

Report

Porous Borders and Boko Haram's Arms Smuggling Operations in Nigeria



*Dr. Freedom C. Onuoha**

8 September 2013



In this Wednesday, June 5, 2013 file photo, journalists look at arms and ammunition which military commanders say they seized from Islamic fighters, in Maiduguri, Nigeria, on Wednesday, June 5, 2013. Boko Haram, the radical group that once attacked only government institutions and security forces, is increasingly targeting civilians. Some 155,000 square kilometers (60,000 square miles) of Nigeria are now under a state of emergency. On Friday, June 21, 2013, villagers streamed into Maiduguri from the Gwoza hills, saying Boko Haram fighters were threatening a bloodbath in the area where they appear to have regrouped, scrubby mountains with rock caves some 150 kilometers (90 miles) from the city. [AP Photo/Jon Gambrell, File]

Introduction

Since 2009, acts of domestic terrorism perpetrated by the *Jama'atu Ahlissunnah Lidda'awati wal Jihad* (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad"), also known as Boko Haram, have eclipsed Nigeria's longstanding security threats such as piracy, militancy, kidnappings, and armed robbery. The Nigerian Islamist militant group attracted worldwide attention beginning from July 2009, when it staged a violent anti-government uprising that resulted in the death of over 800 people, mostly its members.

The group has since then ramped up violent attacks on diverse government and civilian targets, including a suicide bombing attack on the United Nations building, Abuja, on 26 August 2011. Over 3,500 people have been killed in violence blamed on the group, while tens of thousands more internally displaced by the insurgency and associated military crackdown.

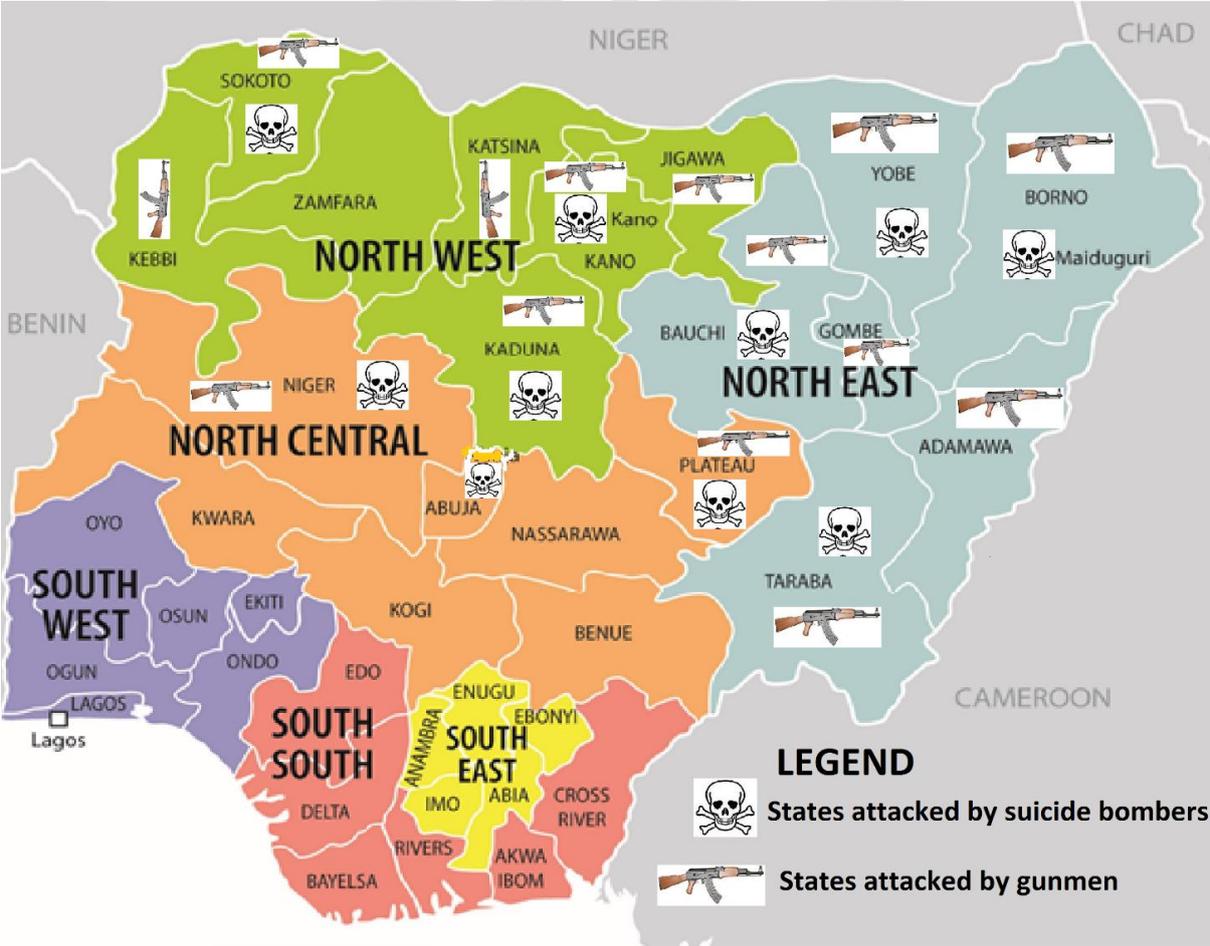
Of particular concern are the growing sophisticated arms and weapons used by its militants in recent attacks, evidenced in seizures made by security forces in northern Nigeria. This piece highlights Boko Haram's arms smuggling operations within and across

