

Nigeria's Boko Haram Threat: How the EU should act

Ola Bello

>> Insurgent activity carried out by terrorist group Boko Haram (BH) in northern Nigeria continues to escalate. This has prompted many international actors – including the European Union (EU) – to consider urgent measures towards the country. Significant gaps exist in the knowledge and analysis of the evolving situation, both on the part of international actors and the Nigerian government itself. This represents a key short-term challenge which must be addressed. In addition, proposals for upgraded EU counter-insurgency assistance to Nigeria are currently being examined. However, the EU's long-standing approach of using development aid to foster more transparent and effective use of Nigerian resources remains fundamentally sound. A shift to hard counter-insurgency support beyond the necessary tasks of strengthening intelligence-gathering and law-enforcement capacities must be avoided. Such an approach risks alienating the EU from its core comparative advantages in 'soft' social and development interventions.

The new EU Sahel Strategy (ESS) – focused primarily on security risks in adjoining states – did not foresee BH's potential regional reach as a central concern. Following BH's recent growth – both in reach and capacity – it is crucial that the EU response is based on a clearer understanding of Nigeria's evolving security situation. The EU must arrive at an accurate assessment, before tailoring its approach to influence micro-level dynamics in Nigeria's north. At the same time, it must offer an enhanced strategic outreach to the country, transcending immediate counter-insurgency contingencies.

HIGHLIGHTS

- The threat posed by terrorist group Boko Haram is fuelling concerns about Nigeria's stability and risks to regional security.
- To help counter Boko Haram, the EU must maintain its approach as a development 'enabler'.
- A firmer EU–Nigeria strategic engagement is also key to addressing Nigeria's internal challenges and supporting implementation of the EU Sahel Strategy.

»»»»» **A DARKENING OUTLOOK**

Once a picture of controlled chaos, the situation developing in northern Nigeria appears to be spinning out of the government's grasp. Incompetence in the security services is exacerbated by the many competing narratives of BH's motives and support systems. The official line – that there exists a formal alliance between BH and international jihadists (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Somalia's Al Shabaab) – is entirely at odds with one view held by certain sections of the populace: that part of the state security apparatus is complicit in terror attacks for self-serving ends. Some sceptical analysts see the federal government's incompetent response to BH as linked to desires within the security establishment for increased national security spending. Some even allude to plots to secure a second presidential term for incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan by exacerbating national security threats.

Regardless of these differences, many recent EU policy discussions have focused on potential forms of assistance to the Nigerian security sector. Yet the West African country does not neatly lend itself to generalised insights, as proven by the existing knowledge on Security Sector Reform (SSR) as a counter-insurgency strategy. Elsewhere, SSR support has focused on active or retired military personnel and their prospective roles in counter-insurgency as a possible entry point for international action. Policy interventions based on this approach are clearly unsuitable in Nigeria: a whole generation of top Nigerian security officials have long viewed early retirement as an opportunity to expand private business interests by utilising government contacts and connections. Part of the EU's challenge is to re-examine the role of security players in causing insecurity, and to consider this alongside other drivers of conflict emerging in the changing Nigerian environment.

POLITICAL RUPTURE

A number of factors have clearly caused the deteriorating security situation in Nigeria. It is vital to

distil their lessons for the next round of EU and international interventions. First, the response of Nigerian law-enforcement authorities to BH's activities has been heavy-handed. The 2009 military crackdown in which Muhammed Yusuf, then head of BH, and his followers were brutally confronted by the police and army Joint Task Forces (JTF) marked a watershed in the group's already-escalating violence. Initially detained, then extrajudicially executed in police custody, Yusuf's demise fuelled local sympathy towards his sect. Other extreme tactics in the pursuit of BH have also alienated segments of Nigeria's northern elites.

A key part of the current picture relates to how a fringe of northern political and security actors have begun supporting BH's terrorism. They have creatively co-opted it to exert pressure on the federal administration, which is led by an inexperienced southern president. These groups, composed of opportunistic coalitions of politicians, serving and retired security officials, and a clutch of similarly disaffected elites, claim to act to defend the economically dispossessed masses in the north.

That a significant section of the mainstream northern business and political elites, former soldiers and security operatives are so dissatisfied that they would subvert state security represents a sea-change. Nigeria's once solid patronage network – structured around influential businesspeople, political fixers, bureaucratic elites and retired security officials – has flailed amidst the north-south tussle over the 'rotational presidency' which ended with President Jonathan's ascension to power. Jonathan's rise after the death of former President Yar'Adua during his first term is regarded by many northerners as a violation of an elite agreement on rotating the presidency. This has fed the sense of political dispossession now prevalent in sections of the north.

Meanwhile, the spectre of widespread breakdown of law and order has grown amidst incoherent and ineffective responses from the federal government. BH terrorist violence has combined with criminal activities of the unemployed youth, with both being actively co-opted by senior security operatives to sabotage public security. The President

acknowledged such difficulties when publicly affirming that the Nigerian Police had been infiltrated by BH. Shortly after, the President dismissed a senior northern police officer from service following accusations that he assisted BH's second-in-command and alleged mastermind of the 2011 Christmas Day church bombing to escape from police custody.

