

NIGERIA: BOKO HARAM AND THE THREAT OF A NEW “CALIPHATE”

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While the United States are fighting, with an international coalition, the so-called Islamic State terrorist group in Iraq and Syria, Boko Haram, the Nigerian jihadist group, is now directly threatening one of Nigeria's main cities. This insurgency is holding territory after a series of victories against the Nigerian army and the proclamation, last month, of a “caliphate”. Despite the international outrage provoked by the kidnapping of more than 200 girls from a school in April 2014 and the declaration of the state of emergency since May 2013 in the states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa, the terrorist group continues to gain ground.

On August 24, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau proclaimed, in a 52-minute video, the creation of an Islamic caliphate in Gwoza, a Borno state town with a population of about 50,000 people seized at the beginning of August. Since then, Boko Haram insurgents have seized several towns in north-east Nigeria, and are now threatening directly the capital of Borno state, Maiduguri, a city with a population of over two million.

Cameroonian and Nigerian media reported that Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau may have been killed on September 17, 2014, in an air raid or in clashes on the ground with Nigerian army, near Konduga. At the present moment Nigerian

authorities have not confirmed officially this information¹. It is worth remembering that with Shekau as the main commander, Boko Haram has grown more ruthless, violent and aggressive, and less open to mediation. However, even in the case of his death, it is likely that the factions of Boko Haram will be able to adapt and remain active. In fact they did the same after the killing of Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf in 2009.

It seems that Boko Haram is trying to emulate the Islamic State terrorist group's victories in Syria and Iraq. From hit-and-run raids, carried out from its hideouts in Sambisa forest and in Mandara Mountains, against civilians and security forces in a series of raids on villages and towns, the Nigerian terrorists have moved to direct confrontations with the army in open battles attacking and holding seized territory. The Nigerian Islamists are still conducting kidnappings and bombings but they are also trying to consolidate their control over the area they hold.

- Since July 2014, the Nigerian terrorist group has captured the towns of Gamboru Ngala, Dikwa, Gwoza and Marte in Borno state. On September 2, the insurgents seized the town of Bama, the largest city captured by them, with a population estimated at 270,000 people and located only 70 kilometers from Maiduguri. The same day, the terrorists captured the town of Banki, near the border with Cameroon.
- In the neighbouring Adamawa state, on September 6, Boko Haram seized the towns of Duhu, Shuwa, Kirshinga, Madagali and Gulak, which is the administrative headquarters of the region. On September 7, Boko Haram seized the town of Michika, with a population of about 700,000 and considered the gateway to Adamawa's commercial hub, Mubi.
- On September 11 the Borno Elders Forum (BEF), which represents influential people in Borno state, including former government ministers, traditional elders and civil servants, announced that Boko Haram insurgents "completely surrounded" Maiduguri. BEF said that the terrorists have rendered impassable

¹ The Boko Haram leader had been declared dead at least other two times. On July 30, 2009, Shekau, then deputy to Mohammed Yusuf, was said by Nigerian police to be one of about 200 members of the group killed during clashes. But several months later he appeared in several videos. On August 19, 2013, Nigerian security forces said that he could have been killed from a gunshot wound after a clash with soldiers in June of that year. But another video was posted with him several weeks later, further undermining the credibility of the security forces.

almost all the roads leading to the city and urged the army to be prepared to an attack.

- The terrorists carried out two attacks, on September 12 and 17, against the town of Konduga, just 35 kilometres from Maiduguri. Hundreds of insurgents were reportedly killed in these two attacks; however Boko Haram fighters are still converging towards Maiduguri.

