

**Unusual Lessons from an Unusual War:
What the Fight Against Boko Haram Teaches Us About Confronting Modern
Insurgency**

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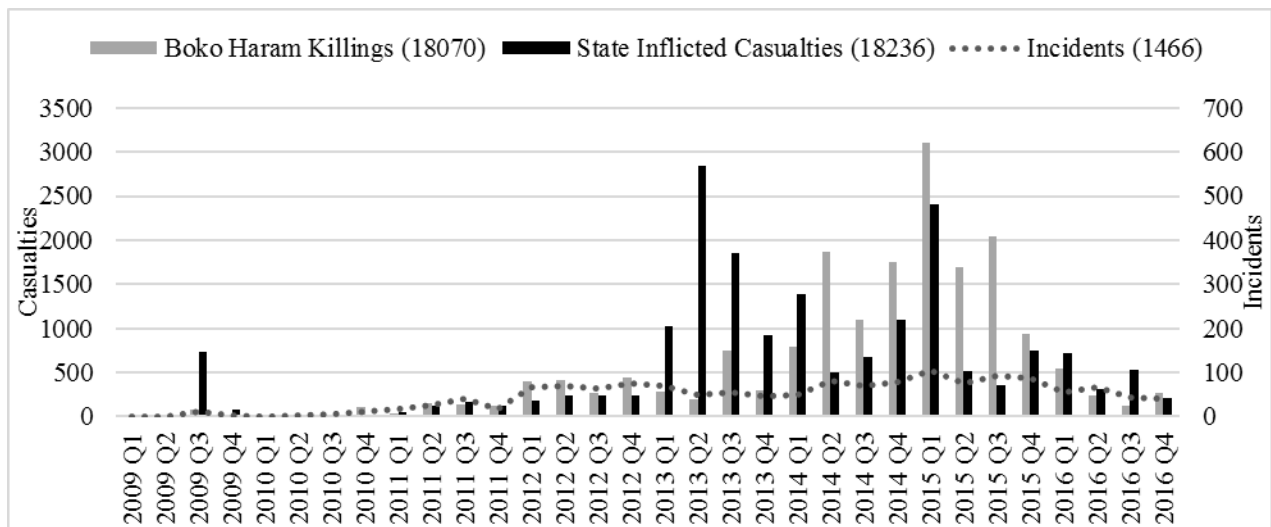
Forthcoming in the *Washington Quarterly* 40:4 (Winter 2017)

Abstract: The fortunes of the Islamic-State affiliated Boko Haram have experienced a sharp decline since being declared the world's deadliest terror group in 2015. The loss of much of the Nigeria-based insurgent group's territory has led government officials to claim victory. In this article, I examine the reasons for Boko Haram's decline and considers whether the war is in fact won. I argue that Boko Haram is neither defeated nor an existential threat to regional security and that in order to prevent a return to large scale violence, authorities will need to show restraint in dealing with dissident groups, carefully manage militias, improve regional cooperation and invest in rebuilding Nigeria's shattered north. The article draws on original descriptive data to illustrate how Boko Haram is different from many insurgencies and how conventional perspectives that read too much into Boko Haram's rise being a product of state failure or linkages with transnational insurgency are misleading.

In early 2015, the Nigerian insurgent group Boko Haram appeared unstoppable. After gaining notoriety by kidnapping 276 schoolgirls in Chibok, Borno State, the group transformed from troublesome terrorist group to a menacing insurgency. It declared allegiance to ISIS, seized command of territory close to the size of Rwanda, and began mounting attacks in neighboring states. With more than 10,000 killed on all sides of the conflict during the year, the insurgency could legitimately claim to be Africa’s deadliest. In November of 2015, Boko Haram was declared the world’s deadliest terror group by the Global Terrorism Index.²

Now, Boko Haram is a menace in retreat. The group has lost nearly all its former territory in Nigeria, maintaining outright control of at best three of Borno State’s sixty Local Government Area (LGAs).³ The conflict claimed just 2,700 lives in 2016, a quarter of the number killed in 2015 and the conflict’s lowest total since 2012.⁴ On December 24, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari declared victory over Boko Haram after pushing the group out of its “last enclave” in Borno’s Sambisa Forest.⁵

FIGURE 1: QUARTER KILLINGS AND INCIDENTS IN THE BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY, 2009-2016



Source: Nigeria Social Violence Database, Johns Hopkins University

Despite Buhari's proclamation, Boko Haram is not defeated. The Nigerian government has claimed victory against Boko Haram half a dozen times before, only to see the group re-form and adapt. Over the past several months, Boko Haram has launched attacks waves of attacks near some of its former strongholds in Borno, causing thousands to flee.⁶ Yet neither is Boko Haram an existential threat to the security of Nigeria and its neighbors. The vast majority of the insurgency's toll in lives, displacement, and property has been inflicted on a fraction of Nigeria's population in Nigeria's remote northeast and surrounding areas.

In reality, Boko Haram is one of the world's most poorly understood and frequently mischaracterized groups. The two most common perspectives on Boko Haram argue that the group's fortunes are best explained by Nigeria's weak state institutions or Boko Haram's links to transnational Islamist insurgency. These perspectives only partially explain Boko Haram's evolution from dissident movement to insurgency and do very little to explain the group's decline. In many respects, Boko Haram is very different from other insurgencies. By discerning these differences, it becomes evident that defeating Boko Haram is possible, but will require years of sustained political and military effort.

