

# **Boko Haram and the Isolation of Northern Nigeria**

Written by Joseph Siegle

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JOSEPH SIEGLE, NOV 6 2013

Boko Haram's violent campaign for an Islamic state in northern Nigeria has led to the growing isolation of this region. Trade in Kano, the economic hub of the north, is estimated to have been cut by half in recent years.[i] Roughly \$15 billion worth of annual trade and two million traders from neighboring countries used to flow through Kano.[ii] As Boko Haram's violent attacks have increased, fewer traders are crossing the border to take the risk. This coincides with a stream of businesses leaving northern states from Borno to Kaduna for greater stability in the south.[iii]

Boko Haram's high-profile kidnapping of French tourists in February 2013 accelerated the plunge in travel in the region. Internet and cell phone access have similarly been restricted due to Boko Haram's bombing of 24 base transceiver stations belonging to at least six telecommunications companies in the northeast.[iv]

While President Goodluck Jonathan's declaration of a State of Emergency in May 2013 applied only to the three northeastern states of Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, the cumulative effect of Boko Haram's violence and intimidation is the growing seclusion of an entire tier of northern states. Such isolation serves Boko Haram's aims well. Ideologically, the sect claims it seeks a purified version of Islam. Severing the region's links with the outside world curbs the influence of external ideas, technology, and resources – leaving more space for the group's message.

The growing isolation of northern Nigeria parallels patterns observed in northern Mali in the years prior to the French-West African military intervention in January 2013 when Islamic militants gained influence and control of large tracts of territory. Comparable patterns of isolation were seen in Pakistan's Tribal Areas and southeastern Somalia under al-Shabaab. In the latter case, this control included barring humanitarian assistance to the famine-affected areas in the 2011 East Africa drought.

### **Regional and International Implications**

Isolation is not only problematic for northern Nigeria but also holds important regional and international implications. To start, it confounds external understanding of the complex dynamics unfolding on the ground. This includes assessing the relevance of Boko Haram within the surge of Islamic militantism across the Sahel. While Boko Haram originated and still largely exists as a homegrown insurgency, it has increasingly taken on international features. The group is now reported to have fighters from Benin, Chad, Mauritania, Niger, Somalia, and Sudan. The funneling of these combatants into northern Nigeria is likely to increase as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its militant partners are forced from their redoubts in northern Mali. Boko Haram's dramatic jump in capacity in 2011, its declared association with al-Qaeda, and the adoption of tactics used in the global Salafist playbook, such as the use of suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices, suggest active influences and support from the international jihadist network.

From the perspective of external actors, ambiguity created by the fluid dynamics in the north fosters hesitancy for the government's stabilization efforts. This is reinforced by reports of human rights violations perpetuated by the Nigerian security forces in pursuit of Boko Haram.[v] Withdrawal of external technical and political support would weaken the stabilization effort, however. The Nigerian government can benefit from the hard-earned lessons of population-centric domestic counter-insurgency operations gleaned from its regional and international allies. Failure to make adjustments to Nigeria's military response risks inflaming the legitimate grievances of communities in

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northern states and stimulating a recruiting boon for Boko Haram. This will expand the duration (and likely scope) of the instability leading to further isolation and deterioration of living conditions for those living in northern Nigeria.

Experience from other parts of Africa and beyond shows that the longer a low-intensity conflict lingers, the greater the likelihood this crisis will metastasize. This could take numerous forms including: Boko Haram splintering into even more violent and politically irreconcilable parts (a process that may already be underway), the acceleration in the spill-over of instability into neighboring countries, an expansion in the number of displaced and exiled persons, Boko Haram's linking up with transnational narcotics traffickers to boost funding for its insurgency, an increase in inter-religious attacks elsewhere in Nigeria, and the shifting of terrorist attacks to soft targets throughout the country, among other possibilities.

There are other important but indirect regional and international implications posed by the Boko Haram instability. Nigeria's sustained deployment of troops in its northern states means Nigeria will be less able to contribute peacekeeping troops to regional peace operations. Nigeria has historically played a leadership role in such regional security initiatives, and is Africa's second largest troop-contributing country with forces serving in 10 different peacekeeping missions in Africa in 2013. This includes the largest contingent of troops in northern Mali.

In addition to other trade, Nigeria typically supplies almost half of the Sahel's cereal needs. As a result of the conflict in the north, production is down and prices have spiked causing serious food security concerns in the Sahel, particularly import-dependent, Niger.<sup>[vi]</sup> Isolation, furthermore, undercuts developmental prospects. This is poignantly seen in the global campaign to eradicate polio. Northern Nigeria is one of three locations in the world today where the polio virus persists (Pakistan and Afghanistan being the others). Inaccessibility to the northern region as well as misinformation regarding the purpose of vaccination campaigns risk derailing the latest drive to eradicate the disease – and free up billions of dollars in resources for other public health initiatives around the world.

Politically, the threat posed by Boko Haram and the, at times, heavy-handed response by the Nigerian security sector also threaten to undercut the perceived legitimacy of the government and support for Nigeria's evolving democratization process. In fact, a key element of the narrative put forward by Boko Haram is that the government is corrupt, uncaring, and unrepresentative of interests in the north. If this perspective is accepted by a large enough percentage of northerners, then the validity of future elections and the willingness to resolve competing interests through democratic institutions will be crippled. Perceptions are already widespread in the north that should President Jonathan seek reelection in 2015, the region will be further disenfranchised.<sup>[vii]</sup> Lacking this basic trust poses fundamental challenges to the governability of the north – and the perceived viability of democracy in Africa's most populous state. This, in turn, shapes democratic prospects elsewhere on the continent.

## **Conclusion**

While commonly perceived as solely a domestic problem, the threat posed by Boko Haram has important multinational origins, drivers, and implications. Accordingly, it is important that both the Nigerian government and external partners make a priority of keeping links between northern Nigeria and the outside world open. Ultimately, this is a battle for the trust of the local population.<sup>[viii]</sup> Communications is a central element of the stabilization equation. External engagement can accelerate the government's learning on this front as well as the broader question of how to confront a dangerous domestic adversary with restraint and sensitivity for civilian casualties. Comparable challenges are being faced in contexts from the Sahel, the Maghreb, and East Africa, to Latin America and East Asia. No one country has all the answers. Yet, opening channels of information-sharing with legitimate actors in these contexts can help avoid some of the most costly mistakes. Enhanced regional security cooperation, particularly with Nigeria's northern neighbors – Chad, Niger, and Cameroon – is of particular priority given the regional elements of the militant threat.

Given the levels of distrust in northern Nigeria, regional and international partners can also play vital roles as honest brokers in fostering dialogue between local communities and the Nigerian government. This, in turn, can contribute to enhanced legitimacy of government leaders. External actors, moreover, can play a vital role in ensuring development resources are reaching communities that have been historically marginalized and hold genuine grievances. Such

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development assistance may likely be best provided by civil society organizations that have long ties to the local communities. Domestic and international civil society actors can similarly provide a valuable layer of accountability for Nigeria's security sector.

The challenges posed by Boko Haram are emblematic of an emerging security paradigm in Africa today where local grievances are fused with international ideology, funding, and technology. Effectively addressing the multilayers of this threat will require the cooperative engagement of Nigeria's neighbors and international partners.

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