

#NigeriaOnTheEdge

The situation in Nigeria is evolving and, perhaps, unraveling. To contain and disrupt Boko Haram a new approach and security paradigm is needed. Left unaddressed, the violence will continue to intensify, with broader implications for Nigeria at a domestic and regional level.

by Jennifer Giroux and Raymond Gilpin

With the next presidential elections less than a year away Nigeria is teetering near the edge, becoming a place where violent incidents are so frequent they are starting to blur. Recently a group referred to as Boko Haram has carried out a number of attacks in the northeast, one of which killed over 200 people and completely destroyed a town, as well as two bombings in the capital, Abuja. Such atrocities sit within a broader insurgency that has been intensifying since 2009. Information of these incidents is usually opaque; only to escape in the form of rumors and whispers due to the persistent sense of secrecy linked to its military dictatorship past and weak political and security institutions. Yet it was the kidnapping of 200-plus girls from Chibok in northeastern Nigeria that has managed to separate itself from the noise. Propelled by the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls, online debates and national protests have created a mosaic of national frustration and terror that has captured rare international attention, even prompting a regional security summit in France.

But what is it about this event that has galvanized so much interest? Violent acts and kidnappings occur frequently in Nigeria and barely make news.

Attacks aimed at children are also, sadly, frequent. In July 2013 Boko Haram set fire to a school in Mamudo, killing 42; another similar attack took place this year, in February. Other incidents involve targeting schools to recruit boys or force girls into “temporary marriages”, illuminating a part of the group’s warped, malevolent targeting behavior.

Perhaps the heightened interest suggests a tipping point. Nigeria is a country where political and socio-economic grievances are extensive, interwoven, and underpin

KEY POINTS

- Boko Haram is becoming more violent and state responses thus far have only escalated the situation
- To contain violence, a shift is needed from a threat-centric to a population-centric approach
- It’s time for Security Sector Reform that factors in regional development goals, civilian safety and human rights
- Regional coordination and international support is needed to address growing security issues in the region

violent phenomena. In the last decade, repeated insurgencies and inter/intra-communal fighting, often politicized along religious and ethnic differences, have been met with weak policing, heavy-handed military responses, impunity and a disregard for civilian safety. Rather than containing violence, state responses (including the suspected complicity of certain political leaders) to groups like Boko Haram have often escalated conflict.

Unpacking Boko Haram

The official name of Boko Haram (loosely meaning “Western education is forbidden”) is Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-da’wa wal-Jihād (JAS), Arabic for “The Congregation of the People of Tradition for Proselytism and Jihad.” Originally made up of ethnic Kanuri in Nigeria’s northeast, it was formed in 2002 by the late Muhammad Yusuf, a Quranic scholar and preacher in Maiduguri, Borno state. Their goal was – and continues to be – to establish an extremist Islamic state with a strict adherence to their own version of Sharia (Islamic law), which includes forbidding western education, particularly to females.

Though its ideological orientation has remained consistent, it has undergone various changes as Nigeria’s geo-political situation has evolved. Today it is a fragmented, rather nebulous organization with unclear channels of decision-making and recruitment. At its height it had upwards of 9,000 members, while now this is likely closer to 3,000 – including criminal, militant, and splinter groups that cut across different factions. The largest, led by Abubakar Shekau, is characterized as a domestically-focused organization, while Ansaru, a well-known faction, has a global jihadi orientation and is regarded as Nigeria’s al-Qaeda franchise (though in 2012 Shekau voiced support of global jihadists). Such differences are reflected in targeting behavior: Ansaru is more sophisticated and targets Western interests, with half of its funding coming from ransom payments; Shekau’s group carries out indiscriminate attacks largely aimed at Nigerians (e.g. schools, religious centers, public spaces, security forces, etc.). Other factions keep lower profiles and often use the name of the group to carry out attacks – kidnappings, robberies, etc., – that are not necessarily connected to the group’s aims or ideology. Despite a massive military effort to contain the threat, Boko Haram has shown resilience in its ability to carry out attacks that have grown in scale despite the securitization of the northeast, thus raising questions like: What have been the triggers of violence? And what are the factors sustaining it?

