



Countering Boko Haram

by Cristina Barrios

Earlier this month, extremist group Boko Haram occupied new chunks of territory in northeastern Nigeria, including the town of Chibok – widely known because of the media attention it received following the #BringBackOurGirls campaign last spring.

Although Nigeria's military recaptured the town a few days later with the help of local armed groups, swathes of northern Nigeria remain unstable at best. Suicide-bomb attacks have claimed dozens of victims in Azar, while people in Maiduguri, where schools are now reopening following eight months of closure, fear that their city is still under threat.

The situation is worsening as the 2015 national elections approach: over 200 schoolgirls kidnapped from Chibok are still missing, and speculations about a recent botched deal with Boko Haram mediated by Chad have undermined, once again, Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan's authority and credibility.

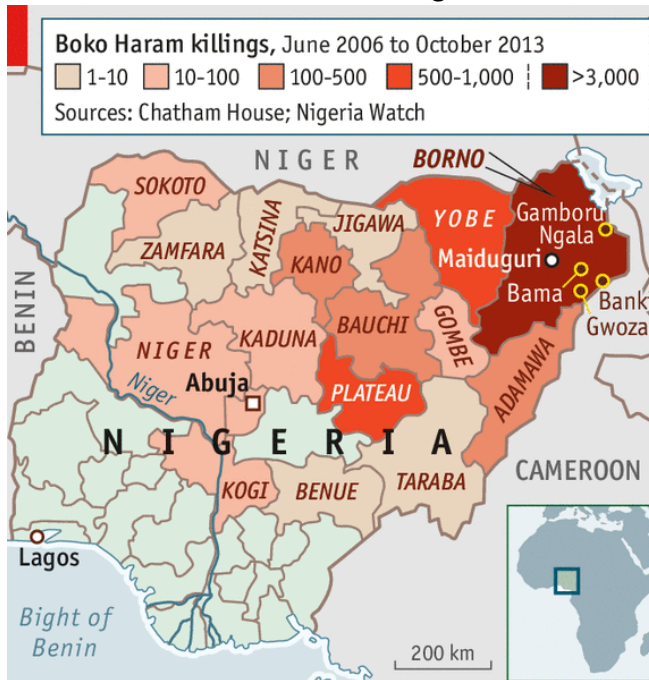
Meanwhile, Boko Haram cells in neighbouring border areas in Cameroon, Chad and Niger are now aggressively pursuing the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. And last week, Niger authorities claimed that over 20,000 displaced people from the Nigerian province of Borno have crossed the border and settled in the country, triggering a humanitarian crisis in an area where poverty and drought already plague local populations.

A boost decade

The name Boko Haram, usually translated as 'Western education is forbidden', was adopted as a nickname for the organisation originally called 'People committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and jihad' (*Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunnah Lidda'awati Wal Jihad*). This Islamist sect became increasingly radical after 2002, setting up a sanctuary where followers could live 'a pure life' away from the state authorities. At that time, its leader, fundamentalist imam Mohammed Yusuf, established good connections with political leaders in Borno (a Boko Haram militant even became commissioner for religious affairs there). In parts of the north, where several states have adopted Sharia law, the sect thrived in collusion with local authorities while pursuing its agenda of radical Islamisation. Members of the group then started to target government buildings and police in a rejection of Nigeria's secular nature. By 2009, Boko Haram was declared illegal and Yusuf summarily executed.

The organisation has since become ever more dangerous: in 2014 alone, it has reportedly killed close to 3,500 people, abducted hundreds of men and women, and has begun to conquer – and hold – territory. Yet Boko Haram is not a compact and centralised organisation. Its volatile leader, Abubakar Shekau, is indeed a commander, but not *the* hierarchical chief. A splinter group, Ansaru, has, for example, established itself as a lethally effective

Boko Haram killings



Source: The Economist

radical anti-Christian sect. Last summer, the UN Security Council formally designated both Boko Haram and Ansaru as ‘terrorist organisations’, and confirmed their links with al-Qaeda.

A catch-all practice

Boko Haram targets Christians and Muslims alike, and the jihadist militia often indiscriminately bombs public spaces or raises entire villages to the ground. Though churches are frequently attacked and Christian holidays witness a spike in violence, the number of Muslim casualties is reportedly higher – no less than twenty Muslim clerics were assassinated between 2009 and 2012. The international community has not been spared either: the United Nations building was hit in Abuja, and expatriates are regularly kidnapped or executed. While the total body count is difficult to ascertain, it is clear that Boko Haram targets the Nigerian population as a whole, and is not just engaged in a war against another religion.

The group increasingly relies on social media and the internet to communicate its message, and is building links with other Islamist organisations. Nevertheless, tangible connections with terrorist groups in the Sahel or the Horn of Africa seem limited. The references to al-Qaeda and, more recently, Islamic State (IS) have appeared mainly in propaganda videos, arguably to bolster Boko Haram’s violent reputation. Despite this attempt to internationalise its appeal, the sect’s core aim

is still to control local spaces where it can impose Sharia law – as an alternative, and challenge, to the Nigerian state.

A broader approach

So far, Nigeria’s response has been rather fragmented and poorly coordinated. While state security forces have responded to attacks whenever possible with crackdowns and occasional brutality, Nigeria lacks an overarching legal, military, or social strategy. Boko Haram insurgents have often outmaneuvered the authorities and the armed forces, inflicting heavy casualties and seizing their assets.

The country’s army, over which President Jonathan has limited control, has been accused of abuses by Human Rights Watch, as well as by local populations. Despite a yearly budget of more than €600 million, the Nigerian Army appears somewhat dysfunctional: troops are poorly paid, poorly trained and poorly equipped – and corruption is deeply ingrained in its top brass.

Nigeria is now Africa’s biggest economy and a major regional power which holds a seat in the UN Security Council. The federal country ticks many of the boxes of a democracy (regular elections, decentralisation, separation of powers), has a population of 173 million and a decent higher education system. Abuja also managed to contain the spread of Ebola with swift action and coordination. So does Nigeria really need help combatting Boko Haram?

Nigeria’s Western allies – including France, the US, and the UK – are already contributing to the fight by providing intelligence and technical expertise on the ground. Neighbouring countries’ involvement is also welcome, but with political and ethnic disputes simmering in (and across) Chad, Cameroon and Niger, too much meddling could have unintended consequences in a region characterised by a precarious security environment.

Helping Nigeria help itself – improving governance and building capacity – may thus prove the only durable solution. Countering Boko Haram requires addressing the socio-economic roots which spawned it in the poorest regions of the country. An exclusively military response risks failing or backfiring unless marginalisation and disenfranchisement, upon which Boko Haram has built its radical appeal, are also tackled.

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