As with most insurgencies, Boko Haram was made possible by a combination of favorable geographic terrain, state weakness, and outside support. But here's what's unusual: Boko Haram began as a mass urban movement. It transformed into an insurgency directly because of the state repression of that movement. It receives no support from foreign nations. As Boko Haram's 2015 declaration of allegiance to the Islamic State indicates, the group's links to transnational Islamic insurgency are an important part of its strategy and identity. However, Boko Haram receives little material support from the Islamic State. Boko Haram's

communications, recruitment, and extreme tactics are as much a product of local political conditions and its leaders' personalities as of Boko Haram's relationships with outside groups. Local militias groups have been essential in cooperating with security forces and in denying Boko Haram the ability to maintain control over populated areas for long.

Grasping this is critical. Stepping away from the generalizations based on state weakness and Islamic extremism allows us to see Boko Haram for what it is – a menacing, but not insurmountable challenge to regional security in Africa, yet one that will not rapidly be overcome. If authorities wish to prevent a return to large scale violence, they will need to show restraint in dealing with dissident political groups, to carefully manage militias lest they be tempted to turn on their state allies, to invest extensively in rebuilding Nigeria's shattered northeast, and to improve coordination with regional forces in Niger, Chad and Cameroon to ensure the group is not able to reconstitute itself. These are the key lessons learned from the recent successes in the war against Boko Haram.

The Insurgent and the State: Too Weak or Too Strong?

Perhaps the most conventional of wisdoms is that weaker states are more vulnerable to insurgencies. David Galula, the famed counterinsurgency theory and French officer during the Algerian War of Independence, wrote with particular attention to the “machine for control of the population,” including the political administration, the police and the armed forces. These, he argues, are the state's essential instruments for combatting insurgency.⁷ But strong state apparatus is not enough; a healthy economy matters as well. Political scientists James Fearon and David Laitin find that an additional \$1000 of per capita income lowers the odds of civil war by 35% in a given year.⁸ Contemporary analysts debate whether these correlations mean that a

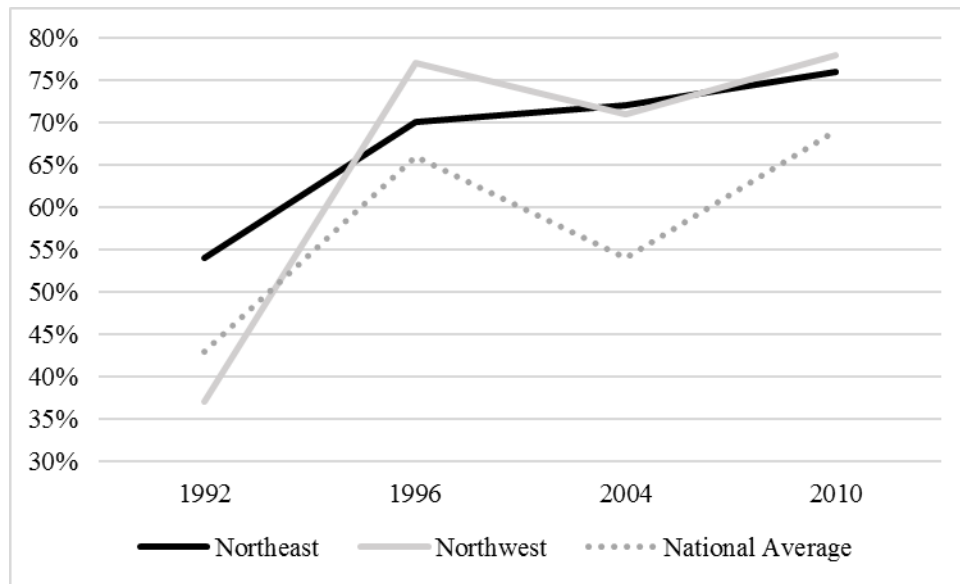
lack of competent security infrastructure makes it easier for insurgent groups to organize or whether a lack of economic opportunity makes it easier for insurgent groups to recruit.

Boko Haram illustrates both these theories. The insurgent group's operations are centered in northeastern Nigeria, a particularly impoverished region of a country that ranks 152 out of 188 on the UN's Human Development Index.⁹ The region's 76% poverty rate, 85% illiteracy,¹⁰ and poor infrastructure all compare unfavorably to the rest of country.¹¹ As one Nigerian analyst puts it, the insurgency is often portrayed as "the result of the failure of successive governments in Nigeria to fight corruption, provide public services, create economic opportunities, and establish accountable and effective security institutions."¹²

Nevertheless, state weakness is clearly just a proximate cause of the insurgency. The socio-economic differences between Nigeria's north and south and between Nigeria and the rest of the world have been there for decades. Though poverty in northeastern Nigeria rose between 1992 and 2010, it increased less than the national average. As Figure 2 illustrates, poverty rose the most in Nigeria's northwest, from 36% to 78% -- far more than in the troubled northeast where Boko Haram operates.¹³ Moreover, the most rapid increases in poverty in Nigeria occurred during the oppressive regime of Sani Abacha in the 1990s. Other measures of state weakness, such as unemployment, child mortality, and school completion rates follow similar trends.