As in the Iraqi case, the main explanation of the jihadists' victories lies in the low morale and poor equipment of their opponents. On August 19, BBC Hausa service reported that a group of at least 40 soldiers refused to fight Boko Haram because of their poor equipment. It seems that in some cases, soldiers were given just 60 rounds of ammunition to face insurgents using Rocket Propelled Grenades, anti-aircraft weapons mounted on trucks and, in some cases, armoured personnel carriers. On August 25, at least 450 Nigerian soldiers took refuge in the far north of Cameroon after Boko Haram fighters attacked the border town of Gamboru Ngala. More than 100 troops fled from Bama and sheltered into Cameroon a week later. On September 16, 12 soldiers were sentenced to death in Abuja for mutiny for having fired at the commander of the Army's 7th Division on May 14. In that occasion, soldiers from 101 Battalion had opened fire at a convoy containing General Amadu Mohammed at a medical center in Maiduguri. The incident took place after a number of their colleagues had been killed in an ambush on the way back from the town of Chibok. It is worth mentioning that in the same town on the night of 14-15 April 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped more than 250 girls from the local Girls Secondary School. At the end of June, 219 of them were officially still missing. The army had been informed of the attack four hours before it took place. However, despite the warning, not only reinforcements were not sent to protect the town but the soldiers on the spot withdrew.

The troops fighting Boko Haram have frequently complained of a lack of adequate weapons and equipment. Many of them have been paid late, or sometimes not at all. In August dozens of soldiers refused to be deployed in a counter-offensive aimed at retaking the Borno town of Gwoza. At the same time their wives were demonstrating in Maiduguri at the gate of a military base asking for proper equipment. The 7th Division, headquartered in Maiduguri, which is fighting against Boko Haram insurgents, has only 8,500 soldiers. Not only the army is overstretched, having just

67,000 troops all over the country, but endemic corruption may have diverted supplies and equipment from the fighting front. Even if the troops are backed by the aviation, they are frightened and demoralized. Furthermore, some troops claimed that some officers and senior soldiers collaborate with the terrorists.

The main problem affecting Nigerian security forces is the lack of trust in the regular army by common people in the Boko Haram-affected regions. Since the Islamist sect has chosen the armed struggle, after a July 2009 crackdown, security forces have been accused of massacres, extra-judicial killings, and arrests without trial. According to Chatham House, “as a result of repression and forced conscription” Boko Haram has grown from 4,000 fighters to between 6,000 and 8,000². Despite the declaration of the state of emergency in the states of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe since May 14, 2013, and despite the creation of a local militia called “Civilian JTF”, formed by youths used as a proxy force, Nigerian security forces have so far failed to deliver the main task of a counter-insurgency: the protection of civilian life and property.

The most evident example of the failure to protect civilians is actually the kidnappings of the Chibok schoolgirls, as mentioned above. Abductions are used to terrorize the local population. The latest mass kidnapping was reported on September 13 when at least 50 young women were kidnapped by Boko Haram terrorists from the town of Gulak, in Adamawa state. Kidnapping are one of the most preferred modus operandi of the terrorists also for ransoms and for prisoner swaps. Hostages are always useful for the insurgents as bargaining chips. In May 2013, Boko Haram’s commander Abubakar Shekau’s own wife was released along the wife of another senior terrorist leader and 90 insurgents in exchange of 12 wives and daughters of security officers taken hostage in Bama. On September 18 the British Telegraph reported that the International Committee of the Red Cross has been mediating a prisoner swap deal to secure the release of the Nigerian schoolgirls for imprisoned Islamist terrorists.

Kidnapping has become one of the main funding sources for Boko Haram alongside extortion and armed robberies. It is worth mentioning that this tactic was employed originally by a former splinter group, called Ansaru, which now seems to be

² Chatham House Research Paper, “Nigeria’s Interminable Insurgency? Addressing The Boko Haram Crisis”. September 2014.

reconciliated with the insurgent group and has a global jihadi orientation. Ansaru, led by Khalid al-Barnawi, trained by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in Algeria, split from Boko Haram initially over controversies on how to share funds from AQIM, indiscriminate attacks against Muslim civilians and possibly Shekau's favouritism to Kanuris, Borno state's main ethnic group. Al-Barnawi organised the kidnapping of two construction engineers, British Christopher McManus and Italian Franco Lamolinara, on March 13, 2011. Both of them were killed in a failed rescue raid by British and Nigerian Special Forces in Sokoto on May 7, 2012. Ansaru seized also Francis Collomp, a French engineer in Katsina on December 19, 2012, who managed to escape from his abductors on 16 November 2013.

