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# Boko Haram: Hard to grasp and even harder to grab

*Sebastian Sieber*

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## Introduction

The increasing number of attacks in neighboring countries of Nigeria, such as the twin bombings in Chad's capital N'Djamena that killed 27 civilians last June, four suicide bombers claiming 32 lives at a market in Douala, Cameroon, at the end of January and recurring raids in Niger's Diffa region indicate an emerging trend of regionalization of the conflict. More and more indicators are adding to the impression that this insurgency has a deep impact beyond Nigerian borders. Firstly, violence significantly diffused regionally around Lake Chad, thereby affecting the neighbouring countries in terms of political, economic and social stability. Secondly, Boko Haram\* joined the Islamic State, now constituting the most violent affiliate outside Syria and Iraq. Thirdly, the group changed its conduct of violence from long-term territorial control back to short-term hit-and-run tactics. Thus, Boko Haram is not simply the Islamist militant group that abducted 300 girls from Chibok in April 2014 but probably the most powerful terrorist group embedded in the Islamic State's global network.

Claims of the "world's deadliest terror group's"<sup>1</sup> demise that arose in recent months are contradicted by the fact that since President Buhari's inauguration on May 29, the frequency of bomb attacks and guerrilla operations even increased. More than 4,000 people have been killed in Boko Haram attacks,<sup>2</sup> which sparked another wave of 800,000 displaced civilians. Buhari's election stirred many hopes for the end of terrorism. Indeed, it is a step forward that, contrary to his predecessor Jonathan, he does not reject the deployment of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF). Consisting of Cameroonian, Chadian and Nigerian forces, the MNJTF succeeded in retaking most of the territory the size of Belgium, in which Boko Haram had assumed state functions and even tried to implement bureaucracy in several towns.

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\*Since March Boko Haram refers to itself as 'Islamic State's West African Province'. To avoid confusion this text will generally stick to 'Boko Haram'.

<sup>1</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015. *Global Terrorism Index 2015*. Online: <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf> [15/02/2016].

<sup>2</sup> Heidelberger Institut für Internationale Konfliktforschung, forthcoming. *Conflict Barometer 2015*.

However, the multinational mission is still limited to Nigerian territory and does not address the group's transnational dimension. Thus, as we can see by now, even if the MNJTF was able to deprive Boko Haram of the towns and districts it controlled, this will not mean their defeat but rather a shift in their operational mode and area.<sup>3</sup>

## Stepping beyond borders

In a 2014 study, Freedom Onuoha concludes, "Boko Haram has emerged as a home-grown group with local grievances, the dynamics of its activities now pose a serious threat to peace and security in the West African region"<sup>4</sup>. In order to understand how Boko Haram became a destabilising force not only to Nigeria but also to Cameroon, Chad and Niger it is helpful to take a closer look at the mentioned key indicators that are significant for transnational conflicts.

Militants have conducted cross-border operations since 2011. However, the development of the conflict since the beginning of 2015 illustrates Boko Haram's return from its IS-like campaign of conquest back to terrorist tactics in the wider region. When the group came under pressure in their occupied territories, it remained threatening by resorting to guerrilla tactics and bomb attacks, quickly retreating across national borders, into the hardly accessible Sambisa forest or submerging among the population.

The increasing number and intensity of bomb attacks, village raids, kidnappings, and targeted assassinations in the Nigerian States Jos, Gombe, Kano, Zaria as well as Chad and Cameroon is the first and most visible sign of Boko Haram's regionalized activities beyond their stronghold in Borno, Nigeria. Throughout 2015, the conflict claimed a total of more than 12,000 fatalities, of which 2,103 were reported from Cameroon, Niger and Chad (compared to approximately 750 in 2014).<sup>5,6</sup> In Niger the militants infiltrated several villages in the border region; schools and hospitals were closed in

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<sup>3</sup> Cummings, R., 2015. *New Nigerian President Inherits Same Boko Haram Violence*. Online: <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/06/nigeria-boko-haram-buhari/> [15/02/2016].