Nigeria’s borders, signposting how other terrorist groups may be trafficking arms in Africa.

Colonial Borders and State Security

Effective border management is vitally important for the preservation of national security. This is why Spencer noted that “the border is the first line of defence against terrorism and the last line of a nation’s territorial integrity”.(1) To be sure, Boko Haram insurgency in northern Nigeria (especially the northeast zone) has been exacerbated by Nigeria’s porous borders with Cameroon (1,690 kilometres) in the east, Niger (1,497 kilometres) in the north, Benin (773 kilometres) in the west, and Chad (87 kilometres) in the northeast. Most of these border areas are either mountainous or in the jungle. Irrespective of their geographic nature, a common feature of the nation’s borders is its porosity.

Map showing Nigeria’s International Borders as well as Locations of Boko Haram Attacks



The porosity of Nigeria’s borders owe as much to the way the colonialists carved up the African continent as to the nature of their management by post-colonial states. The original intention of the colonialists in the balkanisation of Africa was not to create a boundary per se, but to create a sphere of influence driven by political and economic motives. These boundaries - defined in terms of latitudes, longitudes, geometric circles and straight lines-split several ethnic and cultural communities.(2) As a result, most

African governments find it extremely difficult to administer international boundaries that sliced through cultural and ethnic groups.

While Nigeria's border problem is related to this colonial history, its porosity has been exacerbated by the failure of succeeding governments to properly administer these borders. As Okumu noted, "the high level of insecurity on African borders is largely due to the way they are administered and managed, and less to do with how colonialists drew them".(3) In this respect, Nigerian borders are known for the limited presence of security and law enforcement officials. The few that are deployed are poorly trained, work with inadequate and obsolete equipment, and sometimes poorly remunerated. In addition, most border communities have for long been neglected by the government, making it difficult for government to leverage on their position to curtail illicit cross-border activities.

The recent disclosure by Nigeria's Minister of Interior, Abba Moro, that there are over 1,499 irregular (illegal) and 84 regular (legal) officially identified entry routes into Nigeria, confirms the very porous state of these borders which permits illicit transnational arms trafficking. In Adamawa State, there are about 25 illegal routes into Nigeria from neighbouring countries. Terrorists and smugglers take advantage of this leakage to smuggle small arms and light weapons (SALWs) into Nigeria. As a result, over 70 percent of about 8 million illegal weapons in West Africa was reported to be in Nigeria. The proliferation of SALWs in Nigeria is indexed by the intermittent seizure of various types and calibre of arms by security and border control officers, the frequency of their deployment in conflict and crime scenes, and the level of human casualty and material damage recorded in the aftermath of their use in the country.(4)

Boko Haram's Arms Trafficking Modus Operandi

Given the porosity of borders, Boko Haram fighters have devised methods of concealing and successfully trafficking SALWs across and within Nigeria's borders. Such trafficking operations could be considered under two broad dimensions: transnational and national trafficking.

- *Transnational Trafficking*

Transnational trafficking refers to the movement of arms and weapons across borders of sovereign States. During the Libyan uprising, for instance, state armory were either ordered opened in February 2011 by Muammar Gaddafi or looted by rebel forces and mercenaries, and majority of these weapons were never recovered. Terrorist groups like AQIM acquired heavy weapons such as SAM-7 anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles, transporting them back to the Sahel region. They were either surreptitiously obtained by posing as Gaddafi's supporters or indirectly purchased from mercenaries who had acquired these arms from Libyan depositories.

Courtesy of the AQIM, these arms have been transferred to groups such as Ansar Dine, Boko Haram and MUJAO, emboldening and enabling them to mount more deadly and audacious attacks. Thus, the audacity of Boko Haram grew with the proliferation of weapons in the Sahara-Sahel region. The porous borders in Borno and Yobe States, which are the strongholds of the sect, made it possible for Boko Haram to smuggle arms into Nigeria.

