

Boko Haram and Nigeria's Pervasive Violence

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International security experts are watching Nigeria's radical Islamist movement Boko Haram with concern. The militant group has destabilized northern Nigeria and attracted the attention of other jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda affiliates gaining strength in neighboring northern Mali. Boko Haram is highly diffuse. It has an important Islamic revival dimension, but also has political and criminal elements. Little is known about its leader, Abubakar Shekau, including his age, where he was born, or if he can speak English. The movement has issued no formal manifesto. Nevertheless, its various factions do share a common agenda of imposing and rigorously enforcing Islamic law in northern Nigeria; some even want to impose it throughout the country in areas where Christians are the majority. The group is bitterly hostile to the Christian-led secular government in the capital of Abuja, which it accuses of exploiting the poor. Its methods are violent and deadly, ranging from targeted killings to mass deaths resulting from car bombs.

But Boko Haram is only one aspect of the pervasive violence engulfing Nigeria. Government soldiers have been indiscriminate in their fight against Boko Haram, often killing innocent civilians. Police across the country are notorious for extrajudicial murder. Violent clashes between ethnic or occupational groups at times appear indicative of a deeper conflict between Christians and Muslims. Such communal violence, often dismissed as a permanent feature of rural Nigeria, results in a high number of deaths that rivals or exceeds those attributed to Boko Haram. Meanwhile, a new generation of militants in the Niger Delta threatens war against the Nigerian state over the division of the oil wealth their region produces. And then there is kidnapping--sometimes political, but always criminal. This month, the mother of Nigeria's internationally renowned finance minister, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, was kidnapped in Delta state in an alleged attack on the government's financial policies. After five days in captivity, the security services secured her release and arrested sixty-three alleged accomplices in her kidnapping. Once largely confined to the Delta, kidnapping is now ubiquitous throughout the country.

In an effort to better understand this violence, the Council on Foreign Relations has established the [Nigeria Security Tracker](#) (NST), a research project to catalogue Nigerian political violence based

on a methodical survey of Nigerian and international media. The NST is particularly focused on violence related to Boko Haram and other militant activity, communal or ethno-religious conflict, extrajudicial killings by state security, and kidnappings or other violent incidents that have a clear political dimension.

According to the NST, October 2012 was by far Nigeria's deadliest month in the sixteen-month period since June 2011. During that month, three days of ongoing attacks by Boko Haram in the northern state of Yobe left at least thirty dead, including a former government official. In Borno, the state bordering Chad and Cameroon, the military went on a rampage after a bombing injured two soldiers, killing at least thirty civilians. Meanwhile, in Benue, in the middle of the country, communal conflict resulted in the deaths of at least thirty people and the destruction of homes and farmland. A suicide bombing at a church in Kaduna in the north killed eight people and set off reprisal attacks that killed at least two more. In total, at least six hundred people were killed in October 2012.

Boko Haram has also expanded its area of operations. In 2011, Boko Haram violence was largely confined to Nigeria's northeast; by the end of 2012, the NST had documented incidents across all of northern Nigeria. This year, Boko Haram-related attacks have occurred in fourteen out of the country's thirty-six states, including all twelve of the states that have already adopted Islamic law, and in the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja. Boko Haram has also claimed responsibility for attacks in central Plateau state, which has been torn apart by ongoing communal violence.

Up until now, Boko Haram has been focused on Nigerian rather than Western targets of the international jihad. But that might be changing. In a recently released [video](#), Abubakar Shekau made hostile references to the United States and Britain. The United States is increasingly worried that Boko Haram is collaborating with the al-Qaeda-linked Islamist regime in northern Mali. The Nigerian press has attributed to Boko Haram the murder of four Chinese nationals, three Indians, and a Ghanaian in Borno, as well as the kidnapping of two Europeans in Kebbi state who were killed in a botched rescue. While victims continue to be almost exclusively Nigerian, Boko Haram has expanded its focus within the country. In 2011, a large percentage of the victims were Muslims, who were closely associated with the government in Abuja. However, since Christmas 2011, Christians have been a growing percentage of victims. Countrywide, according to the NST, at least thirty-seven attacks have occurred at churches and twenty-one at mosques.

Boko Haram's methods have also evolved. The NST has documented at least twenty-eight alleged suicide bombings, ten of which targeted churches and mosques. Use of suicide bombers had been unknown in West Africa, where suicide is culturally anathema, until two high-profile attacks in Abuja--the June 2011 police headquarters bombing and the August 2011 United Nations headquarters bombing. Since then, suicide bombings have taken place with regularity, leaving well over one hundred

people dead.

At the same time, human rights NGOs have accused the Nigerian security services of responding to Boko Haram with extrajudicial killings, which, in turn, have allegedly fueled support for Islamic radicalism. Indeed, a close reading of the Nigerian press shows that Nigerian security forces across the country have regularly responded to robberies, kidnapping, or terrorism with a heavy hand, often shooting indiscriminately. Since President Goodluck Jonathan's inauguration in 2011, at least 1,100 people have died in incidents involving state security forces, including government troops killed in shootouts with militants. There is nothing new about police violence, which long predates the Jonathan administration. For example, a recent report by the [Network on Police Reform \(PDF\)](#) found that 7,198 people were extrajudicially killed by security forces in the last four years. The number of victims of violence perpetrated by the government security apparatus approaches that of Boko Haram, according to an October 2012 Human Rights Watch report, [Spiraling Violence \(PDF\)](#).

Across the country, impunity reigns for virtually all perpetrators of political or ethnic violence. The judiciary is weak and underfunded. Justice is regularly delayed. The police are corrupt. There have been few prosecutions, convictions, and punishments of members of Boko Haram, the security forces, or corrupt officials. Nigeria remains near the bottom of Transparency International's [corruption perception index](#).

Despite the fact that Boko Haram has garnered local support by propagating a radical Islamist ideology, alienation, poverty, and bad governance are the fundamental causes of northern Nigeria's instability. Indeed, most of the Boko Haram-related violence is occurring in some of Nigeria's poorest states. So far, the federal government has failed to suppress Boko Haram, even as it has killed some of the group's leaders and many of its foot soldiers. The federal government has also failed to address the roots of the popular dissatisfaction that feeds support for radical Islam.

Nigeria will need to make monumental changes to its political economy to address its myriad internal conflicts. In the longer term, the decentralization of government authority, outlined in the country's constitution but never really implemented, would be a step in the right direction. So, too, would be credible elections. In the shorter term, the government should reform the security services, especially the police, including better pay, better training, and ending their impunity from legal prosecution. Indeed, improved policing could take some pressure off Nigerian civilians, who every day face brutality at security checkpoints. Such steps would be a long walk for any government. The unanswered question is whether the Nigerian political system has the will to even start the journey.