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Nigeria: Boko Haram and the Regionalization of Terrorism

Denis M. Tull and Annette Weber

The wave of violence unleashed in north-eastern Nigeria by the militant terror group Boko Haram and the regionalization of terrorism have spurred neighboring Chad, Cameroon and Niger into action. Since March 2015, they have been conducting military operations in the border regions, sometimes on Nigerian territory, in an effort to push back the terrorists. Nigeria and its neighbors have officially agreed a multilateral military operation with the aim of neutralizing Boko Haram. However, for domestic political reasons, Nigeria is blocking regional cooperation, while a UN Security Council mandate for the force is in the making. International support for the planned military operation will be futile unless Abuja changes course. It remains to be seen, if the newly elected President Muhammadu Buhari will bring change.

Boko Haram's stated aim is to proclaim a caliphate in Nigeria and to eliminate the country's political class and all "infidels". Most of the victims of its attacks are Muslims in Nigeria's economically marginalized north-east. Under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, the group has become radicalized and has escalated its military and terrorist activities. It is thought to have as many as 10,000 members at present, including countless forcibly recruited children and teenagers. Since 2009, at least 10,000 people have fallen victim to violence by Boko Haram and the security forces, and more than 1.5 million have been displaced, including around 150,000 who have taken refuge in neighboring countries. A few days before the presidential elections on

28 March 2015, Islamic State (IS) "accepted" Boko Haram's pledge of allegiance.

Background and organization

It is no coincidence that north-eastern Nigeria, comprising Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states, is the epicenter of Boko Haram's activities. The region has some of the world's worst economic indicators. More than 70 per cent of the population live in extreme poverty, and 85 per cent of people in Borno are illiterate. The decline of local industries such as textile production has worsened unemployment, as has the impact of terrorism, such as border closures and curfews. Boko Haram's agenda explicitly addresses local and national abuses of power, and its criti-

cism of corruption amongst the political class particularly touches a nerve. Its jihadist propaganda, which claims to offer the prospect of salvation from the failure of politics and traditional social models, seems to have the desired effect. In a macabre way, the numerous attacks on civilian targets such as markets, bus stations, schools and religious institutions, both Muslim and Christian, are also proving successful. Since 2014, territorial control has become an increasing focus of interest for the group. Coordinated attacks on military facilities and key infrastructures in Nigeria and Cameroon have demonstrated that Boko Haram is also equipped for more conventional warfare.

The Nigerian government so far oscillated between indifference and repression: indifference, because former President Goodluck Jonathan (2010–2015) has never indicated that fighting terrorism is a national priority; repression, because Nigerian security forces have massacred thousands of civilians and suspected followers of Boko Haram. Through its incompetence, the government has further inflamed public opposition and, most likely, has driven more sympathizers into the arms of the militant terrorists. The government's action thus reinforces the view – widespread in northern Nigeria – that the region is being deliberately marginalized. The fact that since Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999, it has always been governed by presidents from the south (apart from 2007–2010), is regarded in the north as evidence of this imbalance. The failure, so far, to neutralize Boko Haram is often not attributed to government incompetence but is seen as politically motivated. The government, it is claimed, is taking no action because the region is politically and economically meaningless to the center.

Nigeria's neighbors under pressure

In view of Boko Haram's cross-border incursions, more intensive military cooperation between the region's countries would seem

to be a sensible approach, but is by no means a given. This became apparent after the French-organized summit on Boko Haram, in Paris on 17 May 2014, which was attended by the presidents of all the affected countries. A raft of decisions were taken – exchange of intelligence, coordinated patrols, pooling of resources, and a commitment to a regional counter-terrorism strategy – but there was little follow-up at first. This situation remained largely unchanged until March 2015, when the countries bordering Lake Chad launched military operations in north-eastern Nigeria and the border regions, accompanied by a Nigerian Army offensive. The threat posed by Boko Haram has apparently intensified to such an extent in recent months that the benefits of regional cooperation outweigh the (remaining) concerns, at least for Nigeria's Francophone neighbors, which are already struggling with the influx of some 150,000 Nigerian refugees.

Cameroon should be mentioned in particular, whose northern region has frequently been targeted by Boko Haram since 2014. This forced an apathetic government to concede that the militant terror group's activities were no longer simply a Nigerian problem. Cameroon has boosted its military presence in the region with a further 2,000 troops, who have battled Boko Haram on countless occasions in recent months. According to government statements, hundreds of terrorists have been killed in these clashes, along with several dozen soldiers.

Since February 2015, Boko Haram has also turned its sights on Niger and Chad. Both countries are now caught in a vice: to the north of their national territories, there is the threat of spillover effects from Libya's disintegration; in the south, a new flash-point has emerged with the escalation in Nigeria. Chad's capital is just a stone's throw from Boko Haram's operational area, while the country's economy is dependent on the transit of goods across Cameroonian territory (imports, pipelines for oil exports). The participation of these three neighbors in the struggle against Boko Haram serves

clearly defined political and economic interests. Their governments expect further benefits to accrue from their engagement, not least from Western countries, given that France and the US in particular are desperately seeking effective partners in the campaign against the spread of jihadism in Africa. As the quid pro quo, Western countries grant fragile and domestically dented regimes (Niger) and authoritarian governments (Cameroon and Chad) a measure of international legitimacy and reputation, as well as more practical, security-related benefits such as training for troops, capacity building and military materiel. This approach obviously bears risks and should not stand alone.

