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Boko Haram threat grows as Cameroon comes under pressure

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Though the Islamist insurgency of Boko Haram has been raging in Nigeria since 2009, perhaps the [defining moment](#) of the conflict was the 14th of April this year, when militants kidnapped over 200 female students in Chibok, with the intent of selling them into slavery, or else marrying them to members of the group.

This atrocity focused the media for a while on the [increasingly violent insurgency](#) that the Nigerian Government was facing, and their seeming inability to stem the tide. Assistance was offered, and accepted, from the United States and UK in an attempt to locate the kidnapped students in particular, and assisting the Nigerian military more generally. It seemed that a combination of media, NGO and governmental focus on the crisis engulfing northern Nigeria meant that the international community was finally taking the events in that country with the importance they deserved.

However, since then world attention has been diverted by a number of critical issues, most notably in the Middle East and Ukraine. While it is important to not always conflate media and NGO coverage with government interaction, there is usually a correlation between the two and in the case of Nigeria, the pace of events elsewhere have led to Boko Haram being largely ignored.

This is very unfortunate, as Boko Haram have significantly strengthened their position compared to earlier in the year. Eschewing their normal hit-and-run attacks, Boko Haram are now rapidly capturing territory, mimicking the rapid advance of the Islamic State earlier in the year, whom they appear to want to emulate. Boko Haram has declared an “[Islamic Caliphate](#)” in areas under its control, though it is unclear whether this is their own, or enjoining their territory with the Islamic State declared in Iraq and Syria. The group has recently bolstered itself, having taken the Borno region capital of [Maiduguri](#).

This is strongly suggestive of a switch from more conventional terrorist operations to that of an insurgent or guerrilla warfare strategy, which in turn suggests that Boko Haram has the resources and sophistication to carry out such a campaign. Elements of this were present in [their participation in the violence in Mali](#), but with peace talks between the Tuareg rebels and the government underway there, they have been denied that area as a “safe haven” for training and logistical purposes. Instead, they are creating zones outside of state control in Nigeria with focused attacks on the military and security services in addition to violence against civilians.

In addition to this switch to territorial conquest and disturbingly rapid advance, Boko Haram are also attempting to take their conflict beyond Nigeria’s borders. Since the capture of the border town of [Gwoza](#), Boko Haram has presented a serious threat on the [notoriously porous](#) Lake Chad border region, clashing numerous times with the Cameroonian military in particular. This makes a certain amount of military sense from the view of Boko Haram, as [Nigeria’s neighbours](#), especially Chad but also to a lesser extent Cameroon, have been aiding Nigeria in dealing with the insurgency and stepping up border security and cross-border cooperation on Boko Haram.

19th September 2014

However, it is quite likely that more than simple military necessity is the reason for focusing on Cameroon here. Widespread social discontent mixed in with an inflexible political system and an aging premier all make Cameroon a [potentially attractive target](#), both for recruitment purposes and in order to illustrate the growing power of the group. Additionally, Cameroon is already struggling with the Central African Republic's crisis [spilling over its own borders](#), drawing resources away, which could have otherwise countered threats from the West.

Worryingly, there exists a potential for Boko Haram to take advantage of the CAR humanitarian crisis here. According to Edmond Mulet, Assistant Secretary-General for the UN's peacekeeping operations, there were indications that Boko Haram was [taking advantage](#) of the lawless situation in the Central African Republic in December last year. CAR refugee camps in Cameroon may prove fertile ground for spreading Boko Haram's message or at least gaining a measure of passive and sympathetic support in the country. Additionally, Boko Haram may be [training rebels](#) in that country in their tactics, exacerbating the crisis and increasing regional unrest.

In sum, the situation in western central Africa at the moment is deeply unsettling. While it is not clear that Boko Haram have access to the same vast resources as ISIS, the parallels between their actions at the moment do suggest a strategy of emulation, utilising the weak governance and existing problems of the states it operates in to create a "caliphate of the gaps", aided by its increased focus on combatting security forces and military units.

Boko Haram are now making it clear that their insurgency is not merely aimed at the Nigerian government, but a regional struggle, closely allied and linked with global jihadists such as [Al-Qaeda in the Mahgreb](#), [Al-Shabaab](#) and [Ansaru](#). West African leaders may have promised "[total war](#)" on Boko Haram, but thus far the [military response by Nigeria](#) and Cameroon has been underwhelming and, in the case of the former, the accusations of [serious human rights violations](#) suggest their presence may only help fuel the violence.

Chad, as the foremost regional military power, has taken on more of a leadership role in the current crisis, but it is not clear to what extent their troops are trained for counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations, especially after their [withdrawal from Mali](#). With French and perhaps American support, Chad [could be a very effective partner](#) in maintaining regional stability, but with resources stretched thin due to other ongoing conflicts, it is likely that the rapidly growing threat from Boko Haram will not have adequate resources put towards it in the near future. And, needless to say, the root causes behind the conflict will not be resolved any time soon.

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