

Nigeria and the Battle Against Boko Haram

Why Has the Militant Group Not Been Defeated?



Picture extracted from a video released in March 2017 purporting to show one of Boko Haram's two known faction leaders, Abubakar Shekau (Source: YouTube)

Northeast Nigeria and the rest of Lake Chad region have been battling the Boko Haram insurgency for nearly a decade. By some estimates, 20,000 people have lost their lives in the conflict, nearly 2.6 million more displaced by it, and scores abducted — many of them still unaccounted for.

More worrying is the fact that Boko Haram has not been defeated, despite the Nigerian army's claim to have retaken the militant group's last hideouts in the Sambisa forest in December 2016, and President Buhari's subsequent description of the event as "the final crushing of Boko Haram terrorists"¹. Ironically, the group has recently released a new video recorded in Arabic, purporting to show the leader of one of its two factions, Abubakar Shekau, scoffing at President Muhammadu Buhari, former President Good Luck Jonathan and Army Chief of Staff Yusuf Buratai, shortly after the raid on a village in Borno state on 12 August².

¹ Sahara Reporters, "Nigeria's President Buhari Declares Sambisa Forest Capture From Boko Haram", Available online at <http://saharareporters.com/2016/12/24/nigerias-president-buhari-declares-sambisa-forest-capture-boko-haram> (Accessed on 10/8/2017)

² Sahara Reporters, 'Boko Haram Leader Releases New Video Taunting Buhari, Jonathan, Buratai' Available online at <http://saharareporters.com/2017/08/14/boko-haram-leader-releases-new-video-taunting-buhari-jonathan-buratai> (Accessed on 15/8/2017)

Persistent attacks against soft and military targets, on and beyond the Nigerian territory, indicate that Boko Haram remains one of the biggest security threats in the region (Lake Chad basin).

Unlike its east-African counterpart Al-Shabaab, which continues to strive, mainly due to a weak — almost inexistent — government in Mogadishu, Boko Haram ironically does so in the face of what appears to be a relatively stable Nigerian federal government.

This document examines the current state of Boko Haram, and analyzes the factors explaining its continuing militancy, while attempting to draw some lessons from the Nigerian government's hasty claim of having "defeated" the group.

Boko Haram today: as deadly as ever

Boko Haram has been conducting relatively low-scale operations during the most part of the first half of 2017. During the afore-mentioned period, much of the group's violence has targeted civilians, with female suicide bombers striking in northeast Nigeria (Adamawa, Yobe and Borno states) as well as in various locations in Cameroon's Far North region. Indeed, Boko Haram's lapse during this period (as seen in the decrease in the intensity and frequency of its attacks) may have been the result of its setbacks towards the end of 2016³.

Yet the group's rebound since the beginning of the first half of 2017 indicates that Boko Haram has had ample time to regroup and adapt its fight to the dictates of the terrain. By all indications, the militant group does not appear to be the "defeated group" that the Nigerian government proclaimed it to be, but rather a reinvigorated, deadly militant group capable of inflicting a great deal of harm to civilian and military targets alike.

In the deadliest incident so far, this year, at least 69 people, among them 19 Nigerian soldiers, were killed when Boko Haram militants ambushed a heavily-guarded team of employees of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation and university professors in the Magumeri area of Borno state on 25 July; three people, including at least one academic, were also taken hostage.⁴

On 5th August, Boko Haram militants killed 31 fishermen in the Duguri and Dabar Wanzam islands of Lake Chad⁵, while on 2nd July, the group had killed at least nine people and abducted nearly 40 others in a village in neighboring Niger, not far from Diffa.

The intensity of the afore-mentioned attacks (heavy casualties), the variety of targets (military and civilians) and areas of operation (in Nigeria and beyond) are evidence of the permanent threat that Boko Haram continues to pose in the Lake Chad basin.

Corruption in the army, lingering socioeconomic grievances: why has Boko Haram not been defeated?

Some observers have pointed out entrenched corruption as one of the ills affecting Nigerian government institutions⁶, the military does not appear to be exempted. In fact, the armed forces have been embroiled in

³ By the end of 2016, Boko Haram had lost most of the territory I had previously captured. The army declared then that it had dislodged the militants from its "last" hideouts in the Sambisa forest, Borno State.