<sup>4</sup> Onuoha, F.C., 2014. *A danger not to Nigeria alone – Boko Haram's transnational reach and regional responses*. Online: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/nigeria/11066.pdf> [15/02/2016].

<sup>5</sup> Heidelberger Institut für Internationale Konfliktforschung, 2014. *Conflict Barometer 2014*. Online: [http://www.hiik.de/de/konfliktbarometer/pdf/ConflictBarometer\\_2014.pdf](http://www.hiik.de/de/konfliktbarometer/pdf/ConflictBarometer_2014.pdf) [15/02/2016].

<sup>6</sup> Heidelberger Institut für Internationale Konfliktforschung, forthcoming. *Conflict Barometer 2015*.

anticipation of Boko Haram attacks.<sup>7</sup> As a result, United Nations and human rights organisations register 2.1 million IDPs and 300,000 refugees in camps in Niger, Chad and Cameroon.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, militants looting crops and livestock, large-scale displacement of farmers as well as the shut-down of cross-border trade and fishing on Lake Chad have set perilous conditions for a major food crisis in the region.<sup>9</sup>

## Boko Haram's international relations

Experts of the Council of Foreign relations note that, already in the early stages, Boko Haram's increasingly sophisticated modus operandi, internal organisation and propaganda in relation to the wide-scale prison break in 2010 and bombings of police stations in 2011 indicated support of Islamist militant groups such as AQIM, Ansar Dine and Al-Shabaab. The ties of the group were further strengthened when Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau's baya'a pledge to IS-leader Abubakr al-Baghdadi was followed by the immediate acceptance and rebranding of the militia as the Wilayat West Africa (Islamic State's West African Province) on March 7, 2015.<sup>10</sup> Five Boko Haram members reportedly being killed by Iraqi forces in an IS training camp near Mosul in Iraq in March have been the most substantial sign of the IS-Boko Haram relation so far.<sup>11</sup> In June 2015 media reports of 80 to 200 Boko Haram members in Sirte surfaced,<sup>12</sup> further indicating close communication channels and cooperation on media issues, visualized by the professionalization of Boko Haram's propaganda, the adaption of IS narratives, speech, rituals, signs and habitus. Additionally, the Chad bombings were intensively promoted in IS media.

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<sup>7</sup> Reliefweb, 2015. *Boko Haram attacks force 12,000 pupils from Niger schools*. Online: <http://reliefweb.int/report/niger/boko-haram-attacks-force-12000-pupils-niger-schools-un> [15/02/2016].

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2015. *Humanitarian Bulletin West and Central Africa*. Online: [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/humanitarian\\_bulletin\\_may\\_2015.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/humanitarian_bulletin_may_2015.pdf) [15/02/2016].

<sup>9</sup> World Food Programme, 2015. *Nigeria in crisis*. Online: <http://www.wfp.org/emergencies/nigeria> [15/02/2016].

<sup>10</sup> Cummings, R., 2015. *Boko Haram's Pledge to ISIS: Public Relations or Reality?*. Online: <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/03/boko-haram-pledge-allegiance-isis/> [15/02/2016].

<sup>11</sup> Abimboye, M., 2015. *Boko Haram members killed while in training in Iraq*. Online: <http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/182925-boko-haram-members-killed-while-in-training-in-iraq.html> [15/02/2016].

<sup>12</sup> ANSA, 2015. *Isis: Libia, Boko Haram giunti a Sirte*. Online: [http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/africa/2015/08/31/isis-libia-boko-haram-giunti-a-sirte\\_5d79f5db-1c6f-43ae-959d-84e34c66746d.html](http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/africa/2015/08/31/isis-libia-boko-haram-giunti-a-sirte_5d79f5db-1c6f-43ae-959d-84e34c66746d.html) [15/02/2016].

