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Is Nigeria Losing the War Against Terrorists in Borno State? Terrorism Monitor Volume: 18 Issue: 12

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There are few places as conducive to insurgency and terrorism as Borno state in northeastern Nigeria. Grinding poverty, ethnic and religious tensions, illicit networks, environmental degradation, porous international borders, and vast tracts of lightly governed and ungoverned spaces are all features of Borno state. On account of these, Borno has acted as an incubator for various insurgent and terrorist groups, most notably Boko Haram, Africa's most deadly terrorist organization. [1] The Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), Boko Haram, and al-Qaeda affiliate Ansaru, are all active in Borno state and surrounding areas. [2]

Despite the deployment of—at times—over 70,000 Nigerian troops to Borno state alone, all three groups, but most particularly Boko Haram, have maintained their operational tempo. Recent reports indicate that the frequency and complexity of Boko Haram's attacks are, yet again, on the increase. On May 26, Boko Haram attacked homes, a church, and shops in three villages in the Biu local government area of Borno state ([Vanguard](#), May 26). This attack followed an attempt by Boko Haram to overrun a Nigerian Army forward operating base in Gajigana, a town located only fifty kilometers north of the capital of Borno state, Maiduguri ([Sahara Reporters](#), May 18). In this attack, Boko Haram used at least ten technicals mounted with heavy machine guns and recoilless rifles. On June 2, Boko Haram launched near simultaneous attacks using female suicide bombers on villages located across five different local government areas ([Daily Post](#), June 2). In addition to the reported attacks, Boko Haram and other groups carry out robberies, kidnappings, and assaults on an almost daily basis across large swaths of northeastern Nigeria.

The government of Nigeria and the Nigerian Army have repeatedly declared the defeat and weakening of Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). However, the tempo and geographic extent of recent attacks by these groups—Boko Haram in particular—indicates that these organizations' operational capacity remains undiminished and may be on the increase yet again. Boko Haram's resiliency is due to the almost ideal conditions for insurgency in Borno. It is also due to the Nigerian Army and security services' failure to adopt a more agile and responsive force structure. Rather than address these failures, the Nigerian Army is making moves that signal a retreat to Boko Haram and, most importantly, to the Nigerian citizens they are meant to protect.

Retreating to Super Camps

Nigerian officials announced the plan to establish so called “super camps” in the summer of 2019 ([All Africa](#), September 12, 2019). The plan was met with immediate criticism in the Nigerian press despite claims by army officials that the super camps would in fact facilitate the fight against Boko Haram and other insurgent groups ([This Day](#), September 16, 2019). The proposed plan eliminates smaller outposts in favor of creating a small number of highly fortified bases located in or on the outskirts of major towns. Nigerian troops will use the super camps as bases from which to launch extended patrols of surrounding areas. However, critics of the plan point to the fact that these patrols will not replace the permanent presence of troops at the smaller outposts. The deteriorating security situation in Borno state, and indeed in parts of surrounding states, points to the weaknesses of the super camp plan. Instead of contributing to the efficacy of operations, as Nigerian authorities claimed the super camp plan would, the frequency and effectiveness of Nigerian operations against Boko Haram have declined. The lack of forward bases impacts intelligence gathering and, ironically, may make Nigerian troops more vulnerable to attack. It was the ability of Boko Haram and other groups to attack and overrun the smaller camps that, far more than increasing the army's effectiveness, forced the Nigerian Army to create super camps. Yet, extended military patrols from the super camps mean that they are often more vulnerable to attack. The patrols are forced to operate farther away from the bases where already limited air support is further stretched. Boko Haram and ISWAP both enjoy excellent human intelligence and are likely to be more up to date on the movement of troops in and out of the super camps than military authorities in Abuja. [3] Both groups also have a long history of recruiting motorbike drivers (known as *okada* or *achaba* in Nigeria)

as couriers and informants. [4] Boko Haram and ISWAP also use motorbikes to move around rural and urban areas quickly and inconspicuously since motorbikes are ubiquitous in many parts of Nigeria and the larger Lake Chad Basin. [5]

Boko Haram and ISWAP's agility and low profile contrasts with the plodding high visibility movements of Nigerian forces. The collapse of smaller camps into heavily fortified super camps has further compromised the Nigerian Army's ability to quickly field units capable of responding to attacks. Deployments from the super camps are heavily armored, slow moving and easily observed. While the use of larger well-protected and heavily armed units has reduced casualties among the army, this also means that the Nigerian Army is even less capable of securing and holding territory. Boko Haram and ISWAP detect the troop deployments, monitor their movements and withdraw rather than engage the armored columns. When the troops return to their bases, Boko Haram and ISWAP move back in and reassert control.

