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#HARDERTHANTLOOKS: NIGERIA'S WAR ON BOKO HARAM

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Exercise Solo Flight

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The world's attention and ire were drawn to Boko Haram with its bold abduction of 276 Nigerian girls from the Chibok School in 2014, prompting the #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign supported by public figures such as Michelle Obama. What has changed since then? On the one hand, in December 2015, newly elected Nigerian President Buhari declared that Boko Haram had been technically defeated and that the violent extremist group no longer posed a threat as a conventional fighting force capable of launching organized attacks against state facilities.¹ On the other hand, despite state victories and Boko Haram's eviction from the territory it once occupied, the group has resisted destruction by exploiting the poorly controlled borderlands of Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. In 2017, Boko Haram is still active, has affiliated itself with Da'esh, and is actively pursuing its agenda, kidnapping 22 girls in late March 2017.² To date, 113 of the Chibok School girls are still missing, and the hashtag campaign has faded from public view.

The Institute for Economics & Peace 2015 Global Terrorism Index labeled Boko Haram the world's deadliest terrorist movement. The 2016 report placed Boko Haram a close second to Da'esh, likely a result of the increased pressure from the Nigerian forces. However, this news comes with a disturbing warning that the decline in violence in Nigeria has been accompanied by a significant increase in Niger, Cameroon, and Chad, seeing a 157% increase in Boko Haram related deaths in these countries.³ In light of

¹ BBC Website. "Nigeria Boko Haram: Militants 'technically defeated' – Buhari" (24 December 2015). Last Accessed 1 May 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35173618>

² The Guardian Website. "Boko Haram kidnaps 22 girls and women in north-east Nigeria". (1 April 2017). Last accessed 1 May 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/01/boko-haram-kidnaps-22-girls-and-women-in-north-east-nigeria>

³ Institute for Economics and Peace. "Global Terrorism Index 2016". (Nov 2016) <http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2017/02/Global-Terrorism-Index-2016.pdf>

these facts, is it safe to say that Boko Haram has culminated and that regional authorities are in control?

Contrary to President Buhari's assertion, this paper argues that Boko Haram remains a threat to Nigerian security and that the Nigerian Government's response has severe limitations. It analyzes the Nigerian State's response to Boko Haram in order to better understand why these operations have failed to bring about a resolution to the situation in North East Nigeria. This is done through a brief analysis of Boko Haram's resiliency, a consideration of the root causes of the conflict, and an examination of the tools chosen by the Nigerian Government to combat Boko Haram. This toolbox has included military suppressive force, criminalization of Boko Haram, and non-military efforts to counter violent extremism.



Economist.com

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⁴ This map shows Nigeria and surrounding countries that are affected by the conflict, including the Lake Chad Basin Region in the north east. This is where Boko Haram has exploited the poorly controlled borderlands to increase its control in the area.

A RESILIENT ENEMY

While Boko Haram poses a reduced threat to Nigeria, it has become a significant regional threat having spread in the Lake Chad Region, encompassing the borderlands of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. Boko Haram has proved adaptive to state pressure, and has undergone several evolutions that have led to its current situation. Boko Haram came to power in the North Eastern regions of Nigeria. It is no coincidence that these areas have been stricken with intense poverty, desertification, high population growth, and little state support.⁵ Nigeria's economic stability comes mainly from its oil reserves located in the south of the country, and as a consequence there has been little attention or investment concentrated on the fringes of the country. Boko Haram came into existence in this vacuum of state involvement, and poverty. It is worth noting however, that President Goodluck Jonathan refuted the idea that poverty was in anyway a driver of Boko Harams success when he refuted US President Bill Clintons remarks on the issue in February 2013.⁶

In addition to economic disparities within the country, religious differences have been a relevant point of friction. Nigeria is religiously diverse, populated almost equally by Christians and Muslims, and although Boko Haram follows the tenants of Islam, they have little in common with the form of Islam practiced in the south. The group subscribes to the more isolationist form of Salifist theology that requires pure obedience to the seventh century texts that not only denounces other religions, but also those

⁵ John Campbell and Ralphe Bunche. "What Makes Boko Haram Run?" (5 May 2016) Council on Foreign Relations Website. Last Accessed: 1 May 2016. <http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/makes-boko-haram-run/p37838>

⁶ Virginia Comolli. *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency*. (London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 2015), 77.