Besides these indications, it is not entirely clear how strong the cohesion between Boko Haram and the Islamic State is shaped and to what extent it will impact the groups and their opponents in the future. Most likely it may be considered as replacement of sporadic regional cooperation with al-Qaida-linked groups in favour of a more stable, institutionalised franchise of the Islamic State's network – a status that involves more than a publicity effect and improves Boko Haram's financial, equipment and personnel situation in the fight for their all-time goal, an Islamist caliphate. The ongoing manifestation of this same goal in the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria proves a military strength of which Boko Haram can benefit against reinforced counterterrorism by the Lake Chad Basin countries. Instability and uncontrollable territories in the entire Sahel provide an unimpeded operational area for Islamist groups. Utilizing or co-opting such already existing Islamist networks has proven one of the IS' most favourable and promising strategies. Therefore, more and more indications for a deep integration into the IS system adds to the existing transnational activities and enhances Boko Haram's transnational capacities.<sup>13</sup>

### **The alarming regional context**

While post-civil war countries Sierra Leone and Liberia remained a valuable source for recycling small arms and light weapons by militant groups, instability in Libya further fuelled violent conflicts across the region and swamped Western Africa with weapons and ammunition. Over the past years Boko Haram established recruitment, training, equipment and funding networks, spreading from Mali to Sudan and the Central African Republic up to Libya<sup>14</sup>. As a side effect the increased influx of mercenaries, militarized refugees and foreign fighters strengthen Boko Harams capacities. One year ago, former President Jonathan mentioned intelligence reports about Boko Haram recruitment, training, and indoctrination camps in Mali, Niger, Cameroon, Chad and Sudan.<sup>15</sup> These countries share a combination of aggravating social and economic conditions that anti-government

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<sup>13</sup> Zenn, J., 2015. Wilayat West Africa reboots for the caliphate. Online: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/wilayat-west-africa-reboots-for-the-caliphate> [15/02/2016].

<sup>14</sup> Norwegian Center for Global Analysis (2015): Trans-Sahara smuggling and trafficking routes. Online: <http://www.globalinitiative.net/download/global-initiative/Libya%20Criminal%20Economies%20in%20the%20trans-Sahara%20-%20May%202015.pdf>; Onuoha, Freedom (2014): A danger not to Nigeria alone, Boko Haram's transnational reach and regional responses. Online: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/nigeria/11066.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Cummings, R., 2015. *New Nigerian President Inherits Same Boko Haram Violence*. Online: <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/06/nigeria-boko-haram-buhari/> [15/02/2016].

resentments are based on and make militant engagement a favourable option. Therefore, the underlying framework conditions of fragile statehood are a main fertilizer for such transnational activities.<sup>16,17</sup>

Moreover, such instability opened the doors for the Islamic State to take roots with another Wilayat in Libya. With Sirte as its “third capital” after Raqqa, Syria, and Mosul, Iraq, expansion to Africa appears to become a crucial factor in the Islamic State’s strategy. At first glance, the allegiance to al-Baghdadi may seem like a cry for help against counterterrorist offensives by the MNJTF. However, as the baya’a was allegedly threaded since May 2014, it is more likely that both sides follow strategic interests. To the Islamic State, Western Africa is crucial not only supporting the narrative of IS ‘always expanding’ but also for support in fighting local militias in Libya as well as al-Qaida-affiliated groups. Along the IS-narrative of ‘Remaining and Expanding’, rivalry to other Islamist rebel groups in the region provides an incentive to exert resources for attention-grabbing attacks to Wilayat West Africa in order to build predominance in West Africa.<sup>18</sup> Mali’s AQIM-franchise MUJAO and especially Mokhtar Belmuktars al-Mourabitoun group, also referred to as Al-Qaida in West Africa, have recently displayed their capacities by conducting large-scale attacks on hotels in Bamako and Ouagadougou. The explicit denomination of Boko Haram as Islamic State’s West African Province and not Nigerian Province further emphasizes such regional aspirations.