Other kidnappings, likely carried out by Ansaru terrorists in collaboration with the main Boko Haram movement, include:

- the abduction of the French Moulin-Fournier family kidnapped with their four children in northern Cameroon on February 19, 2013;
- the abduction and killing of seven foreign construction staff of Setraco, a Lebanese-owned engineering company in the state of Bauchi on February 16, 2013;
- the kidnapping of French priest Georges Vandenbeusch in November 2013;
- the abduction of two Italian priests and a Canadian nun in northern Cameroon in April 2014;
- the kidnapping of 10 Chinese workers in the border town of Waza in northern Cameroon in May 2014.

It should be underlined that not only foreigners, but also family members of high-profile Nigerian and Cameroonian officials have been targeted by kidnappings-for-ransom. On July 27, 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped the wife and sister-in-law of Amadou Ali, Cameroon's vice-Prime Minister, and a senior local religious leader.

As mentioned earlier, most of the kidnapping-for-ransom operations targeting foreigners were carried out by the Ansaru splinter group, characterized by a much more "global jihadist" vocation. It is believed that the group, with several members trained by AQIM, is responsible for expanding Boko Haram's operations into Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Central African Republic. Since late 2012 the splinter group has been reintegrated into Boko Haram. The rapprochement was apparently made more

solid by Shekau's appointment of Babagana Assalafi, al-Baranawi closest lieutenant, as his deputy in Sokoto. According to the International Crisis Group, today Ansaru is one of the six factions composing Boko Haram and, because of its contacts with international jihadism, is considered the most sophisticated one. The French military intervention in Mali, seems to have disrupted the money and arms supply from AQIM to Ansaru and forced Ansaru and Boko Haram to operate more closely³.

Despite its focus on Nigerian targets, the terrorist organization is becoming a regional threat. Porous borders and inter-state links based on common ethnicity allow Boko Haram fighters to have sanctuaries in neighbouring countries. Many Boko Haram fighters, including Shekau, belong to the Kanuri, now the largest ethnic group in north-east Nigeria, south-eastern Niger, western Chad and northern Cameroon. It is believed that Boko Haram established rear bases and training camps in southern Niger. The Nigerian terrorists could have been involved in the June 2013 attack against Niamey prison which allowed several Boko Haram members to escape. The shared ethnicity has allowed the creation of sleeper cells in Niger. Other cells are present in Chad. But it seems that the neighbouring country more affected by Boko Haram is Cameroon. To recall, many kidnappings targeting western citizens took place in this country. At the end of 2013, Boko Haram sent extortion letters to traders in the Far North region of Cameroon and demanded local authorities to implement Sharia and stop working with the West. On September 6, 2014, dozens of Boko Haram fighters were killed near the town of Fotokol by the Cameroonian army during an attempted incursion into Cameroon. In May 2014, at a Paris Summit, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria and Benin agreed on reviving the Lake Chad Basin Multilateral Force, based in Chad, to improve security around the Lake Chad, a lawless area affected not only by Boko Haram insurgency but also by weapons trafficking.

Many recruits seem to come from these neighbouring countries but Boko Haram does not appear to rely on foreign funds. The insurgents use weapons seized either from fleeing soldiers or by looting army armouries. There were reports of Boko Haram members fighting in Timbuktu and Gao alongside AQIM in northern Mali in 2012.

³ Crisis Group Africa Report N°216, 3 April 2014, "Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency".

Some others had links with Somali Al-Shabaab. However, these contacts appear more to be aimed at acquiring weapons and training bombers instead of an effective coordination. Abubakar Shekau never pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda but, in July 2014, he released a video paying tribute to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. And, as mentioned earlier, a month later Shekau declared that he would rule the territory seized by his fighters as a caliphate. However, until now, reports that Islamic State is giving strategic advice or funds to Boko Haram are unconfirmed.