The Multi-National Joint Task Force

In early February 2015, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger (plus Benin) agreed to establish an 8,700-strong Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF). Since then, negotiations have been under way between these countries, the African Union (AU) and international partners (the US, France and the United Nations) on the Task Force's mandate, composition, operational strategy and resourcing. It has already been decided that the Task Force should be a multidimensional operation with military, police and civilian components. The AU Commission is lobbying for international support for the MNJTF and is also mediating between Nigeria and its neighbors, whose bilateral relations are historically burdened as a consequence of border disputes.

The AU is pushing for a UN Security Council mandate for the Task Force under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. There is also an expectation that the Security Council will set up an international fund in order to mobilize flexible financial and logistical support for the Task Force. The speed and scope of this assistance will, however, depend on the MNJTF countries themselves. Besides the continued failure to deploy the pledged troops (Nigeria: 3,250; Chad: 3,000; Cameroon: 950; Niger: 750; Benin: 750), the

greatest obstacle to the Task Force's functionality is the lack of a political consensus on a common approach.

Roadblock Nigeria

More than two months after the adoption of the decision to establish the MNJTF, there is still no sign of a coordinated military approach by the stakeholder countries. Chad's cooperation with Cameroon and Niger, respectively, is progressing satisfactorily, but the key player – Nigeria – is still in denial. Under President Jonathan Abuja has refused to grant formal permission for its partners to pursue members of Boko Haram across its borders or, indeed, to carry out attacks in Nigeria itself. The border closure between Cameroon and Nigeria is respected by both sides. However, since February, the Chadian Armed Forces have repeatedly encroached on Nigerian territory, often together with troops from Niger. The Nigerian government's silence in the face of these incursions has domestic and foreign policy causes. For Nigeria, which sees itself as a leading regional power in Africa, it is uniquely humiliating to be a recipient of military assistance – worse still, from Francophone states, which it has traditionally regarded as vassals of France, the former colonial power. This signifies a massive loss of face both regionally and internationally, made more potent still by the involvement of South African mercenaries in the Nigerian offensive against Boko Haram.

Before the 28 March 2015 presidential elections, it was impossible for the Jonathan government to publicly voice approval of Chad's intervention against Boko Haram on Nigerian territory. To do so would have meant admitting its own impotence. Muhammadu Buhari won the elections with his campaign message that he has the military skills needed to conquer Boko Haram, among other things. His religious and ethnic identity meant that he is likely regarded throughout northern Nigeria as a president more committed to solve the region's problems, including Boko Haram. However, on

14 April 2015, the anniversary of the abduction of the 276 schoolgirls from Chibok by Boko Haram, the president-elect did not make any promises for their return.

Nigeria's domestic policy configuration thus explains why Abuja is talking down the successes achieved by its regional partners, especially Chad. However, from its neighbors' perspective, whose armed forces are paying a heavy price in blood, this is a demeaning and disrespectful attitude that stands in the way of cooperation. For example, since the start of military operations in February, 71 Chadian soldiers have lost their lives while more than 400 have been injured. As long as there is a continued lack of genuine willingness on the part of Nigeria to engage in regional cooperation, the MNJTF will remain a costly and ineffective operation.

What is unlikely, by contrast, is a military solution to the problem of Boko Haram. The armed forces of Chad and Niger can do no more than contain the militants and drive them back into Nigeria. The Nigerian troops have already provided ample evidence of their inadequacy. The Chadian Armed Forces, whose reputation was greatly enhanced by their deployment in Mali, should not be overestimated. As part of the AU-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA) in 2014, Chadian troops played more of a destabilizing role. They were also alleged to have committed serious human rights abuses, ultimately prompting the government of Chad to withdraw its troops from the mission.

Outlook

Boko Haram's as yet merely symbolic alliance with Islamic State should not take up too much (international) attention or prompt an overreaction from Western countries. This would simply play into the hands of the group, whose goal is to secure their international reputation and notoriety. It is media coverage of terrorism that puts militant groups on the world map, creating a pull effect which enables terror groups to

attract more recruits and leverage more resources both locally and nationally.

However, the threat of Boko Haram's regionalization is no longer a future scenario. Enhanced regional cooperation is therefore an appropriate and necessary approach. But this will only be effective if Nigeria declares its unconditional willingness to cooperate with its neighbors. Western actors should attempt to speed up developments towards this goal, doing so directly, through support (resources and expertise) for the MNJTF and diplomatic persuasion towards Abuja; and indirectly, through coordination with international partners – above all, the AU, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations – which can also bring influence to bear on Nigeria. In the aftermath of the presidential elections, chances should have increased that the government is more receptive to cooperate with its neighbors. Only if Boko Haram is rapidly contained will it be possible to prevent the regionalization of terrorism and a further surge in recruitment, prompted by the group's alliance with IS. There is also a fear that jihadists from Libya and Sudan and countries further afield will come to Nigeria and that Nigerians will increasingly join other operations.

Medium- and long-term neutralization of Boko Haram also requires political and economic responses. The marginalization of northern and north-eastern Nigeria must end, with political, economic and social inclusion playing an important role. This must include investment in public services, training and job creation programmes, and measures to revitalize the local economy. In order to strengthen social structures, support for religious education and reconciliation initiatives is vital. Amnesties for members of Boko Haram and the resumption of political negotiations should also be reconsidered. And lastly, it is essential to educate the security forces about respect for human rights.

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