Poverty cannot explain why the Boko Haram insurgency began in 2009, and not 2002 or 1995. It also cannot explain why the insurgency's operations are centered in the northeast, when other areas of Nigeria are equally as poor or have experienced more rapid declines in living standards.

FIGURE 2: POVERTY INCIDENCE IN NIGERIA, 1992-2010¹⁴



Source: Nigeria National Bureau of Statistics. Poverty figures reflect the percentage of households spending two thirds or less of the regionally-deflated weighted mean household per capita expenditure.

Nor can we conclude that poor security infrastructure caused the insurgency. Though it may not compare to the armies of the United States and other Western powers, the Nigerian military is the second-largest on the continent, a major contributor to regional peacekeeping, and reasonably well-equipped. With over 100,000 men under arms, a \$2-billion-dollar budget, and considerable operational experience, only South Africa and Ethiopia could stake a reasonable claim to be greater military powers in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁵

We can more accurately say that the northeast's relative poverty provided the context. The Boko Haram insurgency started not because Nigeria's army is weak. Rather, the Nigerian army adopts an ineffective – even counterproductive -- strategy for confronting social and political movements who oppose the state.

Before turning to violence, Boko Haram was a dissident Salafist religious movement with about 280,000 followers throughout much of northern Nigeria.¹⁶ The movement's adherents

were diverse enough to include university lecturers and political elites, but came mostly from urban poor who turned to Boko Haram for schooling, food, or other subsidies. Some elements of the movement had occasional dust-ups with Nigerian security forces, but the group did not openly embrace violence. In 2006, Muhammed Yusuf, Boko Haram's leader at the time, publicly stated "I think that an Islamic system of government should be established in Nigeria, and if possible all over the world, but through dialogue."¹⁷

In fact, between 2002 and 2009, Boko Haram entered into a political partnership with the Nigerian State. Boko Haram's support was crucial electing Ali Modu Sheriff governor of Borno State. In return for the group's support Sheriff promised to help spread Sharia law and provided Yusuf with access to state resources. The governor's patronage in turn helped the charismatic Yusuf reward and build his vast network of followers. For a time, this peaceful accommodation served both the state and the movement.

That all changed in July 2009, when sect members were on their way to a cemetery to bury some of their colleagues who had died in a traffic accident. They were intercepted by security forces, who asked why they were not obeying laws to wear crash helmets. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the confrontation escalated until security forces opened fire, shooting 17 mourners.¹⁸ In retaliation, some Boko Haram members then attacked several police stations, according to news reports -- for the first time, explicitly threatening the state with violence.

The Nigerian government could then have arrested the handful of sect members and leaders who'd been involved. Instead, the Nigerian state's response was disproportionate and brutal. Within days, 800 of the sect's most senior members, many of whom were moderates who

surrendered to the state on their own accord, were extra-judicially massacred by security forces.

¹⁹ Yusuf was one of the dead, killed in the custody of Nigerian police.

After Yusuf's death, Boko Haram went underground and reconstituted itself under the more radical leadership of Abubakar Shekau. Though evidence is scant, during this period it appears to have cultivated stronger relations with outside insurgent groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Al-Shabaab.²⁰ What is clear is that, between July 2009, the month of the crackdown, and August 2010, the month of Boko Haram re-emerged and began attacking police officers, Boko Haram was transformed from a largely non-violent political dissident movement to a terrorist group whose explicit aim was to destabilize the Nigerian State.

Nigerian security forces routinely respond to perceived threats with crude repression. In 1995, security executed non-violent peace activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, an action widely credited with helping to start the insurgency in the Niger Delta. Most recently, the Nigerian military gunned down three hundred and fifty members of the Shia Islamic Movement of Nigerian (IMN) after the group blocked the convey of Nigeria's chief of army staff in December 2015.²¹ The government's repression of the IMN may or may not lead to further conflict. Yet if military's intent is to deter actions that oppose the state, then the strategy of indiscriminately killing opposition forces carries high risks and appears to fail consistently.

In other words, the most direct cause of Boko Haram's turn to violence was not state failure so much as state repression.

Defining Boko Haram: An Islamist, Kanuri, or Borno Insurgency?

