



## Dandal Kura: A narrative to challenge Boko Haram

David L. Smith

**To cite this article:** David L. Smith (2016) Dandal Kura: A narrative to challenge Boko Haram, African Security Review, 25:2, 215-217, DOI: [10.1080/10246029.2016.1158388](https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2016.1158388)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2016.1158388>



Published online: 24 Mar 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 81



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## VIEW FROM THE FIELD

# Dandal Kura: A narrative to challenge Boko Haram

David L. Smith

On 28 January 2015, the new radio station Dandal Kura – which means ‘the big public meeting place’ in the Kanuri language – began broadcasting in Kanuri and Hausa on shortwave from studios in northern Nigeria. Shepherding and helping to develop the station is one of the most exciting and fulfilling radio projects I have had the pleasure of being associated with.

Kanuri is a language that few outside of the Lake Chad Basin have heard of, yet it is spoken by an estimated 9 million people – more than four times the entire population of Botswana – in an area that includes parts of Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria and Niger. Kanuri is also the language most used by people claiming an affiliation with Boko Haram, who refer to themselves as the ‘Islamic State of West Africa Province’. Until recently, Boko Haram held a virtual monopoly on the narrative heard by Kanuri speakers throughout the Lake Chad Basin.

Important in numbers as the language is, the international boundaries it traverses relegates it to minority status, with few of the perks that official languages receive in most parts of the world. There are no dedicated Kanuri-language newspapers, television stations or radio stations belonging to either state or commercial entities in any of the four countries in which the language is spoken. In Nigeria’s north-western Borno State, part of the Kanuri heartland, the government’s radio station has some Kanuri-language programming, but it occupies only a small part of the broadcast day compared to the dominant languages of Hausa and English. Even if the Kanuri content was to be increased dramatically, the reach of the broadcaster is limited to the state and understandably does not target people living in neighbouring states.

Boko Haram does not recognise the borders between the countries of the region. This is in part due to historical reasons – Kanuri speakers became Muslims in the 11th century, with the Lake Chad area becoming a powerful empire called Kanem-Bornu. The insurgency in the region is part of Boko Haram’s attempt to revive this empire. Of course, Boko Haram’s narrative of reviving a once great Muslim empire clouds the terror, violence, death and lawlessness that dominate their activity.

Operating in an area where infrastructure is limited, education is poor at best for most, and credible information is hard to come by (and gainful employment even harder), it is not surprising that Boko Haram finds an audience, unwilling as it may be, for its message. A researcher at the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies, Anneli Botha, says that police brutality against certain groups is a cause of radicalisation. She refers in particular to the assassination of Boko Haram’s founding leader, Mohammed Yusuf, by Nigerian Forces.<sup>1</sup> The often heavy hand of security forces during encounters with civilians, particularly following an attack by Boko Haram, also tends to have the undesired outcome of serving as a recruitment tool for the insurgents.

Add to this mix endemic corruption at the highest levels, immunity from prosecution and a long history of bad governance in the region, and the outcome is unlikely to be peace and

stability – let alone progress. It is clear that the need for dialogue, a sense of belonging, and the opportunity to talk about how to make things better has never been greater.

Radio is king in Africa; and perhaps it is the king of kings in the Lake Chad Basin. There are few people in even the most remote parts of the region who do not have access to a radio. In most cases, that radio will be an inexpensive, battery-operated, made-in-China multiband unit capable of picking up FM, MW and shortwave. The radios are used, for the most part, to listen to international broadcasters transmitting programmes on shortwave in Hausa. For most of the Kanuri-speaking population, Hausa is a second language and the Hausa services, notably the BBC and Deutsche Welle, are followed closely. Listenership is high simply because local information is hard to come by on local radio; there is almost no content in Kanuri, and few take the content of most of the state broadcasters seriously as it tends to glorify the senior politicians, who keep a tight grip on what can and cannot be said on the air.

What the international broadcasters do not do, however, is target the millions who live in the Lake Chad Basin. Hausa is spoken from the Atlantic to the Indian ocean by over 200 million people, including many millions who speak it as a second language. The shortwave services in Hausa target, for the most part, the greater Hausa community, the two largest groupings being in Nigeria and Niger.