Muslims who have incorporated modern value into their daily lives. This is the primary reason that so many of Boko Haram's victims have been Muslims.⁷

Despite their brutal reputation, Boko Haram did not begin as a violent extremist group. The most common narrative is that Boko Haram was founded by Mohammad Yusuf in the North-Eastern Nigerian state of Borno in 2003 as the basis for an Islamic state devoid of the government corruption that was perceived as a major threat to the people of the region at the time. Since the area was poorly serviced by the government, there was little resistance to his ideas and preaching. Boko Haram began with three main objectives: opposition to Western education, rejection of the Nigerian political system, and creating an Islamic state.⁸ The group remained largely dormant, using Yusuf's non-violent approach, and advanced steadily towards their goals operating largely unimpeded until the government crackdown in 2009. During that time however, there were sporadic clashes with security forces and evidence that Boko Haram members were operating outside Nigeria, acquiring knowledge in tactics and bomb making.⁹ This came to an end in 2009 when the government cracked down on the group and arrested Yusuf, who later died in custody.

While Police thought the death of the charismatic Yusuf would surely cause the groups collapse, this was far from the case.¹⁰ In the face of state intervention against the group, Boko Haram was further radicalized under Abubakar Shekau, Yusuf's second in

⁷ John Campbell and Ralph Bunche. "What Makes Boko Haram Run?" (5 May 2016) Council on Foreign Relations Website. Last Accessed: 1 May 2016. <http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/makes-boko-haram-run/p37838>

⁸ James L. Regens et al. "Operational Dynamics of Boko Haram's Terrorist Campaign Following Leadership Succession" *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 97, No. 1. (March 2016): 45.

⁹ Comolli, 51.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

command.¹¹ The group's ability to remain viable after the killing of its leader is the first example of its adaptability. Under Shekau's leadership, Boko Haram waged a deadly insurgency and funded itself through criminal activity. Between 2009 and 2014, the group made significant progress towards its initial objectives.

In the first five years of open hostilities, Shekau accomplished significant increases in operational tempo. In his analysis of operational dynamics of Boko Haram, James Regens shows that between 2009 and 2014, Boko Haram increased their operations and used effective tactics. Direct attacks using firearms and kidnappings were among the most pervasive. While the increase in attacks was sporadic and non-linear over time, there was a distinct increase in attacks that was stemmed only by significant military operations by the Nigerian Government such as the 2013 state of emergency.¹²

Since 2013, the only way that the Nigerian Government has been effectively reducing Boko Haram resistance is through a campaign of suppressive violence and criminalisation. This has pushed the group out of much of their previously occupied territory but has done little to address the root causes. As a result, Boko Haram has been able to resurge after near destruction. In his article entitled "Re-evaluating the Boko Haram Conflict", Jideofor Adibe outlines occasions in 2013 and 2015 where Boko Haram suffered near defeat yet they resurged after a brief period of inactivity. He argues that security forces have underestimated the resiliency of Boko Haram and that defeat on

¹¹ Regens et al., 45.

¹² Ibid., 47.

military terms is unlikely unless Nigeria expands the tools they use and put “nation building on the front burner”.¹³

Boko Haram has been able to remain viable mostly due to enduring economic and religious disparities between northern and Southern Nigeria.¹⁴ These disparities and lack of effective government social response have created the environment for Boko Haram to operate with only intermittent resistance. Therefore, they have continued to pursue their long term objective of the creation of an Islamic state having carved out significant territory in which to operate, despite short term success by security forces.

A BRUTAL RESPONSE

Suppressive force has been the main tool of Nigerian efforts to subdue Boko Haram.¹⁵ The Nigerian strategy has evolved throughout the conflict, but has remained principally a military approach. Between Boko Haram’s further radicalization between 2009 and 2014, President Jonathan’s efforts to destroy the group were largely ineffective. In fact, the major tactics that made up the counter Boko Haram strategy led to increased violence and increased regional threat. The failure of Jonathan’s strategy can be put into two broad categories. First, the human rights violations committed by security forces, and second, the criminalisation of sect members.

While the crackdown against Boko Haram began before Jonathan took office in 2010, his strategy led to a significant escalation of the conflict. The Joint Task Force (JTF) that led the military component of the fight against Boko Haram has been the target

¹³ Jidefor Adibe. “Re-evaluating the Boko Haram conflict” Brookings Website. (29 February 2016). Last Accessed: 8 May 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2016/02/29/re-evaluating-the-boko-haram-conflict/>

¹⁴ Regens et al., 51.

