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Unbroken Boko Haram

Buhari Prematurely Declares Victory

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After less than a year in office, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari is claiming significant progress against Boko Haram. Buhari has shifted the base of military operations from Abuja, the capital, to the northeastern city of Maiduguri, coordinated military efforts with other armed forces in the region, and sought better cooperation with the United States and the United Kingdom on intelligence and assistance. His administration has also attempted to crack down on corruption in the security establishment. As a result of these efforts, the Buhari administration says, Boko Haram is on the run; Nigeria, Buhari declared, has won a “technical victory ^[1]” over the group. It is still a “fighting force,” he continued, but “we have dealt with them.”

Such pronouncements are less than reassuring, however, to many Nigerians and their neighbors who are still targeted by Boko Haram terror attacks, as well as to the hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the continuing conflict in the region. During the first two weeks of February, more than 260 people were killed in a series of insurgent attacks on villages in Borno State, a suicide bombing at a large camp for displaced persons in Dikwa, Borno State, and a number of military operations against the militants. If anything, these attacks confirm a trend we first described in a *Foreign Affairs* article ^[2] published in June (shortly after Buhari’s inauguration). In it, we argued that although regional forces had made significant progress in the fight against Boko Haram, the group was far from defeated; it had merely returned to urban terrorist tactics and assaults on “soft” targets.

This trend dates back to an offensive launched in the summer of 2015 by forces from Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria. The offensive degraded Boko Haram’s ability to conduct conventional attacks. Overall in 2015, casualties in Boko Haram–related incidents topped 10,000 on all sides. Our data show that Boko Haram was responsible for 6,760 deaths and regional security forces were responsible for 4,020 deaths, slightly more than in 2014.

Since the launch of the offensive, however, the numbers are slightly less grim. Combined operations from Nigerian and neighboring forces have limited the ability of militants to claim territory and mount large attacks. Government forces have gone after bases in the Sambisa Forest and attempted to cut off food, supplies, and weapons flowing in from the region. The extremist group was responsible for just a little over 1,100 deaths in the five months between August and December 2015, the lowest toll of any five-month period since 2013. Boko Haram's contracting territory and reduced military capabilities are signs of a shift of momentum against the network.

It is important, however, not to exaggerate claims of military progress, which is why Buhari's recent pronouncement is premature. Boko Haram maintains significant manpower—made up of a network of committed insurgents whom the state has had difficulty capturing or killing—and far-ranging operational capabilities. Using women and even children as bombers, Boko Haram has mounted dozens of coordinated attacks, striking as far afield as Chad's capital of N'Djamena last June and July, Nigeria's capital of Abuja in early October, and northeastern villages and camps for the internally displaced in January and February 2016. It has proven extremely difficult for Nigeria to defend itself against such sporadic assaults on smaller settlements and military outposts. Doing so will require improved intelligence and sustained efforts to degrade the technical skills and specialized supplies of the militants.

In addition, although Boko Haram has dramatically lost territory in Nigeria, its spread across the region shows few signs of being contained. The group began to expand its operations among neighboring states in late 2014, when six Boko Haram-related incidents claimed the lives of 110 people in Cameroon. In 2015, there were at least 66 Boko Haram attacks, battles, or assassinations outside of Nigeria, causing more than 1,400 deaths in total, including in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. These cross-border attacks declined in early 2015 but picked up again after August.

Although Buhari has done more to cooperate with the international community than his predecessor, Goodluck Jonathan, the enlarged Multinational Joint Task Force he planned with neighboring states in March 2015 has been slow to materialize. The group consists of 8,700 troops from Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria and is meant to curtail Boko Haram's ability to take advantage of the region's porous borders by moving in and out of states whenever they are under pressure. Forces from Cameroon, Chad, and Nigeria have been active in northeastern Nigeria and border areas, although funding constraints and logistic problems have delayed full deployment. To prevent Boko Haram's further consolidation, regional partners should take a more consistent and coordinated approach, in tandem with international support. This would include broadening the mobilization of the Multinational Joint Task Force, full funding of the force's estimated \$700 million budget [3], and appropriate cooperation on intelligence, logistics, and training from partners outside the region.

For now, government forces must not mistake tactical progress with strategic victory. Boko Haram has faced serious challenges from state security forces before, only to make tactical and operational adjustments that made it even more threatening. The only way to defeat the group in the long run, besides organizing for an effective counterinsurgency effort, is for the government to move ahead with development efforts and initiatives for political accommodation. Central authorities continue to oversell their progress on the battlefield while underinvesting in measures to address northeastern Nigeria's abysmal poverty and

marginality. They have also aggravated dissension through human rights abuses and repression. Without a more coherent political and developmental approach, declarations of victory will ring hollow and social disaffection will remain a salient threat to state legitimacy.

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