

## Report

# Nigerian Hostage Crisis: The Likelihood of Western Intervention

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This photo taken on June 17, 2014 in Dabanga, northern Cameroon, shows Cameroon's army soldiers deploying as part of a reinforcement of its military forces against Nigerian Islamist group Boko Haram. Boko Haram, which in April 2014 kidnapped more than 200 schoolgirls in northeast Nigeria to international condemnation, has been waging a brutal, five-year insurgency that has claimed thousands of lives. [AFP PHOTO / REINNIER KAZE]

## Abstract

The abduction of approximately 230 schoolgirls by Boko Haram sparked international outrage. Although much of the rage was directed at the armed group that has terrorized Nigeria for years, the Nigerian government was also criticized for its inability to protect its own citizens, and the poor response to the crisis. Weeks after the incident, there was still no trace of the girls. Soon, the US, UK and France, amongst others offered assistance, promulgating fears of a western-led intervention into Nigeria. This report examines the kidnapping, the threat posed by Boko Haram and analyses whether the kidnapping has been used as an excuse by Western powers to enter the country.

## What is Boko Haram?

Boko Haram is one of the most illusive<sup>(1)</sup> and misunderstood armed groups on the planet. Even their name is not without contention or debate. The group's original and full name is Jama'at ahl al-sunna li-da'wa wa-l-qital and though most believe that Boko Haram means, "western education is a sin", this definition is but one more ambiguous feature of the group's identity.<sup>(2)</sup> Liman Muhammed, a scholar in Hausa, the language spoken in northern Nigeria, argues that 'boko' "originally meant something (an idea or an object) that involves any form of deception and by extension, the noun denoted "Any reading or writing which is not connected to Islam".<sup>(3)</sup>

Boko Haram was formed in the town of Maiduguri in 2002(4), packaged as a movement of social change. It was formed with an Islamic ethos – made up of religious scholars and local leaders - who spoke out against corruption, unemployment and told of transforming the lives of ordinary people in northern Nigeria.(5) Northern Nigeria remains inordinately underdeveloped and largely disconnected from the Federal government. Most Nigerians, be it in the north or south, live under the poverty line, without water, electricity and basic amenities. But it is in the northern territories where poverty is especially concentrated.(6)

After the killing of its leader Mohammed Yusuf in police custody in 2009 (7), Boko Haram was the subject of a power struggle for control of the group. The nature of Boko Haram changed and from 2009 and particularly 2010, the group has been brutal, killing indiscriminately, targeting all symbols of Nigeria's state infrastructure. Army bases and police stations were targeted, but soon too were soft targets of churches and schools in a bid to terrorise and dismantle all state apparatus.(8) It must be emphasised that ordinary civilians have suffered the brunt of Boko Haram attacks.

Overnight, the group had transformed into a terrifying outfit that wanted Sharia law instated in all of Nigeria (it already exists in the criminal justice system in twelve northern states (9)).

Boko Haram became a confusing outfit whose members flirted with crime, maimed and killed thousands of civilians, be it Christian or Muslim. If factions within the group were abusing the movement by carrying out heinous crimes, then it wouldn't be known since communication from the group has always been rare and curt.

Following the dramatic spike in violence, the Nigerian government declared a state of emergency in three northern states, namely, Adamwa, Borno and Yobe in May 2013. But the violence didn't stop. Between the years 2010 and 2013, almost 3600 people have died in Boko Haram related violence.(10) Over the past two years, the group has attacked over 300 schools. Within the first six months of 2014 alone, almost two thousand people have been murdered and the country's military moved in to root out the group with brutality.

As a locally driven insurgency, the violence meted out against the civilian population did not discourage membership. Moreover, the mountainous, treacherous but porous border region with Cameroon allowed Boko Haram to carry out attacks in Nigeria and cross the border and recuperate in relative safety.(11)

Even after the mass kidnapping in April 2014, and the global outrage, neither the attacks, nor the kidnappings, have ended.

## Local vs. International threat

By and large, Boko Haram has remained a domestic threat. The violence has also been largely limited to the northeast of Nigeria, though there have been attacks in Abuja and even a UN compound. Questions still remain as to why Nigeria has not been able to contain the scourge, though it is largely understood that as an insurgency impacting the north, it is likely a complex combination of dirty politics, a lack of political will and poor counter-insurgency tactics that has allowed Boko Haram to thrive.(12)

The spill over into Cameroon, Chad and Niger has also been a point of much deliberation and concern for Nigeria's neighbours. Niger and Chad are particularly vulnerable to the group's activities, with Niger sharing a border with three Nigerian states where Boko Haram is considered very influential. "These so-called "ungoverned spaces" have become a serious threat to territorial integrity and personal security," according to the Institute of Security Studies (ISS).(13)

But it was the global attention thrust on Boko Haram by the abduction of the schoolgirls in April that catalyzed the reframing of the group as a regional threat, and not just a particularly Nigerian problem.

