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The Internationalisation of Nigeria’s Boko Haram Campaign

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Summary

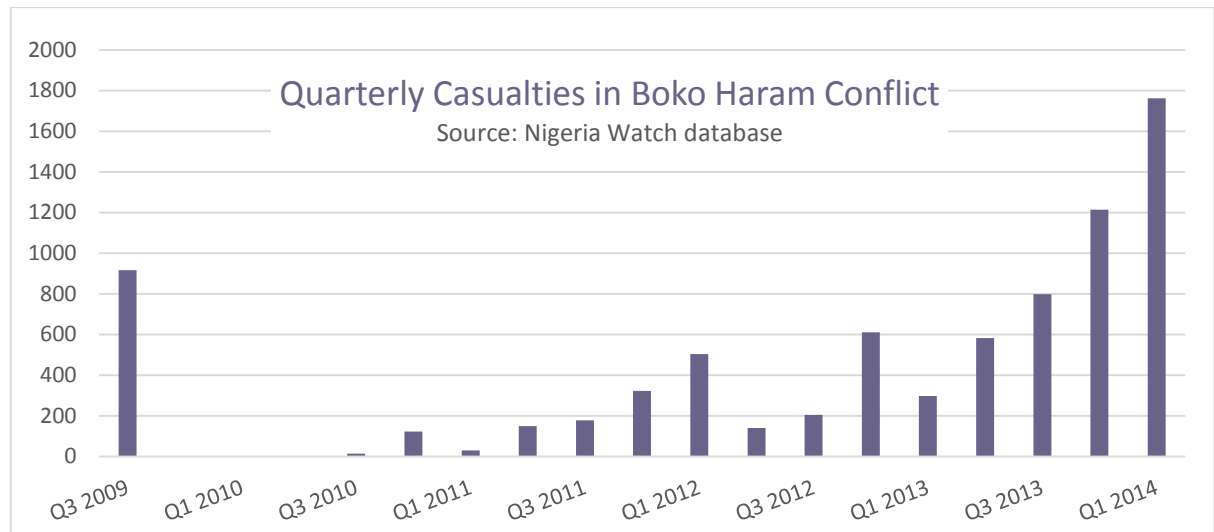
One year since it escalated its counter-insurgency campaign under a localised state of emergency, Nigeria has lost control of its war against Boko Haram. Up to 3,000 Nigerians have been killed in violence linked to the group so far this year and clashes have spread to neighbouring Niger and Cameroon. Humanitarian outcry over the abduction of some 276 girls from a boarding school on 14 April has radically increased the chances of foreign military intervention, with Nigerian consent, against Boko Haram. Despite the humanitarian compulsion to act urgently, this could change the character of the rebellion and its links to jihadist groups in the Sahel. Any international military assistance to Nigeria must be backed by commitments – primarily from Nigeria itself – for greater investment in the north, and national governance, anti-corruption and security sector reforms.

Background

Boko Haram was founded by Salafist preacher Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri, northeast Nigeria, in the years after Nigeria’s 1999 transition from military to multiparty rule. Known officially as *Jama’atu ahl al-Sunna li’l-Da’wa wa’l-jihad* (roughly meaning Sunni Group for Preaching and Jihad), it advocated the Islamicisation of law and society. This was a populist stance for many northern politicians at this time and Boko Haram’s activists appear to have been allied with some. Co-opting, and sometimes arming, violent youth and student groups (known as ‘cults’) is common practice among politicians across Nigeria.

While a radical dissident faction led by Abubakar Shekau launched several attacks around Borno and Yobe states in 2003-04, Boko Haram did not switch from proselytization to combat until 2009. An uprising in Borno state in July was put down with maximum force and Yusuf was arrested and killed in custody. Boko Haram then went underground, re-emerging under Shekau’s leadership in mid-2010. Attacks have subsequently been staged in at least 12 of Nigeria’s 36 states, as well as Abuja, the federal capital. Targets have included security forces, administration buildings, politicians, informants, foreign workers, moderate Imams, churches, bars and increasingly schools. Most casualties have been Muslim civilians. After Shekau rejected a possible amnesty the federal government declared a state of emergency in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states on 14 May 2013.

A War Gone Wrong



Casualty figures recorded by Nigeria Watch, an Ibadan-based casualty recording project, demonstrate an insurgency that has been stoked rather than countered in the last year. About 9,000 casualties have been recorded since July 2009, of which over 5,000 since the state of emergency was imposed. 1,043 were recorded killed in March 2014 alone, with over 700 in April. These rates are comparable to the current conflict in Iraq. They may well be underestimates since the domestic press sources that Nigeria Watch relies upon have had restricted access to the three focal states since May 2013.