Libya currently serves as hub for djihadists from all directions and re-treating IS fighters from Syria and Iraq in particular. For the Islamic State, its wilayats in Sinai and Libya offer a gateway to Africa, where fragile political structures, economic grievances and social fragmentation are highly vulnerable for extremism. Thus, the Maghreb and southern Sahel are increasingly periled to become the next centre of gravity for djihadists<sup>19</sup>. While Libya, Sinai and Nigeria mark the first spots where the Islamic State metastasizes beyond the Middle East, Boko Haram benefits from IS capacities and, in case of defeat, militants of each IS affiliate could also withdraw to Libya or other Wilayats. This way, their rebellion could continue or strengthen the “core” fight for the Islamic State in its heartland Syria and Iraq. Despite internal

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<sup>16</sup> Cummings, R., 2014. *Boko Haram and the Symmetry of Asymmetric Warfare*. Online: <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2014/12/boko-haram-asymmetrical-warfare/> [15/02/2016].

<sup>17</sup> International Crisis Group, 2015. *The Central Sahel: A Perfect Sandstorm*. Online: [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/west-africa/227-the-central-sahel-a-perfect-sandstorm.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/africa/west-africa/227-the-central-sahel-a-perfect-sandstorm.pdf) [15/02/2016].

<sup>18</sup> Zenn, J., 2015. *Wilayat West Africa reboots for the caliphate*. Online: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/wilayat-west-africa-reboots-for-the-caliphate> [15/02/2016].

<sup>19</sup> CSIS, 2015. *Global Forecast 2016*, p.78. Online: [http://csis.org/files/publication/151116\\_Cohen\\_GlobalForecast2016\\_Web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/151116_Cohen_GlobalForecast2016_Web.pdf)

fragmentation concerning the international course of Boko Haram, this outlet could explain the relatively low number of defections since the baya'a.<sup>20</sup>

### **An insurgency hard to grasp and even harder to grab**

Accordingly, the complex structure of the Boko Haram conflict is both a multidimensional and multi-state problem which can only be addressed by a comprehensive and concerted strategy. First, this requires a coherent coordinated counterterrorism strategy among the affected countries in the region to deprive Boko Haram of its valuable cross-border operational basis. The MNJTF might be a suitable quick fix, but providing troops against the militant's territorial gains and destroying their hideouts will not cut it. Second, their profitable trafficking of humans and arms needs to be prevented. The connection to the Islamic State lifts Boko Haram to a new level of strategic and military supply, making it much more difficult to carve out the core drivers of the conflict. Third, governments not only in Nigeria but in the entire Lake Chad basin have to provide a solid basis for its deprived population. In the case of Nigeria this means to strengthen political institutions, account for the military's human rights violations and the prevalent corruption, improve employment rates, share oil revenues from the south and thus decrease the attractiveness of Boko Haram as an alternative to the lack of prospects. As long as instability and grievances in Nigeria and the region remain, Boko Haram or ISWAP will always be able to dissolve if necessary and regroup if possible.

Decision-makers in all of the affected countries may be reluctant to call the threat they have watched evolving from the Maiduguri-based sect more appropriately what it is today: a solidly founded, well-organised and equipped transnationally operating jihadist group with the potential of destabilizing the entire region. Acknowledging that this is the challenge they face would be a first step for the region and may prove helpful in the fight against this group that is so hard to grab.

– Sebastian Sieber is currently writing his master thesis in Conflict Studies at the University of Augsburg. He works at the *Heidelberger Institute for International Conflict Research (HIIC)* and conducts research on several conflicts in Nigeria, amongst others the Boko Haram conflict.

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<sup>20</sup> Zenn, J., 2015. *Wilayat West Africa reboots for the caliphate*. Online: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/wilayat-west-africa-reboots-for-the-caliphate> [15/02/2016].