As a group touted to have links with Al-Qaeda(14), Boko Haram still does not represent a major threat to the national interests of states involved in the so-called global war on terror. As such, the group's goals seem to revolve around primarily expanding its base, implementing its harsher interpretation of Sharia law and crucially, destabilising Nigeria, especially as elections approach early next year. By the nature of its activities across Nigeria's borders, the group's activities have also become increasingly regional.

In 2013, the US officially declared Boko Haram a terrorist outfit(15), but it is only recent events and popular public pressure that has forced the United States, France and the United Kingdom, and other members of the international community, to engage more constructively with the threat posed by Boko Haram. In May 2014, a month after the kidnapping, and 10 days after interest in the story finally peaked internationally, a special summit on Boko Haram was held in Paris.

Speaking at the summit, the President of France, Francois Hollande, said that his country had resolved against sending troops because Nigeria was adequately resourced to deal with the situation.(16) Be that as it may, Nigeria had already approved a contingent of American, French and British teams to come and assist their troops on ground; offer 'expert' advice and 'technical support'.

The decision to attend a summit in France over a largely domestic conundrum in northern Nigeria, amplified suspicion that dialogue between Nigeria and its neighbours



had broken down. The conversation in Paris was therefore billed as an attempt to bring all stakeholders to the table, to facilitate cross-border raids; an awkward talking point in relations between Nigeria and Cameroon, in particular. It was here at this summit that President Goodluck Jonathan called Boko Haram the “Al-Qaeda of West Africa”.<sup>(17)</sup>

Furthermore, The decision to host the meeting in Paris also suggested that the African Union or ECOWAS had failed to address the scourge. While the Boko Haram threat has featured at the AU’s Peace and Security Council, it was only in May that the council raised the group as a special subject.<sup>(18)</sup>

According to Solomon Dersso, a researcher at Peace and Security Report said that it was only in late May that the AU<sup>(19)</sup> took the issue more seriously. As the body principally charged with security on the continent, the decision to focus on the group was a move designed to ensure that countries in the region were fully engaged on the matter.

Days after the meeting in Paris, on 22 May, the UN Security Council added Boko Haram to its sanction list.<sup>(20)</sup> According to the statement, Boko Haram has maintained a relationship with Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) for training and material support purposes. The UN further claimed that Boko Haram members fought alongside AQIM groups in Mali in 2012 and 2013 before returning to Nigeria. In 2012, Boko Haram leader Shekau is said to have expressed kinship with AQ affiliates in Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, North Africa and Yemen.

The Al-Qaeda link is oft repeated but still difficult to prove. Though Boko Haram itself claims links to Al-Qaeda, there has never been any public acknowledgement of this connection from Al-Qaeda themselves.<sup>(21)</sup> Moreover, that Boko Haram engages in the mass murder of civilians, including Muslim civilians, is also at odds with Al-Qaeda’s methods. In spite of these obvious contradictions, it seems unlikely that Boko Haram could have survived without training and funding from the outside.

The Nigerian government has stubbornly battled the group for the past five years, but the kidnapping saga has caused irreparable damage to the country’s image, and to President Jonathan’s administration. Therefore, the decision to accept assistance from the US, UK and France and allowing Boko Haram to be described an offshoot of Al-Qaeda is arguably Nigeria’s attempt to relinquish sole responsibility for rooting out the group and more broadly, Nigerian ownership for the crisis. With elections due in early 2015, Goodluck Jonathan has to convince the electorate that he is making the right decisions for his country.

It is of course a discourse western powers are happy to engage. The former US ambassador to Nigeria, John Campbell, said that Boko Haram’s leader Shekau should be considered a global threat.<sup>(22)</sup> Likewise, the former British Foreign Secretary, William

Hague, told the US magazine Newsweek that while the Nigerian authorities had to address Boko Haram, "We all have a role to play".(23)

### The possibility of intervention

A large-scale military operation designed to hunt down Boko Haram, even with significant public pressure was always going to be a remote possibility. First and foremost, Boko Haram is a domestic threat and has yet to significantly threaten the material interests of western players engaged in the global war on terror. Secondly, with Afghanistan and Iraq remaining priority operations for the United States, at a time when both countries are facing resurgent insurgencies, it can be argued that kidnapped school girls in a far flung corner of Nigeria is not a foreign policy priority for the US, UK or France. This, in spite of Barack Obama stating on record that finding the girls was a priority.(24)

However, the Nigerian government's attempt to coalesce Boko Haram with Al-Qaeda, and label the group as having strong links to other terrorist groups on the continent, has allowed the US, France, the UK, even Israel, China and Canada, an opportunity to send specialist teams, and set up a foothold in a country that has in the past resisted the presence of foreign troops.

