



SAR Consultancy (Security Analysis and Research)

Special Bulletin – Boko Haram’s slow resurgence in the North East; what’s next?



On the 29th of March 2015, a historical Presidential election took place in Nigeria. Given the ongoing security situation in Nigeria at the time, and based on previous elections, a vast majority of people feared the precipitation of violence in the aftermath of the electoral process. Furthermore, given that many forecasted the fall of the incumbent, the risk of violence was perceived to be considerably higher than before. Interestingly, the incumbent, President Johnathan did lose his seat, the first time in the history of Nigeria but little in the way of mass violence was experienced. However, as many are rejoicing in the relatively peaceful atmosphere throughout the country, some are less optimistic and are fearing that after the inauguration of President Buhari, on the 29th of May, peace may not be sustainable. Factors which may influence the new President’s ability to maintain peace and stability throughout the country may go beyond the ongoing security situation; the economy, corruption, and a lethargy amongst the people may greatly influence his policies. Furthermore, it would appear that Boko Haram have not gone away, with recent attacks signifying a comeback. This bulletin will examine the insurgency over the last few months in an attempt to forecast, what may come next.

Security Situation in North East Nigeria

The security situation in the North East of Nigeria, has gone through a number of phases since the start of the year. From regular reports of high level insurgent attacks in the North East, to proclamations of allegiance to ISIS. As a result, it became difficult for the Nigerian Government and the international environment to ignore or down play the level of capacity and drive of Boko Haram. However, after the postponement of the elections in February for six weeks, and in what would appear to be a re-energised Nigerian military operation, in conjunction with targeted regional support, the picture slowly changed to their advantage to one which made many perceive that Boko Haram were on the back foot. Interestingly, it seemed that many of these ignored similar previous patterns in which a reduction in attacks by Boko Haram in the past and an apparent disappearance on their behalf, should not be seen as an indicator of their demise. In fact, as forecasted by SAR two weeks ago, the slow resurgence of ‘one off’ incidents recently in Maiduguri and Damaturu, and those in the last number of weeks in both states should be seen as an indicator of their continued presence, capacity and commitment. This pattern of incidents was forecastable given patterns of behaviour over the last number of years. However, during the last five months older patterns and trends appear to have been slightly ignored when analysing Boko Haram. Albeit, during this time there has been an increased international focus on the North East of Nigeria and the insurgency with Boko Haram, this period of time should not be viewed as an isolated period. Irrespective of the fact that more detailed information has become available in recent months, the patterns of activities in 2013 and 2014, can provide analysts with a longer term perspective on which to base their forecasts for the weeks, months and years ahead.

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It was widely acknowledged that Boko Haram had gained territorial control over parts of Borno State in the earlier part of the year, presented by many as a new dimension to the insurgency. Interestingly 2013 and 2014 had witnessed similar patterns of behaviour in respect to territorial control, albeit it was not widely accepted or acknowledged militarily or internationally. While this may not appear to be significant, the longevity of insurgent control over these communities may assist them in the medium to long term even if they are forced to retreat for the short term. Reports of locals providing food to insurgents recently may have been the result of these relationships. On another note, largely resulting from the alleged allegiance between Boko Haram and ISIS, Boko Haram's tactics and methods of inflicting torture and pain have received increased attention. Given the high profile nature of ISIS and their increased social media exposure, activities of Boko Haram who began to use a similar model of publicity received much more attention and notoriety of late. An apparent increase in brutality in the group was widely reported. However, the group's barbarism was widely noted over the last two years at the same time as the capacity of the group was often questioned. This trend of barbarism is likely to have significantly impacted the psyche of the group and their living victims. Widespread therapeutic care is likely to be needed for the general population for years to come.

So what changed, why are Boko Haram being given more attention after years of bloodshed? As many know, the kidnap of the Chibok girls and the related media campaign appears to have been the catalyst which changed the response to Boko Haram. This resulted in a shift both nationally and internationally with respect to the recognition given to Boko Haram and in return, their response. The first related to the response by the neighbouring countries, such as Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. The strategic approach by such militaries appeared to have a significant impact on the insurgent's ability to retreat and regroup when pushed back by the Nigerian military. In addition to the regional cooperation, mercenaries, initially hired for training, were deployed to the North East, to assist the military operations on the ground. This, too, has been credited for the reducing the capacity within Boko Haram. That being said, it should be noted that reports indicate that the funding provided to these three military forces and the mercenaries has been reduced over recent weeks, if not stopped. This is likely to result in more limited joint responses, which may assist Boko Haram regroup and re-take ground. Due to the patterns of recent attacks along border areas, this may already be the case. The second element related to an improved response by the Nigerian military. The Nigerian military have been provided with support, training and mentoring from a number of other nations. This has been attributed to much of their improvement. In addition, their military assets and equipment has seen vast improvements over the past number of months. Collectively, this has contributed to a significantly improved military offensive against Boko Haram. Reports of asset and weapons seizures, dismantling of camps, deaths of high profile operatives, etc. are all supported by a reduction of Boko Haram attacks, IPDs moving back to their homes to Borno and Yobe, and an increased desire for NGOs to get back to Maiduguri and further into the state. All in all, the general consensus is that significant improvements have been made in the North East, something long overdue. That being said, many have expressed caution with regard to whether this is sustainable, resulting in the question; what does the future hold for Boko Haram, the related insurgency and more importantly for the people of the North East?