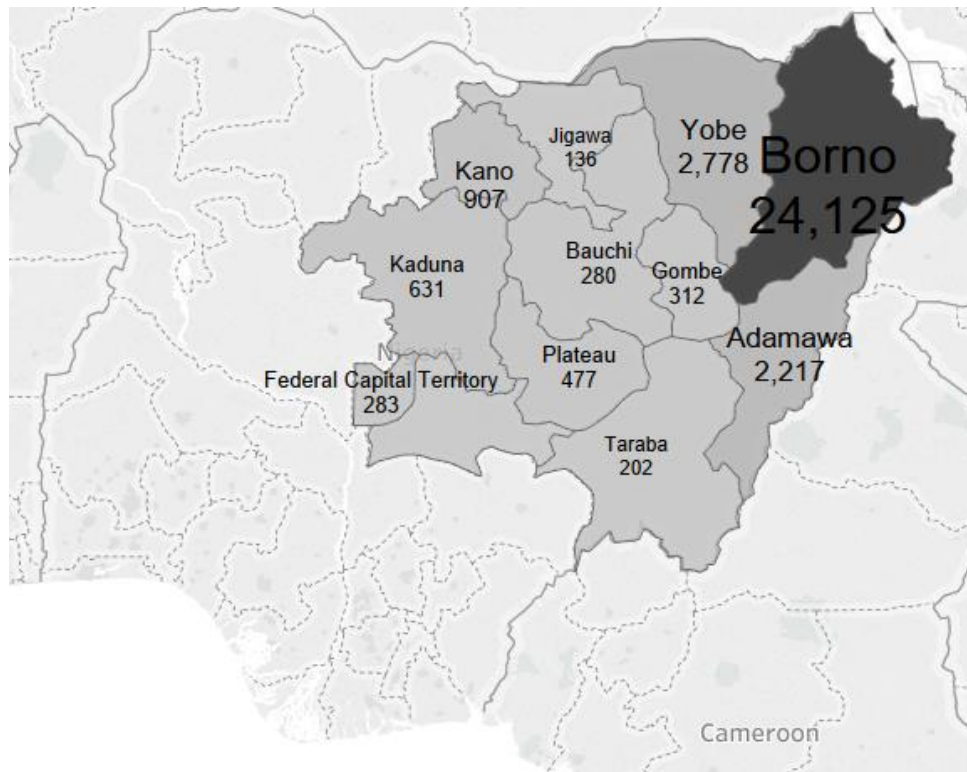
Over the past decade, Islamist insurgency has become the preeminent driver of contemporary conflict. Militant Muslim groups serve as combatants in over 60% all on-going

conflicts, according to the Council on Foreign Relations Global Conflict Tracker.²² The timing of Boko Haram's insurgency coincides with the general spread of Islamic insurgency to much of the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Boko Haram has many ideological, tactical, and material links with the transnational Islamist insurgency. The group refers to itself as Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād (Group of the People of Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad), and was founded with the political goal of bringing Sharia law first to Nigeria's north and then to the rest of Nigeria. According to Georgetown's Alex Thurston, Boko Haram's worldview is a noxious combination of "religious exclusivism that opposes all other value systems" and a "politics of victimhood."²³ It has allegedly received training and assistance from al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and, more recently, the Islamic State, with whom it declared bayaat or allegiance in April 2015.

Nevertheless, we should avoid overstating the influence of other Islamist movements. Boko Haram was founded to spread Sharia law first across all of Nigeria's northern states, which are predominantly Muslim, and then across the rest of Nigeria, according to Yusuf. Yet Borno State has seen nearly ten times as many deaths from the insurgency as any other state, even though it's home to a mere three percent of Nigeria's population (see Figure 3). Why has the insurgency failed to make significant inroads across Nigeria's north? It's not because of links to outside insurgent movements, local poverty, or robust state institutions.

FIGURE 3: BOKO HARAM-RELATED DEATHS IN NIGERIA'S NORTH, 2009-2016



Source: Nigeria Social Violence Database, Johns Hopkins University

The most likely explanation for Boko Haram’s limited reach is simply that its spiritual and political home, before the fighting began, was in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State. Once the group turned violent, many of the same networks that Yusuf had built up with assistance from the state turned against it. The need for secrecy and a lack of pre-existing political infrastructure across the rest of Nigeria made it difficult for Boko Haram to establish much of a foothold elsewhere. To this day, most of Boko Haram’s senior leadership is drawn from the northeast-centered Kanuri ethnic group, which makes up less than 10% of Nigeria’s Muslim population. This has been virtually ignored by analysts of the conflict, even though it may be perhaps the most important reason the effects of the insurgency have been grave, but far from catastrophic.

In fact, it’s unlikely that the Islamic State actually influences Boko Haram’s day-to-day operations. An overwhelming percentage of Boko Haram’s funding and manpower comes from

local sources, as a result of taxes, theft, extortion or kidnapping; to lose the material support of transnational Islamic terrorist groups would likely not be a crippling blow. Since Boko Haram's formal *bayaat* to ISIS there has been little evidence of formal collaboration, apart from Boko Haram echoing the social media and propaganda strategy of the Islamic State.

Apparently, the two groups made a fairly even symbolic exchange: Boko Haram gained the explicit support of the world's pre-eminent Islamic extremist organization, while the Islamic State claimed a franchise in Africa's most populous country. In keeping with that exchange, much of influence the Islamic State has over Boko Haram is informal and even mutual, with both sides observing and adopting one another's tactics.²⁴ Shortly after the Islamic State captured significant territory in Iraq and Syria in 2014, Boko Haram declared its territorial ambitions. After declaring allegiance, Boko Haram changed its name to the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and its social media operations experienced a major upgrade. But the influence appears to have flowed two ways. Evidence suggests that the Islamic State's use of kidnapping and public beheadings as a strategic tool was learned by observing Boko Haram. This kind of strategic and tactical information exchange does not require close collaboration; these days, an internet connection may suffice.

