

# *Dжихадisme sans frontières?* Boko Haram's regional and international links

By Patrick Smith

## ■ Executive summary

In 2014 Boko Haram has greatly expanded its operations in Nigeria, its primary target and base. National security officials expect an intensification of attacks in the run-up to national elections in February 2015.

While Boko Haram has been primarily operating in Nigeria, it has also undertaken limited operations across the country's borders and maintained and established contacts with associates in the region, in particular in Niger and Chad. Regional and international attacks on jihadist groups in Mali and Somalia appear to have disrupted Boko Haram's ties with these groups. States in the region have established a regional security framework designed to confront the group militarily, with French and other Western support.

Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan portrays Boko Haram as a regional al-Qa'ida operation linked with international jihadist terrorism networks, but all the indications are that the group remains a predominantly Nigerian issue, and political and security solutions need to be found domestically. International responses need to be cognisant of the specific national context in which the threat from Boko Haram has emerged in order not to risk further regionalisation of the conflict.

### **Boko Haram: regional aspects**

The announcement of a truce between the Nigerian military and Boko Haram on October 17th 2014 pointed to both the complexities of the conflict and its regional dimensions. Although the two Nigerian officials announcing the truce – Chief of Defence Staff Air Vice Marshal Alex Badeh and Principal Secretary in the Presidency Hassan Tukur – have a high degree of credibility, the continuation of attacks by factions of Boko Haram after the announcement showed how difficult it will be to implement any ceasefire even if considerable progress has been made in the negotiations.

Equally, the regional role will remain critical. Senior Nigerian officials confirmed that the latest round of negotiations started in late August after a faction of Boko Haram approached Chad's President Idris Déby Itno. Subsequently, President Déby convened a meeting with

President Jonathan in Ndjamena, which was also attended by Ali Modu Sherriff, a former governor of Nigeria's Borno State with historic ties to factions within Boko Haram.

In the subsequent negotiations between Nigerian officials led by Hassan Tukur and representatives of Boko Haram, President Déby acted as a broker, having gained the confidence of at least one faction of the militia.

The first test of this negotiating arrangement was the release on October 10th by Boko Haram of 27 hostages, including 10 Chinese workers, who had been kidnapped in northern Cameroon in two separate attacks in May and July this year. This arrangement helped to establish the bona fides of the representatives with whom Boko Haram was negotiating.

Boko Haram's military success in Nigeria had regional implications. The occupation of Dikwa, Gamboru Ngala, Gwoza and Marte in Borno State, Madagali in Adamawa State, and Buni Yadi in Yobe State in July and August 2014 pointed to a concerted attempt to control swathes of territory, almost all of which is contiguous to Nigeria's neighbours Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

It was Boko Haram's spreading operations in the region – and its threat to the economic and security interests of those countries neighbouring Nigeria – that seem to have prompted the involvement of Chadian and Cameroonian officials in ceasefire negotiations.

In May 2014 President Goodluck Jonathan and his regional counterparts – Chad's Idris Déby Itno, Cameroon's Paul Biya, Niger's Mahamadou Issoufou and Benin's Boni Yayi – met at a regional security summit in Paris convened by President François Hollande of France. One outcome was the establishment of a regional security framework, including the new Multilateral Joint Task Force (MJTF), comprising Chad, Niger, Benin and Nigeria, and the French-backed Operation Barkhane. In addition the framework facilitates bilateral and regional cooperation and coordination steps. Based in Chad, the MJTF will have battalion-strength units from cooperating states, with the possible exception of Cameroon, which so far has been reluctant to commit military forces.

Of the four countries teamed up in the regional security alliance against Boko Haram, Nigeria and Cameroon have been receiving and are likely to continue to receive the brunt of the sect's attacks until they can improve their intelligence early-warning systems.

### **Cameroon**

Up until the summer of 2014 Nigeria remained sceptical about the role of Cameroon in the efforts to curb Boko Haram. Officials in Abuja seemed convinced that Cameroon was paying some kind a protection money to Boko Haram, allowing the sect to establish bases on its territory from which insurgents could cross the border and attack north-eastern Nigeria.

