

NIGERIA: UNDER THE FIRE OF BOKO HARAM

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More than 10.000 people have been killed since Boko Haram started its campaign to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria in 2002. In the most recent attack, about 200 people were reported killed, when Boko Haram gunmen stormed the villages of Goshe, Attagara, Agapalwa and Aganjara in Borno state on June 3. This latest attack brings the 2014 death toll at around 2.000 deaths.

However, since President Goodluck Jonathan has launched a crackdown operation on May 2013, with a deployment of a Joint Task Force in Borno and surrounding states, Boko Haram seems having changed its tactic to a survival mode. Over the past year, the terrorists group has carried out more attacks against soft targets than on hard ones. At the same time, it has re-focused its geographical area of operation toward the north-eastern states in Nigeria (Borno and Kano states) and in the bordering areas in Niger, Chad and Cameroon.

The choice of soft targets over hard ones is justified by the fact that Boko Haram has suffered heavy losses since the launch of the counter-terrorism operation in May 2013. In addition, the extremism of Boko Haram's leader Abubakar Shekau might have created internal divisions within the group and complicated the recruitment process. According a BBC report, Boko Haram is increasingly resorting on hiring teenage mercenaries from Niger's Diffa region than on people sharing Shekau's goals and methodologies.

By targeting soft targets, Boko Haram aims at spreading terror among the population and maintaining its notoriety while avoiding an open confrontation with the Nigerian army. This tactical withdrawal sees the group preferring hit and run attacks over the control of portions of the territory, as pursued during the first half of 2013.

Kidnapping activities, like the one of the 300 school girls in Chibok, may be part of this plan. Through the kidnapping of soft targets, either foreigners or unprotected Nigerians, Boko Haram obtains both financing and notoriety. The raise in kidnappings over the past months might be explained by the need of the group to hire mercenaries and the temporary disruptions of other financing channels, like through AQIM, following the French intervention in Mali.

In addition, the deployment of the Nigerian army in Boko Haram's strongholds seems having pushed the group backward to Borno and Kano states, as well as in the surrounding territories in Niger, Chad and Cameroon. This is the area where Boko Haram will most likely operate in the future, hence exporting its terrorist activities to the three bordering countries. The porosity of the borders and the shared Kanuri ethnicity (the same of the current Boko Haram's leader Abubakar Shekau) may play a key role in this regard.

With the approaching of Presidential elections next year, it is likely that the security situation in Nigeria will deteriorate further. In the north of the country, Boko Haram will keep carrying out mass executions, car bombings and kidnappings against civilians in order to delegitimize and destabilize the government. This could turn the population against President Janathan, who could be accused of not using oil revenues to boost security in the country. In fact, it has already occurred in multiple occasions that Nigerian security forces were alerted about possible Boko Haram attacks in specific locations, but the army failed to arrive or, if arrived, soldiers were outnumbered by the terrorists. On May 9, Amnesty International announced that the Nigerian military was warned about an imminent attack against the town of Chibok, almost four hours before the terrorists kidnapped the girls from their school. According to human rights activists, the army could not assemble the force needed to repel the attack, "due to poor resources and a reported fear of engaging with the often

better-equipped” Islamist terrorists. Therefore, the 17 soldiers based in the town were overpowered by the attackers and had to retreat.

Moreover, the lack of security personnel, equipment and training will also have a negative impact on the morale, hence leading soldiers to defect the army or even join the Islamist militia for a better pay. In fact, despite Nigeria is the largest oil producer in Africa, widespread corruption has impeded the country to build a solid military force. In addition, oil revenues have created evident socio-economic disparities between the north of the south of the country. According to estimates issued by the Council on Foreign Relations’, the 27 percent of the population in the south lives in poverty, while in the north this percentage reaches the 72 percent.

To conclude, the Nigerian government’s counter-terrorism operation seems having pushed Boko Haram toward a tactical retreat. Nevertheless, the Islamist group has demonstrated its flexibility in adapting to new conditions by attacking unprotected targets and creating safe havens in neighboring countries. In the near future we could experience low intensity terrorist attacks in the areas where Nigeria borders with Niger, Chad and Cameroon. Kidnappings and slaughters of civilians will likely continue, while sophisticated attacks against hard targets, like those against the police headquarter and the UN compound in 2011, will be postponed to a time when Boko Haram will have re-built its ranks.

Last but not least, Boko Haram risk becoming a regional phenomenon. This trend could be accentuated if the group splits into “secessionist cells”, as already occurred in the past with Ansaru, lead by leaders like Mamman Nur and Khalid al-Barnawi who do not share Shekau’s strategy and modus operandi.