¹⁵ Isaac Terwase Sampson. “The Delemmas of *counter-bokoharamism*: Debating state responses to Boko Haram terrorism in northern Nigeria” *Security Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2016): 132.

of many accusations of human rights abuses. The Presidential Committee on Security Challenges in the North-East of Nigeria (more commonly known as the “Galtimari Commission”) stood up in 2011, cites the unprofessional conduct of the Nigerian Forces as a significant impediment to the maintenance of public support and an effective response to terrorism.¹⁶ Some of their findings include prevalent use of rape, destruction of property, violations of rules of engagement, and extra-judicial killings. In addition to the questionable tactics used, underfunding, poor equipment, corruption, and operational lapses show the image of an ineffective force to combat violent extremism.¹⁷

As a result, by 2013, Boko Haram held significant territory and current military action lacked the strength to break the stalemate. The Nigerian Government declared a state of emergency in the three most affected areas: Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa. However, despite a surge in troops, little actual progress was made. Once again, security forces were criticised for poor performance, low morale, corruption, and human rights abuses.¹⁸ Unsuccessful tactics and abuses by security forces further alienated the affected populations and decreased national support for the military across the country.

One unfortunate result of the failure of the military approach was a retraction in international support. Due to the reports of human rights abuses, Nigeria was subjected to an arms embargo that caused significant supply problems. Efforts to obtain weapons and ammunition through Russia and China weakened relations with the U.S., and illegal purchases were disrupted by South Africa creating friction with that regional power.¹⁹

¹⁶ Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos. “A Sectarian Jihad in Nigeria: The Case of Boko Haram” *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 5 (2016): 880.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 880.

¹⁸ Habibu Yaya Bappah. “Nigeria’s military Failure against the Boko Haram insurgency” *African Security Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2016): 151.

¹⁹ Hakeem Onapajo. “Has Nigeria Defeated Boko Haram? An Appraisal of the Counter-Terrorism Approach under the Buhari Administration” *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2017): 67.

However, despite international sanctions resulting from their poor human rights record, Nigeria has received considerable military cooperation. Amnesty International lists many countries that provided weapons to the Nigerian security forces including Canada, China, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Israel, Norway, Russia, South Africa, Ukraine and the USA.²⁰ Many others have participated in combined training and assistance.

In addition to the direct military action against Boko Haram, Nigeria's efforts to criminalize Boko Haram and use the justice system to neutralize the threat has been another unsuccessful venture. While in line with conventional counter terrorism approaches, the criminalization of Boko Haram members led to mass detentions without trial. This incarceration without process has become a key grievance of Boko Haram and has intensified the conflict. They have demanded the liberation of their detained members and have targeted detention facilities regularly. Their first act in 2010 was to attack the prison in Bauchi, and since then they have attacked 15 of 18 prisons in the country's north-east.²¹ Further to their actions towards these facilities, prisons have become a key recruiting ground for Boko Haram. The Terrorism Act, passed in 2013, renewed the military's right to detain suspects for three months without process by police or the justice department.²² This exacerbated the detention, and as Amnesty International outlines in its 2015 report "Stars on their Shoulders. Blood on their Hands", 20,000 people were incarcerated in mass arrests based on suspicion of supporting Boko Haram.²³ With little hope of process or release, prisoners are easily targeted for radicalization by

²⁰ Amnesty International. *Stars on their Shoulders. Blood on their Hands. War Crimes Committed by the Nigerian Military*. (London: Amnesty International Ltd., 2015), 108.

²¹ Pérouse de Montclos, 881.

²² Ibid., 881.

²³ Amnesty, 75.

Boko Haram members. Detention facilities have become more effective than the mosque for radicalization.²⁴

In an effort to avoid some of the pitfalls of criminalizing Boko Haram and ignoring reintegration concepts, the Nigerian Government has made efforts to negotiate with Boko Haram and grant amnesty for some combatants. This was attempted between the 2012 and 2013 states of emergency. However, this proved unsuccessful for several reasons. First, military leaders were skeptical of Boko Haram motives and that the ideology of the group was unlikely to compromise.²⁵ Also, extreme demands by Boko Haram to release and grant amnesty to all combatants, and the implementation of Sharia law in certain states, were rejected by Jonathan. Shekau also introduced the notion that his group had committed no crimes and that the government should be the one requesting amnesty.²⁶ This included demands for Islamic law trials of certain government officials including a former Governor of Borno state.²⁷ Eventually, hope of reaching any negotiated settlement was abandoned and led to the 2013 state of emergency and further violence. Attempts to negotiate continue, but have met with limited success.