Rather than being displaced, Boko Haram's activity has become more concentrated in the Kanuri-speaking northeast, especially Borno state and the well garrisoned city of Maiduguri. The extent of this 'battlefield' is about 75,000 km², the size of Ireland or Scotland. According to the National Emergency Management Agency, a quarter-million people have been displaced from this area so far in 2014 and half the north-east's 12 people are directly affected by violence. The UN High Commission for Refugees estimates nearer half-a-million displaced and predicts a food crisis. Hundreds of schools and clinics are closed. There have been few attacks or clashes over the last year in the rest of northern Nigeria but a number of high profile attacks have been staged around Abuja since March, suggesting a well-entrenched Boko Haram cell operates there.

The nature of attacks attributed to Boko Haram suggests that the group has grown rapidly in confidence, capability and coordination. In attacks in December and March Boko Haram units massed several hundred combatants in Maiduguri to attack the main air force and army bases. On 14 April, the group detonated a car bomb in Abuja's main bus station and kidnapped some 276 girls from Chibok school in southern Borno. In several cases it is reported to have moved columns of dozens of conspicuous armed vehicles along Borno's main highways without interdiction. Indeed, despite the reinforced state security presence, Boko Haram is regularly reported as controlling large areas of Borno and its borders with Niger and Cameroon.

Islamic nationalism

Unlike northern Mali or Somalia, where jihadist armed groups have taken over remote areas in recent years, Nigeria is far from a small or weak state. Its rapidly growing and recently rebased economy is now easily the largest in Africa, providing a nominal per capita income well within the lower middle income bracket and federal government revenue forecasts of \$46 billion for 2014. It has over 100,000 troops (of variable training, equipment and experience), some 400,000 police and technological capacities that include a Space Program with four satellites. Its efforts to counter the threats posed by Boko Haram are failing not because of a lack of national resources but because of how these state resources are deployed.

First, the Muslim north of Nigeria feels chronically marginalised by the Nigerian political and economic system that has concentrated wealth in the oil-producing southeast and industrial southwest. Northern Nigeria is three times poorer than the mainly Christian south, and the northeastern heartland of Boko Haram is the poorest part of the north. Such inequalities have accelerated during the last decade of rapid national growth. Environmental change, including desertification and the disappearance of Lake Chad, is having a devastating impact on Borno and Yobe states. Unlike most other developing countries, Nigeria's fertility rate is static or increasing; population growth is highest in the north.

Economic marginalisation has been exacerbated by the perception of Christian political dominance since the 1999 transition. Whereas at least half of Nigeria's population is Muslim and military governments over the previous two decades were dominated by northern generals, all but three of the last 15 years have been under a Christian president. Muslim president Umaru Yar'Adua (2007-10) died three years into his term and was widely seen as a proxy of his southern predecessor. Current President Goodluck Jonathan is a southern Christian who inherited a presidency that most northerners saw as rightfully theirs until at least 2015. That the ruling People's Democratic Party selected him, rather than a northerner, as its candidate in 2011 is often linked to the intensification of Boko Haram's insurgency that year.

Second, Boko Haram is unlike most other challengers to the Nigerian state, such as militants in the Niger Delta, in that it is ideological and not easily bought off with oil money. It may be that some of its combatants have been lured by money, but the Salafist commitment of its leaders is real. Aside from seeking retribution for the murder of their founder, Yusuf, the group has a strong commitment to overturning the corrupt basis of Nigerian political and social life. Over centuries, political reform movements in northern Nigeria and the wider Sahel have only arrived through Islamic revivalist movements. Given the extreme corruption of Nigerian politics and the under-development of the northeast, this stance gives Boko Haram credibility among many disaffected youths. Unusually, the group is far more interested in national issues than global jihad or the al-Qaida brand.

Third, the at times brutal and incompetent nature of the counter-insurgency operation conducted by the state's Joint Task Force (JTF) has hardened opposition to the government in many quarters. Army and police are frequently accused of deserting communities under attack

or failing to respond to alerts. The army has committed extra-judicial executions of suspected militants and attacked communities suspected of harbouring them. The security forces are perceived to enjoy impunity, including for Yusuf's murder. Reports suggest they harbour Islamist sympathisers and some officers sell the identities of their local informants to Boko Haram. Conspiracy theorists argue that the armed forces benefit from bonuses, promotions and equipment as the war escalates.

Towards 2015

With general elections approaching in April 2015, when President Jonathan may seek re-election, hostility to the state will harden in the northeast. Many Nigerians believe that Boko Haram was nurtured by northern Nigerian opposition politicians looking to harness the credibility of Islamic reform. Some believe that the current insurgency is being deliberately stoked by the government via emergency rule to punish the northeast, where the opposition (including factions within the PDP) has had its most consistent support. Others believe that Boko Haram is funded by northern politicians, of either opposition or ruling party, who want to demonstrate to Jonathan and southern elites that the north is ungovernable under a Christian president.