Losing Hearts and Minds

Even before the implementation of the super camp strategy, the Nigerian Army's responses to terrorists and insurgents in Borno and other states was unpredictable and lacking in precision. In many parts of Borno state, residents fear the military as much as they do Boko Haram and ISWAP. [6] The Nigerian Army and the security services are often heavy-handed in their approach and are responsible for hundreds, if not thousands, of civilian deaths. [7] The fall back to super camps will exacerbate these fears as officers and soldiers have less contact with the local populace. The small camps and bases that the Nigerian Army was using facilitated intelligence gathering and generally gave the soldiers posted to the camps "a feel" for the area as they came to know and recognize local residents. The camps also provided residents with some, albeit limited, security.

The limited security and predictability that the Nigerian Army and security services were providing is dissipating. As a result, the battle for hearts and minds in much of Borno state is being lost. The only real check on Boko Haram, and to a much lesser degree, ISWAP, is the groups themselves. Boko Haram's indiscriminate violence—the group kills far more Muslims than Christians or animists—limits the support that the group might receive if it were less brutal. This is less the case with ISWAP which, while violent, is more measured in how it deals with the populations it wants to control. Boko Haram's bloody tactics, inspired by its leader, Abubakr Shekau, are a leading cause of the tensions within Boko Haram and between ISWAP and Boko Haram.

Neither Boko Haram nor ISWAP are able to provide the communities they operate in with services and consistent predictable security. This inability also serves as a check on their influence in Borno. While both groups have grafted themselves onto the region's licit and illicit economies, they are, as yet, incapable of filling the voids left by the state. This contrasts with other groups like al-Shabaab in Somalia and the Taliban in Afghanistan, both of which often provide basic services and higher levels of predictability and security than their respective governments. This is not to say that these groups are not violent. They are. However, the violence and brutal tactics balance against a measure of relative predictability and security in the areas in which they operate, helping them secure support through both fear and genuine buy-in.

By abandoning large swaths of Borno state to ISWAP and Boko Haram, the Nigerian Army and security services are leaving many residents with little or no choice but to, at best, turn a blind eye to the terrorists and insurgents operating in and around their communities. If Boko Haram and ISWAP adopt a more measured strategy, like al-Shabaab, which Boko Haram has had contact with, the Nigerian government will face an even more intractable insurgency.

Outlook

Borno State and the surrounding states have the highest levels of poverty and illiteracy in Nigeria. Nigeria is one of the few countries in the world that has—at least pre-Coronavirus—seen an increase in extreme poverty, a trend that has been in place since 1990. The responses to coronavirus have all but ensured that the state of Nigeria, which is dependent on oil exports, will face serious budget constraints, increased unemployment and decreased foreign direct investment. All of this will impact the Nigerian Army's ability to combat insurgents while at the same time a deteriorating national economy will make tens of thousands more vulnerable to recruitment by ISWAP and Boko Haram.

Boko Haram and ISWAP already draw on a well of deep discontent. With the effective withdrawal of Nigerian forces from much of Borno and the economic impacts of the response to coronavirus, the well is about to get much deeper. Borno State is ideal for the growth of insurgent groups. The state and surrounding areas have all the conditions required for an insurgent leader to grow his organization: poverty, complex human and physical terrain, thriving illicit trade networks, and porous borders. Battling insurgents when such conditions are present is incredibly difficult for even the best led and equipped militaries. One need only look at recent U.S. experiences to understand this.

However, the Nigerian government's current strategy of operating from a handful of fortified bases, combined with the economic impact of the coronavirus responses, will supercharge both ISWAP and Boko Haram. Both organizations will take full advantage of these shifts to expand their organizations' reach into communities across Borno while at the same time deepening their links to and within illicit trade networks. Short of a comprehensive overhaul of the Nigerian Army's strategy in Borno, the only check on Boko Haram and ISWAP will be their own flawed tactics and factional fighting between and within these groups.

Notes

[1] Boko Haram refers to itself as: Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād.

[2] The dominant faction of Boko Haram led by Abubakr Shekau considers itself to be a part of Islamic State and its sub-group, Islamic State in West Africa Province. However, Shekau's faction has engaged in periodic battles with ISWAP over territory and resources. Shekau's faction and ISWAP operate as two distinct groups with different organizational structures and different tactics.

[3] Author interview with a former official with the Nigerian government (May 2020).

[4] See: Andrew Walker, *Eating the Heart of the Infidel: The Harrowing of Nigeria and the Rise of Boko Haram*, Hurst: 2016.

[5] See: Scott Mac Eachern: *Searching for Boko Haram: A History of Violence in Central Africa*, Oxford University Press: 2018.

[6] See: Amnesty International, "[Nigeria: Military razes villages as Boko Haram attacks escalate](#)," February 14, 2020.

[7] See: Amnesty International, "[Stars on their Shoulder. Blood on their Hands: War Crimes Committed by the Nigerian Military](#)," 2015.

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Article on continuing activities of Islamist groups Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Ansaru in Borno State despite efforts by the Nigerian armed forces to stop them

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