Given the evidence that the Islamic State might actually have adopted some tactics from Boko Haram, Boko Haram's brutality cannot fairly be attributed only to transnational Islamist groups or ideology. Different Islamist terrorist movements have very different ways of treating opponents, civilians and fellow Muslims. The Islamic State split from al-Qaeda in part because the former supported attacks on fellow Muslims it deemed apostates.²⁵ And the Islamic State's contested August 2016 attempt to declare Abu Musab al-Barnawi head of Boko Haram is also due to differences over the treatment of civilians and captives.²⁶ The announcement, was

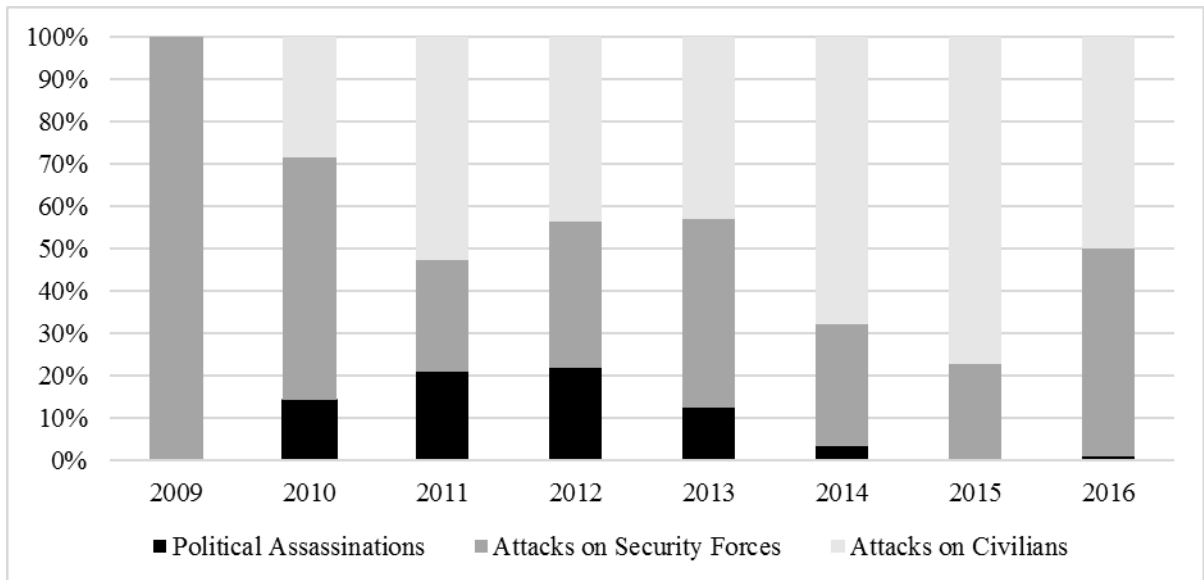
reportedly prompted by long-time leader Shekau's reckless killing of Muslims, fellow fighters, and captives.

Brutality is No Substitute for Effective Strategy

Until the conflict's recent reversal of momentum, Boko Haram's tactics became steadily more brutal over time. These tactical shifts were not because of any affiliation with ISIS but because of strategic choices made by the group's leaders. The group's initial violence in 2010 appears to have been motivated by little more than revenge against the Nigerian security forces: it attacked police stations, beer halls, and checkpoints where Nigeria's police and armed forces were known to congregate. The group also mounted an assassination campaign against prominent political figures, including leading Islamic clerics Boko Haram saw as too close to the state. But that shifted over the next four years. As illustrated in Figure 4, the percentage of its attacks targeted at civilians increased from less than thirty percent in 2010 to around eighty percent in 2015.

Boko Haram's first series of mass bombings occurred in a series of churches in late 2010, killing around 50 civilians. It set off Nigeria's first suicide bomb at Nigerian police headquarters in June 2011, killing six. In early 2012, it began attacking schools, killing hundreds and eventually forcing over 1 million children out of school.²⁷ These attacks might also have been partially motivated by vengeance at what Boko Haram saw as popular rejection but also served a strategic purpose: to deter ordinary civilians and their leaders from cooperating with security forces.

FIGURE 4: BOKO HARAM'S TARGETS, 2010-2016



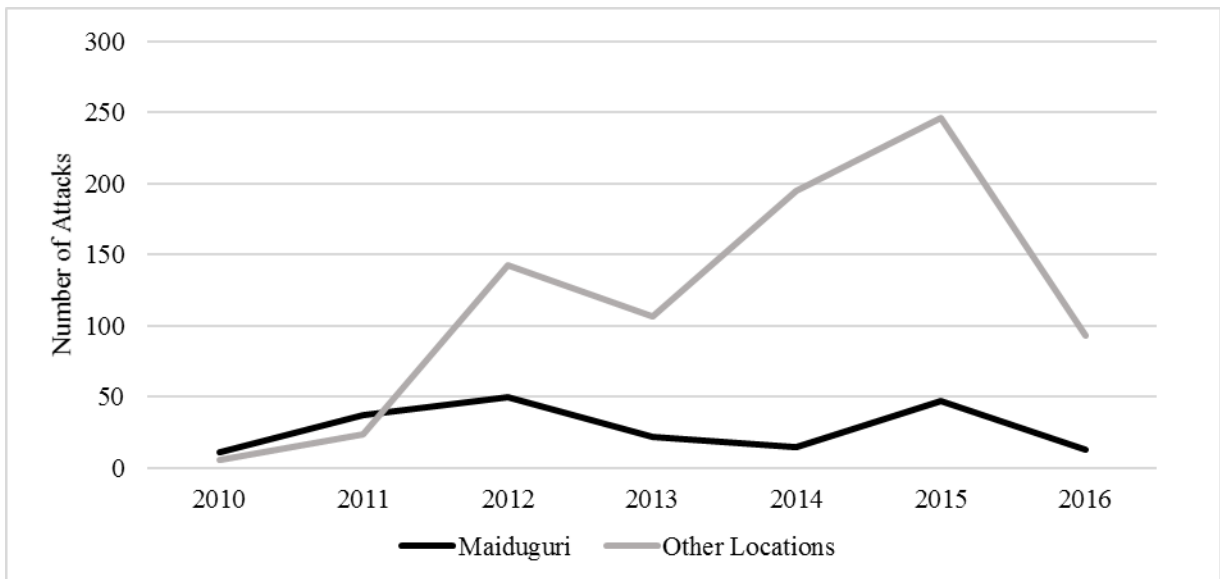
Source: Nigeria Social Violence Database, Johns Hopkins University