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Whilst it is still difficult to predict, SAR forecasts the following, if a joint military offensive is not continued, Boko Haram are likely to regroup and start by conducting 'one off' incidents, as is currently being seen, and from there territorial control is likely to re-emerge, especially around border areas, and areas like the Mandara Mountains which are still very vulnerable. 'One off' incidents outside of the North East are also likely to emerge. Attacks in Yobe, Bauchi and Gombe may be witnessed in the short to medium term. It is likely that the number of operatives will have been reduced based on the recent military operations, due to death and desertion. Although this is likely to have impacted the group, the core group are unlikely to be significantly impacted; a group very capable of adapting to the environment in which they find themselves and to a lack of weapons and assets, which are likely depleted in recent times. Other elements that should also be acknowledged when one is looking at the possible future of Boko Haram relate to the possible regional impact and ISIS's alleged allegiance to Boko Haram. The ongoing insurgency and the recent regional response may have an impact on regional stability. Exactly what this might look like requires more in-depth research before elaboration. The second element relates to ISIS; the following section will examine this further. Prior to that, however, it should also be noted, that a military offensive regardless of how successful could never get rid of Boko Haram and the related insurgency alone. While it has often been proclaimed, but to date little has been seen in the way of action, there needs to be an economic and social response to the North East focused on wider issues than the insurgency. Without this it is unlikely that the necessary level of stability could be sustained.

Can the evolution of ISIS in Libya be a predictor of things to come in Nigeria? If so, what to watch for?

Reports of ISIS flags, courts, assemblies, etc.

Proclamations of a breakaway/sub group

Reports of attacks on non-Muslim Nigerian, claimed by ISIS

Targeting of low level/not high risk international targets. This may be seen on attacks on NGOs, Religious Orders, or internationals with limited security.

Attack on high profile international targets; likely choice a hotel, restaurant or shopping centre frequented by internationals.

Continued attacks on softer international/ national targets.

Softer attacks may be experienced throughout the North of Nigeria; high profile target may be in Lagos or Abuja.

Libya may differ from Nigeria, in that:

Libya had a pattern of fighters travelling to conflict zones for decades, ensuring favourable networks & relationships.

Libya may be geographically better placed for ISIS to support groups there, both in human support and assets.

Boko Haram allegiance to ISIS – Rhetoric or Recognition

As media reports continue to discuss the alleged allegiance between Boko Haram and ISIS, a number of analysts and journalists have suggested it is only rhetoric. That being said, many acknowledge that this rhetoric may and could already be giving both groups some level of benefits from such an alleged alliance. For example, for ISIS, acceptance of allegiance by Boko Haram signifies an extension of their caliphate, illustrating to the Western World an extension of their control. In respect to Boko Haram the likely benefits are different. These were discussed in detail in SAR's last bulletin, many of which still stand. Furthermore, given the increased military response to Boko Haram and perceptions that For further information, please contact SAR Consultancy @ info@sarconint.com or follow on twitter @ SAR_Consultancy. Copyright © SAR Consultancy 2014. Reproduction in whole or in part is prohibited without written permission from SAR Consultancy. SAR Consultancy is an Irish registered trading name.

Boko Haram are suffering increased casualties and loss of capacity links to ISIS leave a residual fear in many that the recent silence by Boko Haram and their previous patterns of retreat and regroup, may be indicative of them evolving under the influence and ideological guidance of ISIS. However, evidence of this has yet to be seen. Until this is present many are likely to argue that direct contact between the two groups is unlikely. Nonetheless, recent media articles claiming the death of Boko Haram members in Mosul, Iraq, are likely to reignite further discussion of possible joint operations. Based on SAR's analysis, any display of direct actions and evidence of ISIS in Nigeria, is likely to be conducted via a sub-group/breakaway group from Boko Haram. Given Boko Haram's structure, or at least of what is known about the group, it is unlikely that all of the group will support such a shift in activities. This assessment is largely based on Boko Haram's history of predominantly targeting domestic targets, rather than having an international focus. That being said, given the activities of ISIS to date, any breakaway group is likely to be made up of violent, pro-active and committed operatives, more than capable of working with or without the wider support of Boko Haram. If such a group were to evolve, attacks on international targets in Nigeria are likely to increase. Unfortunately, many other questions remain unanswered that may provide further indicators of growing linkages between the two groups, the most simple would appear to be, what has changed that may incite Boko Haram to look beyond Nigeria for support and/or an extended territory of influence? *SAR would like to hear your thoughts.*

Other factors influencing or likely to influence the ongoing security situation in Nigeria.

The economy in Nigeria has suffered considerably of late, with significant reductions already noted in capital spending and within the national coffers. This has already resulted in the cancellation or suspension of capital spending project. As a result, many companies have released people from employment. In addition, due to the drop in oil prices, the income for the government is likely to be greatly reduced. The loss of monies to alleged corrupt practices is also receiving greater attention, most noticeable the alleged loss of over \$20 billion in the NNPC. This will all impact the choices the new President will be able to make into the future. In time, it has been argued that this may impact the Niger Delta region and the amnesty programme, requiring close monitoring in the short and medium term with regard to security related risks. *SAR would like to hear your thoughts.*

Conclusion

While the security situation in Nigeria, even outside of the North East continues to be a significant factor for consideration to all those active in Nigeria, some more basic but less considered factors may be of greater risk. So before rushing to identify high profile threats and risk factors, don't forget to review those more common placed. These may include, traffic accidents, protests, criminality, which may exhibit in incidents such as armed robbery, car theft and theft from car, simple theft, burglary, etc. Kidnapping may increase outside the areas already known for such incidents. These issues are likely to poses a greater risk to the majority of groups and individuals active throughout Nigeria.

SAR Consultancy would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who they met during their recent trip to Nigeria. It was a great trip.

SAR Consultancy

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