The tactics employed by Boko Haram are a combination of hit-and-run guerrilla style attacks, using mobile columns of armed pickups and motorcycles, as well as terrorist bombings, using car bombs and suicide bombers. The insurgents prefer to hit soft targets but have used also suicide bombers against military barracks. The terrorists carried out bomb attacks in April and in June 2014 in the Nigerian capital Abuja and claimed responsibility also for an explosion, on June 25, at the Apapa port district of Lagos, their southernmost attack. It is worth mentioning that they have started to employ female suicide bombers as a weapon of war. The first reported female suicide attack took place on June 8, 2014, when a middle-aged woman rode a motorcycle laden with explosives into a military barracks killing one soldier in the city of Gombe. At the end of July 2014, four suicide attacks were carried out by young women targeting soldiers, shopping centres and colleges. At the same time, the Islamist insurgents carry out hit-and-run raids against towns and villages. The last one was on September 19, 2014, when 23 people were killed during an attack against the market of the town of Mainok, about 50 kilometers from Maiduguri.

Boko Haram's ideology is aimed at establishing a Muslim state in the northern regions of the country, ruled by Sharia and without the influence of Christian and Western culture. This goal is underlined by its very name. Boko Haram means "Western education is a sin", in the Hausa language. To accomplish this objective, the jihadists carry out ruthless terrorist attacks against churches and colleges. The latest of such assaults was against the Kano Federal College of Education, a teacher training college in the city of Kano, which was stormed by two suicide bombers who killed 15 people on September 17, 2014. Moreover, the insurgents have repeatedly targeted critical Muslim clerics, traditional leaders, suspected collaborators, UN agencies, bars and health workers.

The incidents of recent weeks demonstrate, as the Nigeria Security Network highlighted, that “for the first time in its history, Boko Haram is seizing and holding onto territory outside of its hideouts in Sambisa and the Mandara Mountains”⁴. The insurgents are trying to behave as a conventional army by defeating government troops in pitched battles and holding towns. It is unlikely that Boko Haram will have the funds to rule as a state the seized territories such as the Islamic State does in Iraq and Syria, where it can count on oil revenues. But it is still possible that, as the Islamic State did, Boko Haram insurgents may be able to seize big cities such as Maiduguri, if they are not attacked effectively in a ground and air counter-offensive.

There is no doubt that if the city falls, it would be a symbolic and strategic victory with great consequences for the terrorist movement and for President Jonathan Goodluck’s aspiration to be re-elected in the elections scheduled in February 2015. In fact, the entire Borno state could fall under Boko Haram’s control soon and the jihadists could expand their attacks both into Cameroon and into southern states of Nigeria. It is worth mentioning that in March 2013, Shekau claimed that the group would attack oil refineries in the Niger Delta. The statement came just few days after hundreds of detainees, mostly members of the terrorist organization, were freed in an attack against the Giwa barracks in Maiduguri.

A recent United Nations estimate indicates that as many as 650,000 people have been displaced by the insurgency both within Nigeria and in neighbouring countries. Roads and bridges have been destroyed, schools and electricity shut while Borno state’s economy is in ruins. Human Rights Watch reported that at least 2,053 civilians were killed by Boko Haram during the first half of 2014 in an estimated 95 attacks. The failure to protect civilians, corruption, high unemployment and a sense of marginalization felt by the northern Muslim population toward the mainly Christian southern regions are all factors that indicate the weaknesses of the Nigerian state institutions. Boko Haram has been able to exploit these factors as well as regional tensions, particularly the north-south divide. Boko Haram could render impossible the presidential elections scheduled in February 2015 in the north-eastern

⁴ Nigeria Security Network, “Special Report : North-East Nigeria On The Brink”, September 2, 2014 ;

states. In this case the results could be challenged as unconstitutional leading to further political destabilization.

The Roman historian Florus said that territories are gained by force, but must be retained by justice (“*viribus parantur, jure retinentur*”). This is an ancient synthesis of the modern military commandment saying that the only way to win insurgencies is to “win the hearts and minds” of the population affected by them. To fight effectively an insurgency, the perception that military power improves citizens’ life is of paramount importance. Not protecting civilians and provoking collateral casualties in military operations can always backfire in terms of lack of support from the population. A good start in fighting Boko Haram could be the implementation of the so-called “soft approach” announced in March 2014 by the National Security Adviser Sambo Dasuki. This approach is centred on a holistic strategy involving deradicalization programmes, community engagement and social and economic development in the impoverished north states in order to reduce radicalization. However, the recent Boko Haram attacks have rendered more difficult, even if necessary, the implementation of this approach.