The strategy of targeting prominent Muslims and other officials who denounced Boko Haram appears to have partially worked. As of mid-2015, many prominent Muslim clerics were still reluctant to denounce the group.²⁸ However, the group’s increasingly brutal campaign against civilians backfired. Fed up, in early 2013, civilians organized into local militias known as the Civilian Joint Task Force (JTF). The Civilian JTF’s knowledge of local terrain provided state forces with insight into the insurgency’s networks and inner workings it did not have in the early years of the conflict. In collaboration with security forces, they identified, fought against and evicted Boko Haram from much of Maiduguri in 2013. By some accounts, the insurgents now fear the Civilian JTF more than the Nigerian military.²⁹

Boko Haram’s expulsion from Maiduguri marked another important strategic shift. Between 2010 and 2014, Boko Haram transformed from an urban-based terrorist group into a rural insurgency. As Figure 5 illustrates, between 2010 and 2011, nearly all of group’s attacks took place in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State that is home to over 1 million residents. In

2012, attacks in rural areas surpassed those in urban centers, driven in part by Boko Haram's ambitions to extend its reach across Nigeria. These attacks helped to turn the tide of local popular opinion against the group and led to a stronger government response, beginning with President Goodluck Jonathan's declaring a state of emergency across much of the northeast in mid-2013. By then, less than 20 percent of Boko Haram's attacks were conducted in major cities, driven by the pressure Civilian JTF and security forces were placing on the group in Maiduguri.

FIGURE 5: BOKO HARAM ATTACKS IN MAIDUGURI, KANO OR JOS OVERLAID WITH TOTAL NUMBER OF ATTACKS, 2010-2016



Source: Nigeria Social Violence Database, Johns Hopkins University

The effect of this transformation was significant. When Boko Haram was expelled from Maiduguri, it left behind a locale where it had ample supporting infrastructure to areas where its leaders and members had little and knew few people. In Nigeria's cities, Boko Haram was able to recruit adherents from disenfranchised youth without kinship networks, particularly among the urban poor.³⁰ In the countryside, where Salafism is absent and many Muslims practice more

syncretic forms of Islam, it had to recruit through coercion and kidnapping. Nevertheless, the group began seeking territory, declaring itself a caliphate in August 2014.

These territorial ambitions meant even more conflict with the northeast's civilian populations. From mid-2014 to mid-2015, the insurgency had its bloodiest period, claiming well over 10,000 lives and displacing millions. This is the period of many of Boko Haram's most spectacular attacks, from the Chibok kidnapping to bombing the grand mosque in Kano, which killed over 120 civilians. At its apex, Boko Haram controlled a large chunk of territory in Nigeria's northeast, and began significantly expanding its operations in Niger, Cameroon and Chad. Its rule over the population by coercion, intimidation, mass killings and fear rather than legitimacy what Asfura Hein and Julia McQuaid call "enforcement terror," appeared to be briefly to be working.³¹

The Ill-Considered Expansion

As it turned out, Boko Haram's territorial expansion was a big strategic blunder. It placed Boko Haram, now a full-blown insurgency, into a strategically vulnerable position, with perhaps five or ten thousand fighters spread out over 10,000 square miles.³² Seizures of medium-sized towns such as Bama and Gwoza committed the insurgents to holding fixed positions, which made them easier targets for Nigerian civilian and security forces. And this occupation required governing a mostly hostile local population.

Before early 2015, the Nigerian government had mishandled the insurgency. Nigeria's president at the time, Goodluck Jonathan, was seen as disengaged from the conflict and unable or unwilling to provide strategic direction. Critics made allegations that members of his government were colluding with Boko Haram. The President was reticent to comment in the aftermath of the

kidnapping of the Chibok girls. This left many with the impression that Jonathan was either out of touch with what going on or that developments on the ground were out of his control.

The military wasn't doing well on the battlefield. Despite its experience as part of peacekeeping missions in Sierra Leone, Liberia and elsewhere, the Nigerian armed forces had never faced an opponent like Boko Haram. Insurgents were well-hidden among the population, possessed superior knowledge of the local terrain and were equipped with rocket-propelled grenades and vehicle-mounted anti-aircraft weapons likely raided from Libya.³³ Many units in Nigeria's army were not nearly so well armed. In some cases, army units tasked with combatting the insurgency soldiers were left with 30 bullets and no food rations to fight an insurgency with superior arms and fuller stomachs, leading to mutiny.³⁴ Boko Haram used suicide bombs, massed attacks at military checkpoints, road-side ambushes and other hit-and-run tactics to inflict hundreds of casualties. The casualties provoked the Nigerian army into a predictably disproportionate response, such as the killings of hundreds of civilians suspected of harboring insurgents after a Boko Haram raids on an army barracks in Giwa, Borno State. These operations left civilians distrustful of security forces and unwilling to cooperate.