An electoral transition to a northern Muslim presidency would increase the chances of a negotiated settlement with Boko Haram, but it would not be a panacea for Nigeria. The successes of the Yar'Adua-Jonathan presidency include the mainly non-oil economic growth of the south and the related near termination of insurgency in Jonathan's native Niger Delta region. In effect, 26,000 Delta militia have been paid off with government stipends and a blind-eye to 'bunkering', the theft and refining of crude oil. Southern people and politicians chafe at the increasingly asymmetric violence against Christians in the north and Delta militia have threatened to resume their insurgency if a northern-led government redirects oil revenues from them to the north.

In the northeast, the government's policy of training and mobilising vigilante groups known as Civilian JTFs is also likely to leave a legacy of violence and impunity even if the army can be returned to barracks. Elections are likely to go ahead, even in Borno, next April but the process is likely to be even more destabilising and violent.

A hashtag narrative for intervention

Notwithstanding Boko Haram's long record of indiscriminate terrorist violence, the Chibok mass abduction and Shekau's subsequent threat to marry pre-teen girls forcibly to his supporters or sell them into slavery has crossed multiple red lines around protection of civilians, girls' right to education and sexual violence. The #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign has tapped into a social movement last and best exploited through the Stop Kony 2012 viral video campaign. That campaign influenced the African Union to establish its Regional Cooperation Initiative for the Elimination of the Lord's Resistance Army in April 2012 and was a major driver of post-facto public support for the Obama administration's October

2011 commitment of US special forces to Uganda and central Africa to hunt LRA leader Joseph Kony directly. Those troops remain in four countries and have recently been reinforced.

The response to Chibok has been even stronger and faster. Between 6 and 11 May, the US, UK, France, China and Israel all pledged to send teams to Nigeria to help search for and rescue the abducted girls and France will host a meeting of Nigeria, its neighbours and key western states on 17 May. In fact, all these states already play a role in training or supporting Nigerian forces against Boko Haram but have been anxious about going public with a counter-insurgency campaign previously linked to the increasingly unpopular and divisive 'War on Terror' and the toxic human rights reputation of the Nigerian security forces.

For example, Israeli firms have trained Nigeria's Special Boat Service (SBS) and supplied fast attack craft and unmanned aerial vehicles for patrolling the Delta. US Africa Command pledged assistance in January to the rapid establishment of a Nigerian Army Special Operations Command (NASOC). The UK has also provided training and in 2012 sent its special forces to join a disastrous raid against the jihadist kidnappers of a Briton in northern Nigeria. French President François Hollande visited Nigeria in February to pledge assistance against Boko Haram, stressing links to France's counter-insurgency operation in Mali. Repositioning of French forces in the Sahel in 2014 is reinforcing air and special forces deployments at bases in Chad and Niger, just across northern Nigeria's borders. US reconnaissance drones have been flying from Niamey, Niger since early 2013. China is now the major supplier of military aircraft and ships to Nigeria.

Prior to the Chibok attack, Nigerian pride had prevented it from overtly seeking foreign assistance against Boko Haram. Under intense popular and diplomatic pressure, that rubicon has now been crossed and US and other states' special forces and reconnaissance aircraft may stay on in Nigeria well beyond the current abduction crisis under the logic of protecting civilians. President Jonathan's announcement in early May of an extra-budgetary \$1 billion for emergency military procurement is an added incentive for international security cooperation. Boko Haram has both further damaged and massively extended its international reputation through acknowledging the Chibok attack. Shekau believes there is no such thing as bad publicity and has embraced international reaction as leverage to trade the girls for Boko Haram prisoners, who include his own wife and children. The overt presence of western or Israeli military in northern Nigeria could yet determine Boko Haram to seek closer ties to al-Qaida and its affiliates in the Sahel and North Africa. Al-Qaida has been dismissive of jihadist groups that target Muslim civilians indiscriminately but Nigeria, with the world's fifth largest Muslim population and a political system ripe for change, is a long-term priority for the movement.

Policy Implications

In pursuing the immediate imperative to safeguard and release the Chibok schoolgirls, it is important to consider how the current surge of international interest in Nigerian security may impact on the management and resolution of the larger Boko Haram crisis. Mission creep that permits international tracking and negotiation teams' presence to be translated into direct

military support for the current blunt counter-insurgency campaign should be resisted. Instead, the opportunity presented for negotiation with Boko Haram needs to be developed while its leaders are both under pressure and primarily concerned with a specifically Nigerian political settlement.

In the longer term, the crisis of northeast Nigeria will not be resolved sustainably without a searching national dialogue on reforming political and security institutions, the relationship between state, religion and identity, and the inclusion of northern communities, women and men in Nigeria's rapid economic development.

About the Author

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