CONTAINING THE IDEOLOGICAL BH

Even though the official opinion of BH is widely disbelieved, the truth behind the group's hierarchy, motivation and support systems remains open to interpretation. Founded as 'Jamatu Ahlussunnah Liddawati wal Jihad', the group grew out of revivalist Islamist projects in northern Nigeria dating back to the Sokoto Jihad at the turn of the nineteenth century. BH was also inspired by move-

ments such as the 'Yan Izala' (Salafist Renewalist), led by figures like Abubakar Gumi and his *Jamaat Izalat al-Bidaa wa Iqamat as Sunna*.

There is some consensus that BH formally emerged in Nigeria's Borno state around 2002 as a sect led by Muhammed

Yusuf, a charismatic Islamist preacher. The group clearly drew inspiration from puritanical islamist ideas, but was also nurtured in its early days by Modu Sheriff, the former Borno state governor. An opposition governor from the All Nigerian Peoples' Party (ANPP), Sheriff partly relied on Yusuf and his nascent BH militant wing – drawn from the large urban poor – to provide a buffer against the political forays of rival politicians from the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which ruled at the federal level.

Yusuf later parted ways with his mentor, and the federal military cracked down hard on the group in 2009, culminating in the death of the

BH leader. This inadvertently strengthened the sect's extreme ideological wing, on which Yusuf had exerted a moderating influence. Highlighting the counter-productive outcome of the military response, BH went on to benefit from the support and sympathy of the poor in north-eastern Nigeria, partly due to widespread resentment of the JTF's tactics.

Can BH's Islamist-tinged insurgency be contained? The keys to doing so lie in a clear understanding of the threat it poses, responsible national leadership to defuse it sufficiently to allow for dialogue with radicals, and the allocation of resources to an amnesty programme for militants. Conflict resolution efforts must focus on isolating the ideological core of BH, while simultaneously diluting the toxic mix that has pushed once mainstream elite figures into supporting a terrorist organisation. BH primarily acts against the Nigerian state and increasingly militant Christian groups in Nigeria's 'middle belt', who it perceives as allies of the southern president. Aside from BH's bombing of the UN headquarters in 2011 and the group's alleged involvement in the kidnap and subsequent killing of a British and an Italian national in March 2012, almost all of its targets have been local. Diminishing economic opportunities and unresolved social tensions provide the context within which religious and inter-ethnic strife in Nigeria feed on popular discontent. Addressing these issues is therefore vital. However, terrorist violence in Nigeria cannot be exclusively attributed to BH. Social rehabilitation programmes must also target unemployed youths formerly deployed by politicians on campaigns of electoral violence and intimidation, as these individuals are now involved in bombings and indiscriminate shootings for criminal ends.

BH's immediate threat also has indirect sub-regional links. Concerns are growing that similarities exist between the destitution which feeds BH in north-eastern Nigeria and extreme poverty in the adjacent Sahel states. Nigerian intelligence assessments already allege the involvement of itinerant youths from neigh-



The EU Sahel Strategy did not foresee Boko Haram's potential regional reach as a central concern

»»»»» neighbouring countries including Chad, Niger and Cameroon in recent suicide attacks. In addition, the current BH leader, Imam Abubakar Shekau, is reported to have escaped to Qoundere in Cameroon from where he allegedly directs an 'emirate' structure with branches in Nigeria and neighbouring countries. The fact remains that the key actors in Nigeria's current insecure environment are exclusively local, but regional links may be on the rise.

DYSFUNCTION AT THE CENTRE

Divisions and inexperience at the federal level are constraining an effective government response to the BH threat. President Jonathan's status as a newcomer unfamiliar with the country's rough-and-tumble politics is increasingly obvious. Both his badly-judged timing of an announcement on fuel subsidy removal and his advisors' contradictory views on BH attest to his inexperience. While the president mostly canvasses for a political solution to BH, some aides threaten a crushing military response. Other officials, including Deputy Inspector General of Police Audu Abubakar, publicly contradict Jonathan's claims on BH's infiltration of the police.

Observers were stunned by revelations that the senior Police Commissioner blamed for the escape of the Christmas Day bomber is also head of the national anti-terror unit. He was dismissed by a previous administration for involvement in torture and other atrocities by the military government from 1993–1999. However, in January 2010 he was secretly reinstated to the force, presumably at the behest of other BH sympathisers in the security hierarchy. This demonstrates the extent of divisions at the heart of the federal government.

Amidst the tension over power rotation, the president and his advisers have displayed very little knowledge of the north – its problems, fears and the extent of disconnect between the street and its traditional power structures. Nige-

ria has no lack of skilled, culturally sensitive mediators who could reach out across ethno-religious divides. However, neutral external parties could help to promote a much-needed national dialogue. Furthermore, the federal authorities will require a coherent media strategy to counter BH's so far astute messaging, with its carefully calibrated and timed violence and use of the internet.