Boko Haram has been able to smuggle arms into Nigeria using various methods such as the use of specially crafted skin or thatched bags attached to camels, donkeys and cows where arms are concealed and moved across the borders with the aid of nomadic pastoralists or herders. Its members are known to connive with merchants involved in cross-border trade to help stuff their arms and weapons in goods that are transported via heavy trucks, trailers, and Lorries. Given the huge size of the goods loaded on these vehicles, very little or no scrutiny is conducted on them by security and border officials.(5)

The ECOWAS Protocol on free movement of persons, goods and services, has thus created a space that criminals exploit to facilitate cross-border trafficking. These traffickers exploit loopholes in state capacity in monitoring cross-border trade in the region and relaxation of national borders intended to enhance regional integration, to perpetrate their nefarious activities. Since corruption is endemic and systemic in Nigeria, cross-border arms trafficking is sometimes facilitated by security agents. In May 2013, for instance, a senior Customs personnel was arrested for allegedly assisting Boko Haram insurgents to smuggle several trucks loaded with large cache of arms and ammunition into Nigeria.(6)

- *National Trafficking*

National trafficking refers to the smuggling of arms from one location to another within Nigerian territory. Similar to their methods of transnational arms smuggling, Boko Haram has equally adopted stocking in goods, loading in specially-adapted vehicles, hiding under cloths of couriers, and tunnelling for arms smuggling.

Boko Haram's arms smugglers sometimes conceal SALWs in bags of grains or carton of goods which are often loaded on heavy-duty vehicle like trucks, trailers, and Lorries. This is usually adopted when transporting arms from one community, town, and state to another. Such arms can also be wrapped in polythene bags and stocked into empty fuel tankers or sewage tankers for long-distance transfer. On 12 July 2013, for instance, soldiers in Kebbi State impounded a petrol tanker loaded with three AK 47 Rifles, one rocket propelled grenade (RPG)-2, nine AK 47 magazines, two bombs, three RPG chargers and 790 rounds of 7.62mm of special ammunitions in the fuel compartment of

the tanker.(7) It was suspected that these arms were destined for Boko Haram insurgents operating in the region.

Furthermore, arms can also be hidden in improvised compartments in a vehicle designed to evade detection by security agents. Cars used for such operations are constructed with chambers for concealing arms or additional fuel tank to minimise the rate of refuelling. On July 2013, an ex-Niger Delta militant, Anietie Etim and four others who allegedly specialised in buying arms in Bakassi Peninsula for supply to Boko Haram insurgents were arrested by the police.(8) The traffickers carefully constructed a special tank at the booth of an Audi salon car where they conceal arms for shipment to the north. The car also had an extra tank constructed for fuel to ensure enough fuel that will take them to their destination.

Another method used by Boko Haram is tunnelling. The use of tunnels to traffic arms, drugs and other substances is not a new tactics among terrorist groups.(9) Boko Haram has used such tunnels for arms trafficking, especially in Borno State. In July 2013, for instance, security forces discovered a vast network of underground tunnels connecting houses and many bunkers used by Boko Haram for trafficking SALWs in Bulabulin area.(10) Some of the tunnels and bunkers have the capacity to accommodate over 100 persons, enabling its fighters to hide and move SALWs around the area.

As security agents tighten the noose around known smuggling methods, Boko Haram militants have resorted to disguising as women to evade attention of security forces while transporting arms. They have equally recruited women (sometimes wives of members) as arms couriers. The women hide AK 47 rifles on their backs covered with their veils (*himar*) or conceal improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on their backs as if they were carrying their babies.(11) Such women arms couriers receive between N5,000 and N 50,000 (\$30 and \$312), depending on the mission and the location for the delivery of the guns and IEDs. They have equally concealed guns and ammunition inside grains in plastic buckets and sacks in their homes. Beyond SALWs smuggled into Nigeria from outside, the sect also obtains arms by breaking into the armoury of police stations.

Northern Nigeria hosts Sophisticated Arms

With the persistence of Boko Haram insurgency, hundreds of weapons including RPGs, rocket launchers, anti-aircraft missiles, and AK 47 rifles have been intercepted by security operatives in various locations in north-eastern Nigeria. It is widely believed that these weapons found their way to Nigeria from Libya and Mali. Table 1 lists only three examples to demonstrate not only the huge size of the cache but the sophisticated nature of the arms.

Table 1: Examples of Seizure of Sophisticated Arms belonging to Boko Haram

Date	Location	Description of Incident
4 August 2013	Bama, Bama LGA of Borno State	Men of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) seized four Toyota Hilux vans, 10 AK-47 rifles and magazines, two G3 rifles and 10×4 40mm bombs, three RPG tubes, and 85 rounds of special ammunition
31 July 2012	Daban Masara, a border town between Nigeria and Chad in Monguno LGA of Borno State	The MNJTF intercepted a Hilux van loaded with assorted high profile weapon, including eight (RPGs, 10 rocket bombs, 10 rocket chargers, two AK 47 rifles, and 13 magazines with six rounds of 7.6mm special ammunition concealed inside desert palm tree leaves
16 July 2012	Bulabulin area in Maiduguri of Borno State	Men of the JTF recovered eight AK47 assault rifles, one G-3 rifle, nine AK-47 magazines, one RPG charger, five RPG, three FMC magazine, one G3 magazine, 14 IEDs and several rounds of ammunition

The sect's access to RPGs and other high calibre arms is generating concern within security establishments. RPGs are explosive projectile weapons used by insurgents to attack or destroy targets from long distances, while rocket launchers are devices that are used to propel missiles or explosives from long ranges. Some of the launchers can go as far as 900m. Possession of these high calibre weapons not only confers on Boko Haram deadly firepower, but also enables fighters to hit targets from long distance.