The plan to create a radio service targeting Kanuri speakers throughout the Lake Chad Basin grew out of the knowledge that this community did not have its own voice on the air, that Boko Haram was using Kanuri to get its message across and, equally importantly, that Kanuri speakers were already listening to shortwave broadcasts in Hausa in large numbers.

The result of this plan, Dandal Kura, is a work in progress. Thanks to support from the international community, funding has been made available to hire and train local journalists, including correspondents from all four countries in the region, as well as hiring transmission time on a shortwave transmitter.

Beginning in January 2015 with one hour of original programming daily, Dandal Kura is now on air for six hours per day, and word of its existence is spreading like wildfire. Thanks to social media, mobile phones and SMSs, listeners in Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria, Niger and beyond – most notably Sudan, where there is a considerable Kanuri population – are almost unanimous in their praise for the station. The most frequently recurring comment from listeners is one of thanks for making radio available in their mother tongue.

The narrative that Dandal Kura is creating is one of inclusion. When Boko Haram attacks a village in Nigeria's Adamawa state, the Dandal Kura correspondent in the state capital Yola files a piece directly with the newsroom, allowing, for the first time, listeners throughout the region to know that they are not alone, fostering the development of a kind of solidarity. People claiming to be members of Boko Haram are contacting Dandal Kura too – that they are listening is good, as listening is a first and vital step in changing the ways in which people think and react. Including opposing viewpoints not only allows all parties in a conflict to challenge rumours, but also allows for the possibility of finding common ground amongst the belligerents.

Dandal Kura will not defeat insurgency on its own, but by providing a space for the larger Kanuri-speaking community to look at and consider options on how, together, a plan can be created to bring stability, peace and eventually prosperity to the region, an element of hope enters the equation where it had, until recently, been hard to find.

And it is not just Boko Haram that needs to listen. Boko Haram does not exist in a vacuum. It operates in a dysfunctional zone. A regional stabilisation force – the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), operating with a mandate from the African Union (AU) – is deploying

throughout the region with the aim of enforcing peace. This underfunded and overstretched entity will try to achieve what national security forces on their own, in their own countries, have not been able to do. One of their greatest weaknesses is that the forces have been drawn, for the most part, from elements that do not have the full confidence of the people they are mandated to protect.

A new phase in the development and expansion of Dandal Kura is to engage directly with the MNJTF. This engagement involves opening up lines of communication between Kanuri speakers in the region and the military personnel they will be seeing in their villages over the coming months and possibly years. The ability of most military operations to communicate with local populations has been mediocre at best. A role Dandal Kura sees itself playing is one of moderator – through understanding the concerns, fears and challenges of both the civilian population and the military, the possibility arises of creating an understanding that leads to trust and, ultimately, success in stabilising the region.

As anybody familiar with peacekeeping knows, stability does not last if the reasons for the insurgency are not addressed. Only once stability has been replaced with progress can we be reasonably certain that the conditions which allowed Boko Haram to thrive no longer exist. Such conditions require buy-in from those concerned – the Kanuri community of the Lake Chad Basin. They will have to see and believe in a change in the way they are governed. They will need to see and believe that they have been neither forgotten nor ignored by their respective capital cities. Dandal Kura gives them a platform to express these concerns, and to come up with some home-grown solutions. If the politicians are listening too, then we're on the right track.

### Dandal Kura: details and information

Dandal Kura can be heard on shortwave frequencies, in the mornings between 6:00 and 8:00 a.m. (on 7 415 kHz in the 41-metre band) and between 8:00 and 9:00 a.m. (on 15 480 kHz in the 19-metre band), and in the evenings between 7:00 and 10:00 p.m. (on 12 050 kHz in the 25-metre band). All times are local for Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon (GMT+1). Dandal Kura is also on Facebook and Twitter, @dandalkura. Some Dandal Kura programmes can be found on its website, [www.dandalkura.com](http://www.dandalkura.com)

### Notes

1. Peter Fabricius, *Known unknowns and the fight against violent extremism*, 2016, <https://www.issafrica.org/iss-today/known-unknowns-and-the-fight-against-violent-extremism> (accessed 9 March 2016)

### Notes on Contributor



**David L. Smith** is media advisor for Dandal Kura and Director of Okapi Consulting in Johannesburg, South Africa ([davidokapi@gmail.com](mailto:davidokapi@gmail.com)).