NIGERIA–EU COOPERATION

The EU must maintain its traditional role of development 'enabler' in Nigeria, especially since domestic policy there has begun to deviate from its previous forward-looking scope. There are indications that the security response to BH will dominate the government's policy outlook in the coming years. This could pose an existential threat to the country's recent economic dynamism. A strong preoccupation with security is evident in the government's latest budget, in which it received an allocation of nearly 20 per cent (\$6 billion of a total \$30.64 billion).

Most worryingly, the recent shift in spending priorities has failed to inspire strong opposition from Nigeria's external partners. For the EU in particular, the shift in national priorities towards security spending could impair perspectives for development cooperation. Given the US's better-established security cooperation with Nigeria, for example in training and equipment supply, development rather than hard security offers the brightest prospects for EU policy success in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EU ENGAGEMENT WITH NIGERIA

1) European engagement must prioritize a national dialogue on reconciliation, social inclusion, effective representation and power sharing. Current proposals on EU assistance include support to energy reform, educational improvement in the north, strengthening intelligence gather-

ing, justice sector reform and arms control. However, all of these proposals address the symptoms of political dysfunction rather than the root causes. The EU could show real ambition by supporting reinstatement of the rotational presidency to cement stability. It seems clear that the accession of the current southern president has dangerously polarized the country along regional lines. The rotational arrangement offers the shortest route to preserving stability at this sensitive stage in the country's transition. Though it limits the range of democratic choice, Nigeria would not be unique in embracing such expediency. The collegiate system in the United States, for example, has sometimes produced presidents – including George W. Bush in 2000 – that lost the popular vote while demonstrating a wider spread of support across the federal states. Nigeria's rotational system may limit the choice of president to one geopolitical zone at a time, but it will help to dilute the worst excesses of electoral competition in a democracy that is only twelve years old.

2) More specific initiatives must be explored within existing bilateral cooperation to promote social regeneration in the north and break the vicious cycle of poverty, inequality and industrial stagnation that blights the region. The EU should clearly reflect this priority in its next development programming cycle. For national actors in Nigeria and their international partners to best tackle the BH insurgency, it must be viewed within the context of wider political, economic and security challenges facing Nigeria. An approach must be devised to help Nigeria address macro-level issues that breed recurrent national instability beyond BH itself.

3) The EU should also support and seek a role in an amnesty programme for BH militants who are open to dialogue. After all, the country has implemented a similar, highly generous amnesty programme for militants in the Niger Delta, with yearly individual stipends of \$4920 (nearly double the country's gross per capita income). Whilst buying out insurgents raises concerns about long-term sustainability, this

may be needed to peel away more pragmatic adherents from the violent ideological core of BH. The EU should also follow this up with targeted development interventions for the worst affected north-east region, using a similar approach to that taken in the Niger Delta. This will go some way towards rebalancing the excessive focus on the Niger Delta region in the 10th European Development Fund allocation to Nigeria, which totals €677 million.

4) Given Nigeria's weak capacity to deal with large-scale ideologically inspired insurgency, intelligence cooperation and capacity development may be a priority area for EU assistance. The longer-term usefulness of such cooperation is, however, questionable given Nigeria's growing reluctance to deploy counter-insurgency units recently trained by the US for fear of losing control over national security. Also, as northern Nigeria borders vast ungoverned spaces in the Sahel – areas long feared by the EU as potential havens for Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb terrorists – integration of Nigeria into EU dialogues on Sahelian security must proceed apace.

5) A more imaginative use of sub-regional body ECOWAS is required, given the implications of challenges in Nigeria and other West African countries for the Sahel region and vice-versa. Clearly, Nigeria's regional weight dictates that it will play a major role in the implementation of the ESS, alongside other smaller but important states in the southern fringes of the Sahel including Senegal, Burkina Faso and Chad. An expanded strategy should take account of inter-linked insecurity drivers including BH, drug-trafficking and chronic state weakness in the region, and more systematically link them to addressing insecurity in the wider Sahel. A broader regional approach also has the potential to prevent BH from establishing its presence in Cameroon, Chad and Niger, where close ethnic affinities with northern Nigeria portend heightened risks. This could also mitigate the destabilising effects of arms and militants dispersed southwards from Libya, a development already fuelling a secessionist war in Mali.

»»»» **CONCLUSION**

External partners require clearer insights into the nature of Nigeria's unravelling elite bargain, and its connections to growing incoherence in the national political and security establishments. Without this, counter-insurgency support, SSR initiatives and other prospective interventions will fail to address root causes. In a broader perspective, the EU should fully pursue ongoing discussions on an overarching strategic framework of engagement with Nigeria, to more coherently shape internal developments as well as shared regional concerns.

As a first step, concluding a Nigeria-EU bilateral strategic partnership could breathe new life into global governance engagements and other shared interests, including expanding prosperity and safeguarding stability across West Africa and the southern Sahel. Conversely, too narrow a focus on concerns around BH and emerging contingencies risks crowding out the worthwhile vision of a bold strategic outreach to an indispensable regional player.

Ola Bello is a researcher at FRIDE.

**e-mail: fride@fride.org
www.fride.org**