The Baga attack that killed at least 185 people in April 2013 showed Boko Haram's substantial fire power, including machine guns, large numbers of RPGs and pick-up trucks mounted with anti-aircraft guns. The threat posed to aviation security by their possession of these sophisticated weapons has been signposted.⁽¹²⁾ The widespread availability of SALWs has helped stoke deadly insurgency in northern Nigeria, demanding that something urgent must be done to stop the inflow and proliferation of arms in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The activities of Boko Haram have cost Nigeria a lot in terms of human, material and financial losses. The Nigerian government has responded with different measures to weaken or defeating the group, of which military crackdown is the most prominent. In addition to decapitation of its top commanders, the Nigerian military recently claimed that the sect's spiritual leader, Abubakar Shekau, may have died of mortal wounds it sustained during military raid of the sect's hideout in Sambisa forest in May 2013. Analysts however believe that Boko Haram will probably maintain its insurgency even if army claims of its leader's death are true.⁽¹³⁾ Although claims of Shekau's death remains a subject of debate, the sect's access to sophisticated arms have enabled its fighters to continue to occasionally mount deadly attacks. The porosity of Nigeria's borders is an important factor in its survival, offering it a lifeline to external support from transnational groups in the form of weapons, training, radicalisation, and funding. Thus,

thorough shoring up of border security constitutes a critical component of any short-term measures to degrade the sect. The Nigeria government therefore needs to evolve a new approach to securing the border, one that includes an integrated mix of development interventions for border communities, trained and dedicated border officials, and enhanced border situation awareness infrastructure.

**Dr Freedom C. Onuoha is a Research Fellow, Centre for Strategic Research and Studies, National Defence College, Abuja, Nigeria.*

(1) M. Spencer (2007), 'Border and State Insecurity,' in J.F Forest (ed) *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century: International Perspectives, Vol. 2* (Westport: Praeger Security International) p.110.

(2) I. James (1989), 'Lake Chad as an Instrument of International Co-operation,' in A.I Asiwaju and P. O Adeniyi (eds.), *Borderlands in Africa: A Multidisciplinary and Comparative Focus on Nigeria and West Africa* (Lagos: University of Lagos Press) pp.309-311.

(3) W. Okumu (2010), 'Africa's Problematic Borderlines,' *Africa.org*, February/March, p.22.

(4) F.C Onuoha (2011), 'Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation and Human Security in Nigeria,' *Conflict Trends*, 1, pp. 50-56.

(5) S. Musa (2013), 'Border Security, Arms Proliferation and Terrorism in Nigeria,' *Sahara Reporters*, 20 April, http://saharareporters.com/article/border-security-arms-proliferation-and-terrorism-nigeria-1t-col-sagir-musa?qoback=.gde_4451300_member_234179302.

(6) M. I. Kwaru (2013), 'Boko Haram: Senior Customs Personnel arrested over arms importation in Borno,' *Peoples Daily*, 29 May.

(7) 'Kebbi: Army seizes petrol tanker loaded with arms,' *The Nation*, 14 July 2013.

(8) J. Okwe (2013), 'Ex-militant, 4 Others Arrested for Arms Supply to Boko Haram,' *Thisday*, 27 July, p.57

(9) T. G. Lichtenwald and F, S. Perri (2013), 'Terrorist Use of Smuggling Tunnels,' *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology*, Vol. 2, pp. 210-226.

(10) F. Soriwei (2013), 'JTF detains Shekau's in-laws,' *Punch*, 16 July, p.1.

(11) W. Odunsi (2013), 'Women Civilian JTF emerges in Borno, targets female Boko Haram members,' *Daily Post*, 24 August.

(12) F.C Onuoha (2011), 'Domestic Terrorism and Aviation Security in Nigeria,' *Punch*, 28 September, p.16.

(13) Y. Ibukun and E. Bala-Gbogbo (2013), 'Boko Haram Threatens Nigeria Even if Leader has Died,' *Bloomberg*, 22 August, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-08-22/boko-haram-threatens-nigeria-even-if-leader-has-died.html>.

Copyright © 2013 Al Jazeera Center for Studies, All rights reserved.