However, a Boko Haram attack on two targets in northern Cameroon – a police station in Kousseri and a Chinese engineering company based near the border – just before the Paris summit changed these dynamics. President Biya announced several measures to address Boko Haram, including security cooperation, joint border patrols and intelligence-sharing with Nigeria. Internally, Biya has been reorganising Cameroon's security sector, increasing the number of soldiers in various sections of the army and the gendarmerie. However, Cameroon opted not to join the MJTF.

To some extent, the north-south schism in Cameroon's politics mirrors that of Nigeria. Northern Cameroon is predominantly Muslim, and its people are mainly from the

Kanuri ethnic group, as are the people of north-east Nigeria (and the leadership of Boko Haram). Like Nigeria, northern Cameroon has been badly neglected by the central government in terms of the provision of schools, clinics and roads. Although Ahmadou Ahidjo, a northern Muslim, led Cameroon to independence in 1960, Paul Biya, a southern Christian, has led the country since 1982.

Boko Haram's failed attempt in late July to kidnap one of Biya's confidants and top ministers, Ahmadou Ali, unleashed a stream of accusations and counter-accusations about the sect's links with local politicians and senior soldiers. Biya responded to this with a further round of sackings and reorganisation in the military and intelligence services. Some of the country's administration is convinced that Biya's political opponents are working with Boko Haram to undermine him.

### **Chad**

President Déby of Chad, a general himself, is a master at exploiting regional security crises for local advantage. He sent two of Chad's best battalions, comprising about 2,000 soldiers, to fight alongside French troops in Operation Serval in Mali; the Chadian troops took on the Ansar ed-Din forces that had seized Kidal and put them to flight.

President Déby offered to host both the MJTF established in May and then the new Operation Barkhane. The latter is a reconfiguration of the 3,000 French forces in the region and is meant to target both jihadist forces in northern Nigeria and the Islamist fighters remaining in Mali, while also monitoring the conflict in Libya.

Boko Haram has already threatened Chad for this new cooperation with France, but in their limited engagements with Boko Haram, Chadian forces have acquitted themselves better than any of their regional counterparts.

### **Niger**

Until 2014, President Issoufou has been fairly circumspect in confronting Boko Haram, fearing that it would launch attacks in Niger in league with his political opponents. There is a substantive but not very active Boko Haram presence in Niger: many of its members had been living in northern Nigeria, but were expelled when the authorities there found out that they were Nigerien citizens. This means that currently they launch cross-border attacks into Nigeria's Yobe State, then retreat back into Niger. Their most serious operation in Niger so far was an attack on a Niamey gaol in June 2013 in which several Boko Haram members and other jihadists were freed.

Niger's agreeing to regional cooperation with Chad and Nigeria against Boko Haram and willingness to host drones would make it an important target for the group. Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau hails from Shekau village, which is on the border with Niger in Tarmuwa district, Yobe State, and is reported to travel clandestinely through Niger en route to Mali.

**Mali**

In Mali in 2012 a force of some 6,000 jihadist fighters took the three largest cities in the north of the country (Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal) and started to advance southwards. During this period several Boko Haram members fought and trained with the jihadist groups, further strengthening regional ties. Their experiences from these battles and the training they received in Libya in the use of heavy weaponry indicate that Boko Haram has the potential to launch large-scale concerted attacks on military targets in Nigeria, including on strongholds like Maiduguri.

**Libya**

The current battle between Islamist militias aligned with Libya's Muslim Brotherhood and secularist forces loyal to General Khalifa Belqasim Haftar will affect Boko Haram. Much of its military hardware came from Libya after the overthrow of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi and many of its fighters received training in Libya. A victory for the Islamist forces in Libya would thus be a strategic boost for Boko Haram, but their conclusive defeat by secularist forces, with regional support, could encourage more effective military cooperation between Nigeria and its neighbours.

**Al-Qa'ida connections?**

Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau has praised leaders such as Osama bin Laden and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as his "mujahidin brothers" in YouTube videos, but any organisational links seem to be mediated through affiliated groups in the region.