But when Boko Haram expanded between 2014 and 2015, the situation changed dramatically. Beginning in early 2015, the Nigerian military's performance on the battlefield significantly improved, for several reasons. First, Boko Haram's holding of fixed positions allowed the Nigerian military to engage Boko Haram in a more conventional manner, striking with massed attacks against cities and towns where the group was vulnerable. Second, he Jonathan administration feared losing an upcoming election, and may have begun to take the conflict more seriously. Recently purchased equipment and supplies began more consistently reaching the conflict's front lines. Private mercenaries were reportedly hired from South Africa

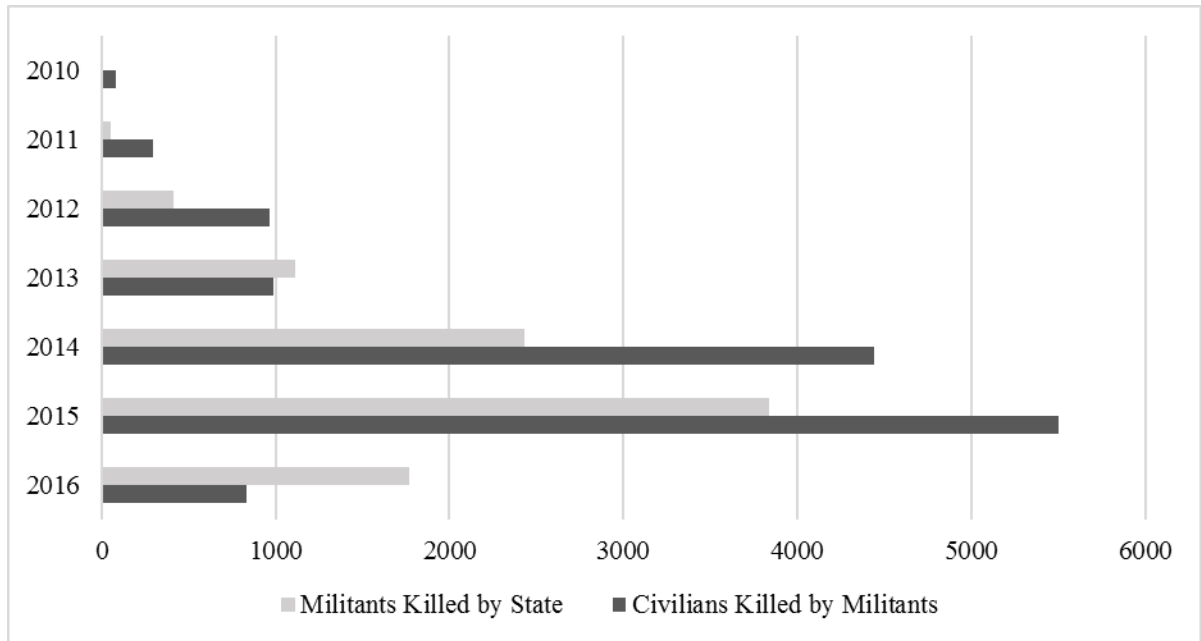
to spearhead an offensive against the group. Better equipped and better directed, army fought with strengthened morale.

At exactly the same time, other countries began reacting against Boko Haram's incursions into their territory. The governments of Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger set up a Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to prevent Boko Hara from easily fleeing across porous borders. Until 2015, Boko Haram had been able to retreat into the no-man's-land of the border region among the four countries. But these smaller armies fought Boko Haram with surprising efficiency, particularly the army of Chad, whose soldiers are practiced in counterinsurgency and which receives significant training and assistance from the West.³⁵

The insurgent group could not hold up against the simultaneous pressure of four militaries at once. Within five months, between January and May 2015, Boko Haram was pushed out of nearly all of the areas it formerly held. It could no longer claim to be a territorial insurgency.

The war against Boko Haram continues to go well, by all indications. The MNJTF continues to pursue the group, though relations between the four principal countries are at times tense.³⁶ Since President Muhammadu Buhari took over from President Goodluck Jonathan in mid-2015, the Nigerian military has been fighting the insurgency with increasing professionalism. Better supplied, better armed, and equipped with better intelligence, a more coordinated campaign is targeting insurgent strongholds. Fewer civilian are now harmed or killed. As Figure 6 illustrates, almost 5,000 militants have been killed in the past two years. That's more than the Jonathan government managed to kill in the previous four years.

FIGURE 6: MILITANT AND CIVILIAN CASUALTIES IN THE BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY



Source: Nigeria Social Violence Database, Johns Hopkins University

Nigeria and its partners are doing several things right. They are preventing the insurgents from escaping across international borders. They are keeping the local militias on the governments' side of the conflict. And they're allocating the military resources necessary to keep Boko Haram out of major cities. If this keeps up, it is difficult to see how Boko Haram can ever again command significant territory. Without territory, the group will never be able to threaten to seize the state by force.

