

Daniel E. Agbibo, **Mobility, Mobilization, and Counter/Insurgency: The Routes of Terror in an African Context**, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022, 236 pp., \$29.95 (paperback), \$70.00 (hardcover).

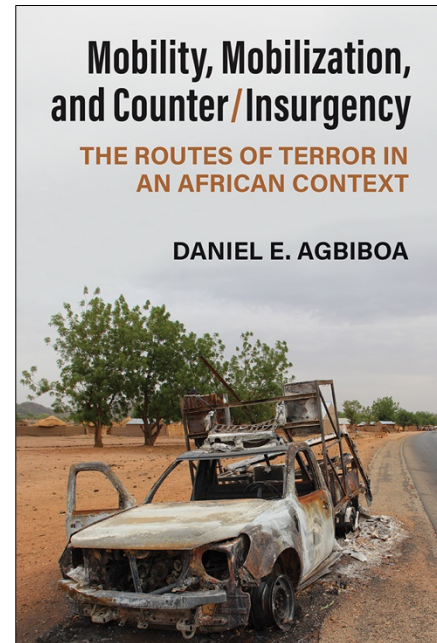
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Rudyard Kipling once observed that “when a nation is lost, the underlying cause of the collapse is always that she cannot handle her transport” (p. 1). Although Kipling may not have had Nigeria in mind, the notorious corruption of Nigeria’s elite (with its inability to govern and control mobility in conflict zones) and the rise of the Boko Haram insurgency (with its ability to challenge the static nature of the modern state) illustrate these links between power, authority, and mobility.

Mobility is central to Daniel Agbibo’s analysis of Nigeria’s security challenges in his recent book, **Mobility, Mobilization, and Counter/Insurgency: The Routes of Terror in an African Context**. In light of the geopolitical situation in the Lake Chad Basin, a region where fixed borders have been imposed on nomadic peoples and their mobile lifestyles (p. 9), Agbibo examines how new forms of transportation and mobility defy territorial perceptions of identity and lead to a search for new communities (p. 14). Focusing on one such organization that relies on community ties, Boko Haram, the author describes how the mobility of motorcycle (*achaba*) drivers and Koranic school students (*almajirai*) created “fertile ground” for their mobilization into Boko Haram jihadism and transnational insurgency.

As hard as it is to believe, it was the motorcycle helmet law, rather than Mohammad Yusuf’s religious sermons or the harsh economic conditions of the 2000s, that transformed Boko Haram into a terrorist organization. Using the conflict spiral model, Agbibo demonstrates how and why the arbitrary and often brutal enforcement of this law, which ultimately restricted the mobility of many *achaba* drivers, exacerbated existing grievances and frequently triggered retaliatory actions. Agbibo argues that Boko Haram exploited and channeled this new form of resentment against the “unjust, morally corrupt, and violent” Nigerian state into political action (p. 88). Moreover, by carefully blending local histories and global aspirations, Boko Haram gave “urban youth with blocked social mobility and limited capacity to aspire” a sense of identity as well as the opportunity to earn a living and gain societal respect (p. 57). In return, the *achaba* drivers’ skills and local knowledge helped Boko Haram build an effective and highly mobile force that was able to travel long distances and launch frequent attacks on police officers, politicians, and the ordinary citizens who dared to criticize it.

In this context, violence stemmed not only from the mobilization of Boko Haram but also from the immobilization of ordinary Nigerians by both state and nonstate actors. Caught between the Boko Haram



insurgency and the Nigerian security forces' counterinsurgency efforts that turned life into "a state of permanent exception and police action" (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 38), the residents of northeast Nigeria were continuously subjected to acts of intimidation, violence, and extortion by soldiers, police officers, progovernment militias, and terrorists. The failure of the authorities to protect the civilian populations exemplifies the "predatory nature of the postcolonial state" and raises further questions about "governance without government" in contemporary Africa (p. 128). At the same time, however, Agbiboa's examination of the state's ever-increasing controls on mobility—especially his extensive research on roadblocks, security checks, police interrogations, and border crossings—demonstrates the extent to which space, access, and movement can be politicized and contested even by weak states with porous "borders haphazardly drawn by European colonialists" (p. 120).

*Mobility, Mobilization, and Counter/Insurgency* contributes to the "new mobilities paradigm" (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 208) by using a non-Western case to study the politics of mobility, borders, and transnational identities by drawing attention to the effects of immobilization and examining how a particular mode of transportation (the motorcycle) produced new ways of traveling, socializing, working, fighting, and interacting. Agbiboa's subjects—whether they be state authorities, nonstate armed actors, or ordinary citizens—perceive mobility as both a constructive force and a threat. As they negotiate (and navigate) mobilities, they experience injustice, frustration, and indiscriminate violence that sometimes result in "a culture of resistance" (p. 36). However, nonstate actors also find ways to travel freely and learn to take advantage of trade networks and the liminal spaces where the state is unable (or unwilling) to exercise its authority.

While analyzing these "routes" of armed conflict, Agbiboa does not dismiss the "roots" of revolt and terrorism in northeast Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin (p. 6). Tracing the *almajirai's* progression "from alms to arms" (p. 76) in chapter 2, he points out the social and economic factors that led these "mobile yet stuck males" (p. 74) to turn to nonstate armed actors, rather than state authorities, for protection and employment. However, perhaps even more significant is Agbiboa's use of ethnographic methods such as in-depth interviews, oral histories, and informal conversations to explore patterns of movement and nonmovement. For social scientists who are used to static and fixed entities, Agbiboa's analysis provides surprising insight into individual experiences with (im)mobilization as well as the daily struggle of life in a conflict zone. His interviews of "mobile subjects on the move" (p. 28) and his immersive and theoretically grounded field research help the reader understand the currency of certain coping mechanisms in response to escalating conflict, immobilization, vigilante action, and the difficult economic conditions in northeast Nigeria. In this regard, *Mobility, Mobilization, and Counter/Insurgency* fills an important lacuna in conflict and counter/insurgency literature.

Agbiboa argues that the logic of mobility and mobilization is "generalizable to a broad range of conflict zones" (p. 173), but it is unclear if he is attempting to present an overarching theory of the contested (and politicized) nature of mobility when "all the world seems to be on the move" (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 207). One cannot help but wonder how far Agbiboa's theory will travel and whether his analysis of and questions about mobility and socioeconomic and political liminality will look different as they move beyond certain borders: Will scholars hit roadblocks when they apply his insights to the armed mobilization of the Kurds in Turkey, for instance? While it is clear that Boko Haram's irredentist claims, coupled with the porous borders of the Lake Chad region, help its members recruit fighters, smuggle weapons, launch attacks, and flee in the face of danger, there is little discussion as to whether this theory can account for the motives and actions of

nonterritorial transnational insurgent groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, whose attacks are not concentrated on the same region. Further research and analysis of these mobile subjects in terms of their encounters with terrorists, bureaucrats, and security forces is necessary in order to better understand contemporary insurgencies from a mobility/mobilization perspective.

Despite its regional focus, *Mobility, Mobilization, and Counter/Insurgency* will be of considerable interest to scholars who study “new wars” (Kaldor, 1999, p. 84) or post-Cold War conflicts where the boundaries between combatants and civilians are blurred. By shedding light on the issue of mobility, conducting extensive fieldwork, and creating a rich, detailed narrative, Agbiboa’s work is a timely attempt to capture the complex (and often messy) dynamics of the ongoing conflict in the Lake Chad Basin. Whether or not this book offers generalizable insights, its findings present a novel approach to the study of insurgent movements.

### References

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