The initial claims that Boko Haram had vital ties to al-Qa'ida rested in part on Bin Laden's calls for jihad in Nigeria in 2002. In 2004 documents seized from an al-Qa'ida courier in Khartoum included a reconnaissance report on political conditions in Nigeria: it concluded that Nigeria was "ripe for jihad".

Substantial funds from Saudi Arabia have gone into backing Wahhabist groups in Nigeria and other countries in the region. These funds have paid for mosques, the importation of Wahhabi texts and the travel expenses of visiting imams (mainly from Pakistan) preaching Salafism. Security agents in Nigeria believe that Mohammed Yusuf, who founded Boko Haram in 2002, initially had access to Saudi funding when the group was mainly proselytising and had set up its headquarters just north of Maiduguri.

In 2006 Yusuf was arrested together with Mohammed Ashafa, an envoy of Pakistan's Tablighi Jamaat, which had affiliations with al-Qa'ida. They were accused of sending youths for military training to jihadist camps in Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

Boko Haram operates differently from its splinter group, Ansaru. Both groups have built up substantial military capacities, but they differ in terms of strategy. Ansaru, whose leaders received some training in explosives and military

strategy from al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), is prepared to undertake more complex terrorist operations. Boko Haram, however, builds up its military capacity to step up guerrilla attacks on state institutions and also schools, where students are either massacred or abducted. Ansaru also perceive Shekau's endorsement of the indiscriminate killing of Muslims seen as cooperating with the West or the Abuja government to be counter-productive.

Accordingly, Ansaru rather than Boko Haram has become the al-Qa'ida affiliate in Nigeria. Such designations may make little difference in operational terms: both groups have received military equipment, munitions and training from AQIM. Nigerian security officials state that it is meaningless now to speak of Ansaru and Boko Haram as distinct entities.

**Decentralisation and increased firepower**

Boko Haram operates a cellular structure with common goals and a broad strategy, but decisions about what to attack, when and how are often made at the local level. Decentralisation, mobility and fluidity have been relevant adaptations to the government's state of emergency in the three north-eastern states of Nigeria, backed up by intensive monitoring of communications and surveillance.

Boko Haram's increased firepower has supported an evolution of military tactics over the past five years from bomb attacks, assassinations and kidnappings to large-scale hit-and-run attacks and direct fire fights with the military.

**International aspects**

Beyond the region, there is far less tangible evidence of Boko Haram's international reach, although it has attracted the attention of several Western intelligence agencies. The U.S. now lists it as a terrorist organisation, making membership and any financial dealings with it a criminal offence. It is also proscribed in Britain, where the security services have been searching for signs of Boko Haram networks among the country's estimated one million Nigerians. So far they have found little sign that Boko Haram has put down roots in Europe.

President Jonathan has used Boko Haram's regional and international dimensions to explain the government's failure to push back the sect, drawing parallels with U.S. and British forces' struggle against the Taliban in Afghanistan or Islamic insurrectionists in Iraq.

While Western governments may have doubts about Nigeria's political and military tactics against Boko Haram, they have engaged the country in several high-level security meetings in 2014 to coordinate policy in the region towards the sect and to offer increased military and intelligence cooperation. This intensified in the wake of the international campaign after the abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls.

Boko Haram's recent campaign to target key bridges linking Nigeria and Cameroon, Chad and Niger looks like a bid to disrupt trade and cause yet more hardship in the region, and perhaps to distract resources and attention from its plans to take Maiduguri.

A Boko Haram attack on Maiduguri will demand much of its resources. Such an attack would be a turning point in the insurgency, even more than the kidnapping of over 250 schoolgirls from Chibok. The success or failure of Boko Haram's operations in Nigeria will determine its strategy in neighbouring countries.

## Conclusion

With an unprecedented set of security arrangements in place, backed by French, British and U.S. military advisers, it is noteworthy that Nigeria's military forces – the largest in Africa – are yet to seriously disrupt Boko Haram's continuing advances. Although Nigeria's government emphasises Boko Haram's links with al-Qa'ida and other foreign jihadist forces to explain its military effectiveness, the views of a veteran politician from northern Nigeria have a particular resonance ahead of next February's national elections: "The problem is much more political than military." ■

### ■ THE AUTHOR

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