What Boko Haram Tells Us About Confronting Modern Insurgency

When academics and policymakers study insurgency, it's important to think carefully about what is new and different about a conflict, in addition to how they fit into standard models. A careful analysis of the Boko Haram insurgency reveals that it's a grave but not existential threat to Nigeria and its neighbors. For now, it's being contained; conceivably it can eventually be eliminated.

Looking at the war against Boko Haram with fresh eyes, we can draw at least four key lessons about confronting contemporary insurgency.

First, states must treat politically dissident social movements with restraint and impartial justice, not with an iron fist. More than any single factor, it was the Nigerian government's brutal repression of Boko Haram that allowed more the group's more radical elements to take control and turn it toward violence. Had Nigerian security forces responded to Boko Haram's initial attacks with negotiations and arrests rather than indiscriminate violence, there might be no insurgency today. At the very least, security forces might have been better able to contain a violent uprising by exploiting the movement's divisions.

Second, restraint in confronting civilian populations is just as important as restraint in dealing with potentially dissident groups. Boko Haram's own brutality prompted civilians to organize a militia to fight it, which was crucial in eventually helping the state launch more targeted, intelligence-based operations against hard-core insurgents. Local civilian cooperation did far more to help expel the insurgents from Maiduguri and other major population centers than did the state's at times indiscriminate and retaliatory violence against civilians who they suspected might have been harboring the insurgents. Using local militias to combat Boko Haram has widely been considered a success. Chad, Niger, and other states are looking into adopting a similar approach.

But of course, as we know from similar conflicts in Latin America and other parts of Africa, state forces need to tread carefully here. The Nigerian government will need plans to monitor, incorporate or employ youth from such militias once the conflict winds down. Otherwise, they may themselves threaten the state with violence. One need only look to the

southern Nigeria, where a government amnesty program for former Niger Delta militants has ended – and where those former militants are again attacking Nigeria’s oil infrastructure.

Relationships with local militias must be handled carefully. Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari’s recently announced that he will employ 250 Civilian JTF members in Nigeria’s army and police forces. That’s a good start, but the state will likely have to do even more to ensure former combatants get stable jobs and are re-integrated into society.

Third, political leadership matters. Early on, President Goodluck Jonathan paid little attention to Boko Haram, allowing the conflict the chance to metastasize. His government didn’t fully engage with the insurgency until early 2015, when he was faced with the prospect of losing an election. That was the kind of leadership that had been needed in confronting the insurgency all along. President Buhari deserves credit for the firm steps he has taken: moving the command against the insurgency to the northeast, replacing key commanders, and improving coordination with allies. On the other hand, Buhari has been as lackadaisical in confronting the Niger Delta militants as he has been attentive in fighting Boko Haram.

Finally, allegiances with transnational insurgent movements are no substitutes for state allies. Though Boko Haram’s Islamic-State inspired expansion in late 2014 and early 2015 appeared unprecedented and terrifying, once four national militaries worked together to oppose it, Boko Haram quickly lost the territory it held. The lesson here is that states must cooperate to contain contemporary insurgencies. It is of utmost importance that cooperation continues between Nigeria and its regional partners to deny Boko Haram and other militant groups the ability to establish cross-border safe havens. The African Union’s planned 25,000-strong Rapid Reaction Force could become an important weapon against insurgencies, if and when it becomes operational.

It is too soon to claim victory. The group has killed over 30,000 and displaced millions, making it Africa's most violent contemporary insurgency. State decisions prompted the insurgency's rise; how states act in the coming months and years will make the difference between Boko Haram's survival or extinction. It took the combined efforts of four national militaries and sustained cooperation with local militia groups to evict Boko Haram from most of Borno State. As I have noted, it will take continued strategic restraint, cooperation with the local population, sound political leadership, and cooperation with regional and international partners to prevent the group's resurgence.

But that's not enough. The Nigerian government is under considerable economic pressure from the steep fall in oil prices. It has not yet considered how to rebuild the north's shattered infrastructure and education systems; re-integrate the children and women the insurgents took as captives; restore the state functions that Boko Haram has successfully destroyed; and reform the legal, economic, political, and security functions that are in disarray from years of civil war. Only once these tasks are completed can victory be declared, because only these steps will ensure that Boko Haram – or a group like it – will never rise again. Even if the insurgent group is defeated, it will take Nigeria a generation to undo the damage it has caused.

Endnotes

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- ¹ The author thanks American University's Bridging the Gap for providing support for the research and writing of this article from Nigeria.
- ² Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP). *Global Terrorism Index: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism* (New York: IEP, 2015), p. 4.
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- ⁴ Unless otherwise specified, all the data presented in this article is created by the author from the 2016 Nigeria Social Violence Project database, maintained by Johns Hopkins University. A project summary is available at <http://www.connectsaisafrica.org/research/african-studies-publications/social-violence-nigeria/> .
- ⁵ Michelle Faul, "Nigeria: Boko Haram is crushed, forced out of last enclave," *Associated Press*, December 4, 2016,
<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/bee64677ffbf4d968b05692a0d86d877/nigeria-boko-haram-crushed-forced-out-last-enclave>.
- ⁶ "Thousands flee Boko Haram attacks around Chibok," *The Guardian*, March 1, 2017,
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