

Nigeria must declare total war on Boko Haram

President Muhammadu Buhari's government should stop celebrating half-victories and engage in military action and reform

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On Feb. 9, two young female bombers detonated explosives at a camp for people displaced by [Boko Haram](#) in Nigeria's northeastern town of Dikwa.

The [attack left 58 people dead](#) and many more wounded.

Nine months after Nigeria's newly elected President Muhammadu Buhari vowed to squash the insurgency, Boko Haram's threat still looms large. Buhari clinched a [historic victory in March 2015 elections](#) in large part because of his reputation as an incorruptible leader. His campaign emphasized Buhari's experience as a general and former military leader as key to defeating Boko Haram and restoring law and order to Nigeria's war-torn northeast.

As per his campaign pledge, shortly after taking office, Buhari moved the military command center [in charge of the operation against Boko Haram](#) to Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State and epicenter of the insurgency. The swift change signaled that the era of languid military operations against the insurgency had come to an end.

But the fight against Boko Haram has stalled since that initial push to dislodge the insurgents from the territory they captured in 2015. Buhari's administration has claimed that the group is ["technically defeated,"](#) but Boko Haram's recent deadly attacks on markets and [villages](#) suggest otherwise. The Buhari administration has routinely underestimated the threat posed by the insurgents while overestimating the effectiveness of the Nigerian military's

counterinsurgency campaign. Buhari must engage in military action and reform — not just rhetoric — to get the job done.

The territorial gains against the insurgency are encouraging, but Buhari's government has yet to seriously degrade the group's capabilities. Boko Haram's ability to [overrun vast territories](#) remains intact. As the dry season, which is typically favorable for ground offensives, draws closer, observers are wondering, 'What is Buhari waiting for?'

Buhari has failed to shift into a total war mode because of a narrow, poorly fitted definition of what victory against Boko Haram looks like and a misplaced trust in the executive leadership for guidance in the fight against the insurgency. In an interview with the [BBC last December](#), Buhari insisted that the insurgency was no longer capable of mounting 'conventional attacks' against the state and local communities. This sort of analysis overlooks Boko Haram's modus operandi and ability to engage in ambush hit-and-run attacks.

Structural issues within the security sector, including a culture of impunity, an unprofessional military and a corrupt bureaucracy, have further complicated efforts to establish lasting stability. Instead of celebrating half-victories, Buhari's government should redouble its military efforts and prepare the Nigerian public for a long, difficult fight and by engaging in a robust planning for a post-conflict rehabilitation.

Some displaced residents have returned to their villages and towns amid notable improvements in security. Urban centers boast increased military presence. Businesses and schools have resumed in cities such as Maiduguri. However, despite these improvements, Buhari's campaign against Boko Haram — Operation Zaman Lafiya — has lacked serious follow through. Rural areas across the North East remain contested. Boko Haram's raids in Dalori on Feb. 1, in which 65-100 residents were killed and the entire village was burned to the ground, illustrates the fact that the Nigerian military has not fully reclaimed all territories. In fact, the military has not led robust operations in Boko Haram's strongholds — most notably the [Sambisa Forest](#), where a number of insurgent

cells that were forced out of urban centers and rural holding have been regrouping for months.

The Buhari administration must stop exaggerating half-victories and conduct robust operations to degrade Boko Haram's capacity to regenerate.

Boko Haram's newest cells in the Lake Chad Basin have a more criminal orientation than others, according to Modibbo Adama University history professor [Kyari Mohammed](#). They are tapping into regional trade routes to finance their operation. Access to trade routes may serve as a powerful recruitment tool to lure unemployed youth to join the insurgency. Buhari must take into account the group's unconventional and criminal capabilities and mobilize regional networks to counter its activities.

Moreover, the spillover of Boko Haram's activities into neighboring states represents a troubling trend that has accelerated under Buhari. A regional effort to quell the insurgency, under the African Union backed [Multi-national Joint Task Force](#), is necessary to prevent Boko Haram from exploiting porous borders and poor regional coordination to rebound. However, Buhari's administration appears uninterested in investing in the diplomatic effort necessary for strengthening the regional military cooperation.

The United States has pledged more than [\\$70 million in equipment, training and logistical support](#) to the Multi-National Joint Task Force. Cameroon's recent successful raid on a Boko Haram base, in which military sources claim more than [160 Boko Haram members were killed](#), illustrates the potential value of regional military cooperation. But competing national interests have also complicated the regional effort. Nigeria and neighboring Chad and Cameroon remain deadlocked over border demarcation in the Lake Chad Basin. However, the scale of Boko Haram's threat should mollify these disputes. Nigeria must also recognize that going it alone comes with a hefty cost for its already struggling economy due to falling global oil prices.

Buhari assumed office in May 2015 with a belief that changing the executive leadership would result in improved military operations. His predecessor President Goodluck Jonathan was widely seen as weak and oversaw a wildly corrupt military and government bureaucracy. For years activists accused Nigerian soldiers on the frontlines of the fight against Boko Haram of complicity and collusion. For example, critics have questioned the group's use of Nigerian military equipment during attacks.

Buhari appears to be operating with the belief that reducing high-level corruption in the military will translate into more victories. His campaign against such corruption is encouraging, but insufficient. Authorities have recently referred 12 senior Nigerian army officers, including former [National Security Advisor Sambo Dasuki](#), to the country's anti-corruption agency [for alleged involvement in an arms scandal](#) that led to the diversion of more than \$2 billion worth of government contracts meant to fund the war against Boko Haram.

Ending the Nigerian military's deeply entrenched culture of corruption and impunity is necessary, but not a panacea. The Buhari administration must stop exaggerating half-victories and conduct robust operations to degrade the group's capacity to regenerate.

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