Barack Obama's response to the Nigerian crisis may be likened to his decision to send 100 military experts to Uganda following the Kony2012 campaign. In 2014, the US decided to send 150 more troops to search for LRA warlord Joseph Kony.(25) Sending in a small team represents the shifting nature of US operations in many parts of the continent. It is easier, less complicated, as well as a "relatively inexpensive way to show resolve in a popular cause".(26) Moreover, it is less conspicuous than the Bush administration's attempt to set up AFRICOM on the continent.

In 2006, the US tried to set up its Africa command, known as AFRICOM; they failed to find a single African country willing to host the Headquarters. At the time, Nigeria was among a handful of African countries, including South Africa, who expressed concern over the establishment of AFRICOM. The concern then was that the country hosting AFRICOM would not only turn into a target for those holding anti-American sentiment, but the operation itself would eventually undermine the host country's sovereignty.

Political writer Dan Glazebrook(27) argues that much of the current failures, including civil wars and smaller conflicts on the African continent are often a result of foreign interference. He posits that it is often the same outsiders who are then willing to provide assistance, or support against the very actors they often helped create.(28) He calls this the "protection racket". With violence in northern Nigeria continuing unabated, there

have been murmurs of initiating a large-scale military intervention into the country, under the guise of protecting civilians. Since countries signed the R2P, or Responsibility to Protect at the UN in 2005, there have been interventions in Darfur, Libya, Ivory Coast, Yemen, South Sudan and Mali over the past decade.

### The R2P question

While R2P is primarily about the protection of civilians, the principle is not without its problems. Firstly, R2P raises uncomfortable questions over the right of nations to interfere with another's state's sovereignty. Secondly, the Libyan example illuminates how R2P has also been used to induce regime change, which often has far reach ramifications, often outside the state itself.

Obama's decision to sidestep Congress and enter Libya in 2011, as part of NATO-led effort "to protect civilians" created more than one precedent: notably the quick-fix intervention in popular causes. The removal of Muammar Gadaffi, the then leader of Libya, was touted as a victory and therefore the intervention was touted as a success for the long-term future of the Libyan people, and the region. Of course, that the intervention in Libya will prove to be to the benefit of its citizens that remains to be seen. Moreover, the collapse in Libya affected all of north Africa, particularly Mali, Niger and Chad. Even West Africa in the form of Cameroon and Nigeria did not go unscathed. It is a fact that Boko Haram was strengthened by the decision to enter Libya in 2011.<sup>(29)</sup> Reports of unsecured arms making their way down to northern Nigeria have been plentiful.

Journalist Glenn Greenwald writes that advocates of war had to bear responsibility for the consequences [for going to war] and that there was "nothing noble about invading and bombing a country into regime change if what one ushers in is mass instability". The Libyan case is not altogether unique. In 2011, R2P was initiated in the Ivory Coast as well, following the post-election crisis, and paved the way for regime change.<sup>(30)</sup>

In many ways, the debate over whether the situation in northern Nigeria warrants such an intervention is a false one. Strong-arm tactics were tried and have failed miserably; bringing peace to the north requires more than just military force. It requires political dialogue.

### Conclusion

The mass hysteria surrounding the kidnapping of the schoolgirls created the impetus for the international community to pay attention to the scourge of Boko Haram. Its links,

however tenuous, to other armed groups, including Al-Qaeda, means the group is of interest to the international community.

Though Cameroon, Niger and Chad are facing increased infiltration and interference from Boko Haram, this is still Nigeria's crisis to own. As far as threats go, Boko Haram exists in a particular socio-political milieu, and is not by definition, a transnational movement. Its primary concern is to bring the Nigerian government to its knees. With the US looking to expand its foothold on the continent, it was only inevitable that Obama and his partners in the war on terror, the UK and France, would rush to offer assistance to the Nigerian army.

Nigeria is the biggest economy in Africa and its proximity to Chad and Mali makes it both vulnerable and of geo-political importance. As a regional hegemon, influence over Nigeria may offer leverage on the West Africa region and the region's grouping Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

It is inconceivable to envisage Nigeria requesting a large-scale intervention. This would be devastating for Jonathan's bid at re-election. But allowing an intervention of certain type to arrive, in small careful, inoffensive bouts, might buy government time. The forthcoming six months will be keenly observed.

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