⁴ Z News, "Boko Haram ambush death toll hits 69", Available online at <http://zeenews.india.com/world/boko-haram-ambush-death-toll-hits-69-2028460.html> (Accessed on 02/8/2017)

⁵ E NCA, "Boko Haram kills 31 fishermen in Nigeria", Available online at <http://www.enca.com/africa/boko-haram-kills-31-fishermen-in-nigeria> (Accessed on 08/8/2017)

⁶ The Economist, "The \$20-billion hole in Africa's largest economy", Available online at <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21689905-most-nigerians-live-poverty-millions-would-be-spared-if-officials-stopped> (Accessed on 08/8/2017)

corruption scandals involving embezzlement of funds meant for arms procurement,⁷ while some army officers have complained about using inadequate equipment when engaging the enemy⁸.

In 2015, then presidential candidate Buhari made the fight against corruption the bedrock of his administration. As a result, former national security adviser, Sambo Dasuki, remains in detention on charges of embezzling up to USD 2 billion through fraudulent arms deals, though critics of President Buhari, including Dasuki, see the move as the president's attempt to settle political scores⁹.

Regardless of the motive behind Dasuki's detention, it is less likely that his arrest has wholly addressed corruption in the military, especially in such a short period of time. Indeed, it could take longer than the Buhari's presidency to root out corruption, be it in the military or any other institution.

Troop morale and efficiency are less likely to co-exist with corruption in any military institution, it took the Boko Haram insurgency to expose the Nigerian army as weak. At best, the army's claim of victory against Boko Haram in December 2016 may have been naïve, or at worst, a calculated move by its top commanders to gain credit from the president and to restore its damaged reputation.

Rather than claiming to have defeated Boko Haram in December 2016, the army may take credit for reducing the group's ability to seize swathes of land, as was the case during Boko Haram's pinnacle.

Moreover, reports of human rights abuses by some members of the army in areas already afflicted by the Boko Haram insurgency may have led to — if not exacerbated — locals' negative perceptions of the military (operations)¹⁰. This factor, coupled with historic economic marginalization (lack of access to quality education, youth unemployment, lingering poverty) in northeast Nigeria will continue to make the region a fertile ground for violence, thus frustrating any military efforts to defeat Boko Haram and similar groups.

Conclusion: can the Boko Haram scourge be defeated on the military front alone?

The resurgence of Boko Harm following nearly six months of reduced activism after its December 2016 setbacks, could be an indication that the war against the group may not be won on the military front alone.

A question may then be asked whether the Nigerian government has a sound program and the will to address the above-mentioned — and probably other — outstanding grievances that gave birth to the Boko Harm insurgency.

The federal government may need to consider investing in the poor, restive northeastern states to address the economic grievances fanning militancy, especially among the youth. Additionally, investment in, and the reform of, the education system through constructive dialogue with northerners, may help to address the ideological drivers of the conflict, and thus deprive Boko Haram of its recruiting pool.

⁷ TIME, "Nigeria's Military Quails When Faced With Boko Haram", Available online at <http://time.com/3702849/nigerias-army-boko-haram/> (Accessed on 08/8/2017)

⁸ Premium Times, "EXCLUSIVE: Lt. Col. Abu Ali's Death: Why Boko Haram is killing more Nigerian soldiers – Top Military Officer", Available online at <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/214716-exclusive-lt-col-abu-alis-death-boko-haram-killing-nigerian-soldiers-top-military-officer.html> (Accessed on 02/8/2017)

⁹ Mail Online, "Top Nigerian corruption suspect blames politics for arrest" Available online at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-3656756/Top-Nigerian-corruption-suspect-blames-politics-arrest.html> (Accessed on 08/8/2017)

¹⁰ Daily Trust, "Army set up board of inquiry on human rights abuses" Available online at <https://dailytrust.com.ng/news/general/army-set-up-board-of-inquiry-on-human-rights-abuses/188325.html> (Accessed on 09/08/2017)