KEY FACTS

- A majority of the Nigeria’s 170 million people live on less than USD 1.25 a day, yet Nigeria has experienced sustained economic growth and is Africa’s largest economy, with a GDP of USD 509 billion.
- 1 in 6 Nigerian children do not attend formal schooling.
- In the north, 72 % of people live in poverty, compared to 27 % in the south and 35 % in the Niger Delta.
- The insurgency in the northeast began in 2009 and has since claimed well over 5,000 lives, resulted in hundreds kidnapped, at least 300,000 displaced, and subjected millions to a protracted state of humanitarian crisis.
- In addition to the Boko Haram-led northeast insurgency, the Middle Belt region has experienced sustained sectarian violence that is driven by competition over land, resources and access to public services. In Jos, violence between farming and pastoral communities – also divided along religious lines – has claimed at least 5,000 lives in a decade. In the Niger Delta, the southern oil-producing region, kidnappings, oil theft, and other forms of violent behavior are near-constant experiences of daily life.

Violent triggers & escalation

Organized violence in Nigeria does not emerge in a vacuum but rather due to a complex interplay of grievances that cut across the country as well as certain regional-specific factors. For the north, the politico-social objective, supported by northern elites and extremist movements, of imposing an Islamic governance system is part of the backdrop of Boko Haram’s emergence. However its shift to violence and subsequent escalation into an insurgent movement was triggered by a number of factors; especially the heavy-handed response of the state security apparatus – a response devoid of any attempts to protect civilians and address grievances in the poverty-ridden north.

In 2002, while Yusuf was focused on efforts to implement Sharia, the more radical Shekau formed a splinter group and relocated to an area where they took advantage of community dissatisfaction. Heavy-handed police responses to Shekau’s group led to retaliatory attacks against police installations. Hence the cycle of violence was set in motion, triggered by local frustration, radicalized group members, security institutions ill-equipped to deal with the emerging crisis, and state/federal politicians ignoring core regional drivers, namely political exclusion and economic inequality. After Shekau and Yusuf reunited circa 2004, violence escalated – reaching a fever pitch in 2009 when clashes triggered an armed insurrection that brought a harsh military crackdown, resulting in over 800 killed.

Yusuf was subsequently arrested and allegedly executed at police headquarters. These factors only increased community support for Boko Haram.

From this point the group, now led by Shekau, began to splinter while hardening its extremist ideology and intensifying messaging campaigns. The next violent escalation followed the 2010 death of President Yar'Adua, a former governor from the north. Vice-President Jonathan, a Christian from the south, assumed the Presidency but his refusal to call for special elections or announce that he would not run for the 2011 elections disrupted Nigeria's informal power-sharing agreement whereby power should rotate between the Muslim north and Christian south after two consecutive terms (8 years). Boko Haram ramped up assaults, assassinating political figures, targeting civilians, and expanding attacks to Abuja where they targeted the UN building and police headquarters. This escalation and its relationship to political competition for the presidency led to suggestions that Boko Haram was backed by some prominent northern leaders, which ties into the upsurge in impunity.

The latest escalation of violence, characterized by the recent increase and scale of attacks, has been triggered and sustained by a confluence of factors. For one, though the state of emergency implemented in May 2013 in three northeastern states intensified security in the urban areas it also pushed the group to border regions and rural areas where they reformed. Second, similar to the run up to the 2011 election, political tensions are growing throughout Nigeria and in turn Boko Haram's activities are intensifying. The third factor illuminates the broader regional dimension. Members, mainly from Ansaru, flocked to Mali during the 2012–13 conflict where they deepened links with regional Islamist groups and received combat training and techniques that they then took back to Nigeria.