Alienation from its own population, and the international community severely impeded Nigeria's efforts to defeat Boko Haram and led to the continuation of the conflict. While Boko Haram was degraded during the 2013 state of emergency, largely due to additional troops, but alongside major human rights abuses the group was able to bounce back and continued committing violent acts including the 2014 abduction of 276 girls from the Chibok School.

²⁴ Pérouse de Montclos, 881.

²⁵ Comolli, 120.

²⁶ Ibid., 118.

²⁷ Sampson, 134.

A CHANGE OF PACE

In the 2015 Presidential Election, President Jonathan was replaced by President Muhammadu Buhari who vowed to destroy Boko Haram. Understanding the importance of defeating Boko Haram, and the criticisms of Jonathan's approach, President Buhari aimed to strengthen the military and achieve decisive victory in the field. With renewed support and regional cooperation, he gave his security forces three months to handle the problem and declared victory in December 2015. Did Buhari accomplish in such a short time what could not be done in six years of bloody conflict?

While still considered a military problem, Buhari's approach to the war on Boko Haram has been more multifaceted than previous strategies. As Boko Haram was pushed to the peripheries of the country, Buhari made significant progress in strengthening ties with neighbouring countries and reinforced the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) that unites forces from Niger, Chad, and Cameroon against Boko Haram.²⁸ However, this has mainly been necessary because Nigerian forces were unable to control the borderlands and effectively fix Boko Haram within its own borders where they could be defeated. This stems primarily from the fact that the group's leadership and main supporters have largely evaded Nigerian Security Forces. As Hakeem Onapajo lays out in his analysis of Buhari's approach, while much territory has been recaptured by security forces, there has been very little impact on the strategic elements of the group. This includes forcing the group's core fighting elements underground, increasing the use of asymmetric tactics like suicide bombers, and children and women in conflict.²⁹ Further to this, support for the group has not been effectively cut off. There is reason to believe

²⁸ Onapajo, 68.

²⁹ Ibid., 69.

that Boko Haram's leadership is being protected by elites within the country itself.³⁰ This has led to a lack of arrests of key personnel, and a failure to recover the 247 abducted school girls.³¹

Another major concern is the continued strategic communication of Boko Haram. Nigeria has not been able to contain the group's messaging that is crucial for dispersed groups like Boko Haram and is a significant recruiting tool. This includes video releases that are still regularly occurring. Most recently, Shekau released a video confirming that he had not been injured in Nigerian bombardments near the Sambisa forest.³²

Buhari campaigned on reforming the military and there have been some military victories that have likely resulted from increased support. Key to degrading Boko Haram's ability to hold ground was the successful capture of their operating base in the Sambisa forest in December 2016. This has become a symbolic victory for the military that held a large demonstration in the area in March 2017, with the Minister of Defense declaring that Boko Haram will never again occupy Nigerian Territory.³³ While the government now controls the area, there has been little evidence that they have initiated effective development programs that will address the issues of poverty and security force

³⁰ Ibid., 70.

³¹ On 6 May 2017, just prior to the submission of this paper, 82 School Girls were released. This leaves 113 girls still unaccounted for. Details of the release are still surfacing. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/chibok-schoolgirl-found-1.4103285>

³² Sahara Reporters Website. "Boko Haram Leader, Shekau, Releases New video To Prove He Wasn't Injured In Nigerian Airforce Bombardment" (4 May 2017). Last accessed 8 May 2017. <http://saharareporters.com/2017/05/04/boko-haram-leader-shekau-releases-new-video-prove-he-wasnt-injured-nigerian-airforce>

³³ VOA News Website. "Nigerian Army Holds Drill in Sambisa Forest, Former Boko Haram Stronghold" 31 March 2017. Last accessed 8 May 2017. <http://www.voanews.com/a/nigeria-army-sambisa-forest-drill/3790625.html>

abuse that allowed Boko Haram to flourish. Amnesty International reports that security forces are still committing widespread human rights abuses.³⁴

