those without strong networks. It is questionable to what extent the *sangayya* system can still provide a viable option to those with few alternatives available to them, given the erosion of support structures and generally difficult economic situation. It also remains to be seen to what extent its open/inclusive ethos can recover from the crisis of trust unleashed by the conflict. For policy makers, this raises the challenge of providing alternative employment opportunities for those with only Qur'anic knowledge who may no longer see a future in teaching *sangayya* students.



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# What education for a lasting peace?

The overwhelming majority of our respondents reported an increased interest in all forms of education/knowledge in the aftermath of the conflict and argued that it was best for children to receive both religious and secular education. Both were deemed helpful to protect against future conflict, including by 'enlightening' young people, making it more difficult to mislead them in future, by instilling discipline and keeping young people busy, thereby preventing problematic behaviours (such as making the wrong friends), and finally by opening up economic opportunities (see Coinco & Morris, 2017 whose findings echo ours).

Schools that combined secular with religious knowledge, such as integrated *Islamiyya* schools, were popular as were arrangements allowing children to attend different educational institutions throughout the course of the day (e.g., secular education in the morning, and *Islamiyya* or Qur'anic education in the afternoon and/or evening). The few parents in our study who enrolled their children only in *sangayya* schools were mostly open to them acquiring secular education afterwards, highlighting the importance of facilitating entry into the secular education system for over-age students, e.g., through accelerated programmes for older children/youths.

Many of our respondents considered Islamic education an integral part of ensuring lasting peace and considered sound religious knowledge important for ensuring future resilience against indoctrination. For many of our respondents, this meant moving beyond memorisation of the Qur'an to ensure young people understand its translation/meaning so as to be protected against radical interpretations. This desire for a broader range of Islamic subject goes some way in explaining the popularity of *Islamiyya* schools.

Our respondents valued secular education for its promise of opening up economic opportunities, for facilitating participation in 'modern life' and the use of technology, and for enabling people to move elsewhere and mingle with others. That being said, many of our respondents also stated that they didn't have the money needed for their children to successfully pursue secular education, referring to some of the less visible costs of schooling, such as exam fees, and expenses for shoes, uniforms and books. Several respondents, notably those who had experienced graduate unemployment themselves or in their family, also raised concerns over the uncertain payoffs of secular education in terms of actual income opportunities.



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# Policy recommendations

**1**

Education policy makers need to ensure that education provision is genuinely free and sufficient to meet increased demand. This requires adequate resourcing.

**2**

Policy makers need to facilitate young people's acquisition of both secular and religious knowledge by providing adequate support for institutions offering integrated education (*Islamiyya* schools; Qur'anic schools teaching secular subjects). Clarifying the responsibilities of and improving planning and coordination between different policy bodies tasked with supporting/overseeing Islamic education will allow for greater synergies and better results. To facilitate trust and cooperation, it is crucial that Islamic schools retain a say in all decisions concerning them.

**3**

Curriculum content needs to address concerns about employability and broad religious learning. Curricula must be designed to match future income opportunities, for example by including vocational skills. Policy makers should seize the opportunity offered by heightened interest in broadened Islamic curricula to provide training opportunities and relevant curriculum resources to Islamic schools to facilitate students' acquisition of sound religious knowledge and increase their capacity to engage critically with religious arguments/evidence.

**4**

Policy makers should facilitate the upskilling and redeployment of *sangayya* graduates. A certification system should be put in place that recognises their Qur'anic knowledge. Policy makers should double down on efforts to provide opportunities for such graduates to broaden their Islamic knowledge so as to become eligible for teaching roles in integrated/*Islamiyya* schools. Lateral entry into the secular education system should also be facilitated for over-age students, e.g., through accelerated/condensed programmes for older children/youths.

**5**

Activities designed to encourage exchange and understanding between people of different education backgrounds, and between members of different government institutions and *sangayya* school stakeholders, can help increase social cohesion, acceptance of secular education and empathy and respect for *almajirai* and their teachers.

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May 2024

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<https://devresearch.uea.ac.uk/project/exploring-the-nexus-between-faith-based-education-and-violent-conflict-islamic-education-and-northeast-nigerias-boko-haram-crisis/>



Financial support: British Academy "Humanities and Social Sciences Tackling Global Challenges" grant