Regional implications

It is clear that Boko Haram is not only a domestic issue. Its use of border areas and relationship to flavors of al-Qaeda is both concerning at a regional and international level. In many respects the developments in northern Nigeria run parallel to recent trends across North and West Africa where weak political and security institutions, and impunity, have enabled criminal and extremist groups to operate and grow – leveraging porous borders, grey economies, and targeting vulnerable, impoverished populations, often neglected by national governments. For the border areas in Nigeria, the shared Kanuri ethnicity allows Boko Haram to be socially camouflaged in neighbouring Niger where they have created sleeper cells. This poses challenges for Nigeria but also potential future security issues for Niger, which has dealt with narcotics and weapons smuggling linked to former government officials and Tuareg rebel leaders. Meanwhile, in Cameroon, Boko Haram has already begun to carry out attacks aimed at civilians and infrastructure.

Another implication concerns Nigeria's ability as a strong regional actor. Not only is it a key player in peace-keeping missions but it also has the largest naval presence in the Gulf of Guinea. That said, it currently has the lowest ratio of military personnel to population in the world and its security forces are increasingly over-whelmed with domestic issues and ill-equipped to deal with the complex, transnational threats confronting the region. Like its domestic situation, Nigeria's role in the region is threatened and uncertain.

Moving to a population-centric approach

Looking ahead, the situation is not particularly bright given that political competition in Nigeria will only continue to intensify as the 2015 elections draw closer. But the #BringBackOurGirls has ignited global attention, creating an opportunity to address one of the key mobilizing factors of violence in Nigeria: the state's response. While major changes are unlikely to be implemented or have the desired effect by 2015, a number of near-term policy responses should be considered.

First, a strategic security shift from a threat-centric to a population-centric approach is imperative. The government needs to lift the state of emergency in the northeast and enhance civilian protection. The reality is that Boko Haram no longer enjoys broad support in the north, but neither does the government. Creating a more productive relationship between the public and security officials requires significant training for police and military forces as well as proper institutional support – decent

FURTHER READING

Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency

International Crisis Group (Africa Report, 216/2014)

Useful overview of Boko Haram's formation and evolution.

Boko Haram: Anatomy of a Crisis

Edited by Ioannis Mantzikos (e-International Relations 2013)

Edited volume that address is various dimensions of northern insurgency.

The Ongoing Campaign of Terror in Nigeria: Boko Haram versus the State

Daniel Agbibo (Stability: International Journal of Security and Development, 2:3 2013)

Examines state responses and the regional security dimension.

salaries, equipment, etc. Messaging and communication is also important – one that provides a place for alternative voices, especially moderate Muslims and impacted communities, to have a platform.

Second, more broadly, Nigeria is long overdue for Security Sector Reform (SSR) that factors in regional development aspirations, the protection of human rights, and addresses impunity. Historically, Nigeria's security forces have been trained to protect the head of state, rather than populations or fighting insurgent or terrorist groups. A new framework should leverage community involvement but not the kind that involves the use of local militia or vigilante groups, which are often destructive in the long run. Of course, SSR should be complemented by concomitant political reforms. The reality is that elected officials are still largely not accountable to the populace. Not only do they need to be brought closer to the people but there is need for more transparency and accountability. The fact that it took three weeks, and international pressure, before the government responded to the Chibok kidnappings is illustrative of this problem.

Third, given the noted regional implications, coordinated responses and international support is necessary. Notably, the May security summit in France – which brought together Benin, Cameroon, Niger, Chad and Nigeria – resulted in a “global and regional action plan” that

will focus on sharing intelligence and border surveillance, aided by Western nations who will provide technical expertise and training. This is an important step, though actual implementation of the plan is to be seen. However such efforts should not exclude a focus on human rights and civilian protection nor should they encourage foreign military operations to build up a regional presence. Rather Western nations need to focus on building up regional political and security institutions as well as ensuring that equal support is given to alleviating the persistent drivers of violence (e.g. underdevelopment, impunity, and bad governance). Otherwise threats in Nigeria and across the region will continue to mutate and expand.

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