The United Nations has echoed the concern of Amnesty International in a January 2017 briefing at the Security Council by Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs Taye-Brook Zerihoun. He criticised Nigerian state security forces of violating International Human Rights Law regarding the conditions of detention for suspects as well as the prolonged detention of Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) and refugees for screening purposes.³⁵ They have also indicated a lack of child services actors to address issues of children being used in conflict and detained by security forces.³⁶ This and other factors led to the unanimous adoption of UNSCR 2349 that strongly condemns terrorist attacks and other violations in the Lake Chad Basin region.³⁷

Not only are the security forces methods currently under scrutiny, but there is also concern that Boko Haram still maintains the ability to mount attacks as evidenced by the incidents in early 2017 ranging from attacks on military check points and units, to multiple suicide bombings.³⁸ This continued activity by Boko Haram, abuses by security forces, and a neglect of the growing humanitarian crisis in the region are good reason to be sceptical of the success of Buhari's approach to the situation.

³⁴ Amnesty International. "Amnesty International Report 2016/2017, The State of the World's Human Rights" (2017) Last accessed: 8 May 2017. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/nigeria/report-nigeria/>

³⁵ United Nations Department of Political Affairs Website. "12 January 2017, Briefing to the Security Council on the situation in the Lake Chad Basin region by Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Taye-Brook Zerihoun" (12 January 2017). Last accessed: 8 May 2017. <http://www.un.org/undpa/en/speeches-statements/12012017/LakeChadBasin>

³⁶ UN Department of Political Affairs

³⁷ United Nations Website. "Security Council Strongly Condemns Terrorist Attacks, Other Violations in Lake Chad Basin Region, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2349 (2017)" (31 March 2017). Last accessed: 8 May 2017. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc12773.doc.htm>

³⁸ UN Department of Political Affairs

The Nigerian Government is not blind to these criticisms and their limited success from the military approach. In October 2016, the Nigerian Government announced that they will implement the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST) that has been under review since its drafting in 2012. It aims to provide a more comprehensive approach to the situation. The results of NACTEST are yet to be seen, however the strategy espouses a multi-agency effort to confront the enduring threat from Boko Haram.³⁹ The National Security Advisor stated “The NACTEST is a call for action to all Ministries, Departments and Agencies, including Non-Governmental Organisations and all well-meaning Nigerians to consciously take up their roles as outlined in the strategy.”⁴⁰

Initiation of the NACTEST is among other initiatives that were formalized in 2016. President Buhari has established government bodies that aim to coordinate response to the humanitarian crisis including the Presidential Committee on the North-East Interventions (PCNI) and North East Development Commission. However, the bulk of the response to the crisis in the North-East has been undertaken by the United Nations Development and other NGOs. Unfortunately, international humanitarian intervention remains hampered by the on-going violence.⁴¹

³⁹ Sampson, 137.

⁴⁰ Premium Times Website. “Nigeria set to implement new counter terrorism strategy” (20 October 2016). Last Updated: 8 May 2017. <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/more-news/213215-nigeria-set-implement-new-counter-terrorism-strategy-official.html>

⁴¹ International Crisis Group Website. “North-eastern Nigeria and Conflict's Humanitarian Fallout” (4 August 2016). Last accessed 8 May 2017. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/northeastern-nigeria-and-conflict-s-humanitarian-fallout>

CONCLUSION

Could the recent release of 82 Chibok School girls be some evidence that this new strategy is working? Perhaps Buhari's approach will further degrade Boko Haram and improve the situation for the people of North Eastern Nigeria. However, the Nigerian government's use of suppressive force has led to human rights abuses that have marred its progress in defeating Boko Haram and have decreased international support. The lack of resources to address the financial and developmental causes of the conflict has also hindered progress. Criminalization of Boko Haram members and mass detention have only aggravated the problem and decreased hope of negotiations and reintegration of former sect members into society.

Boko Haram has proved itself to be a resilient organisation, capable of suffering tactical setbacks and resurging. Past security force victories have resulted in temporary reprieves from violence, however without the addition of developmental support for the affected region they have not created stability. Resolving the issues at hand in North Eastern Nigeria is a daunting task, and both Western idealism and brutal force will likely continue to fall short in the quest to help the people in this desperate situation. As the humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad Basin region grows, the conditions are favourable for Boko Haram to recover from its defeats in North Eastern Nigeria and they will likely remain a regional threat until the root causes of violent extremism are effectively addressed and human security becomes the primary concern for state authorities.

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