Collective Insecurity in the Sahel

Fighting Terror with Good Governance

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On 14 April 2014, gunmen from the Nigerian Islamist extremist group Boko Haram seized more than 250 girls from their school dormitory in the remote northeastern town of Chibok as they prepared to take their final examinations. The attack was only the latest in an escalating series of bombings, murders, and kidnappings committed by the group—a nihilistic, fragmented coalition of Islamists, criminals, political agitators, and embittered young men nominally committed to overthrowing the Nigerian government in the name of fundamentalist Islam. It prompted a typically lethargic response from the authorities, who took no action despite a campaign of daily demonstrations in Abuja led by Nigerian civil society activists. Unofficial campaigning for the 2015 national elections continued without pause. For nearly three weeks, President Goodluck Jonathan offered no public comments about efforts to retrieve the girls. Parents of the missing girls, exasperated by the Nigerian military's inertia, risked their own lives by pursuing the attackers into the forest.[1]

While Nigeria's political class appeared unmoved by the tragedy, it struck a chord with the global media, which propelled the story to the top of the news headlines. Pressure

mounted on the Nigerian government to accept international help. Soon, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, China, and others were providing assistance, including surveillance assets, intelligence-sharing resources, hostage negotiators, and military advisors. But while expectations surged that the girls would soon be freed, more than three months later there was little sign of progress. Not a single girl had been released and Boko Haram's attacks continued apace.

Why is it that Nigeria, urged on by its international partners, has been unable to make a breakthrough in tackling Boko Haram? This article argues that overcoming regional terrorism is an arduous, long-term endeavor requiring a combination of elements that have been absent from Nigeria's response so far. They include the deployment of professional security forces that respect human rights, community engagement, and cooperation with neighboring states. Most of all, defeating regional terrorists requires genuine political commitment to tackle some of the underlying governance challenges and economic grievances that provide the motivation—and recruitment tools—for violent extremist organizations (VEOs). The international community must also rethink its strategy for supporting African allies confronted with terrorism. Too often, efforts are confined to tackling the symptoms of violence through military "train and equip" programs rather than focusing on terrorism's root causes. By doing so, countries like the United States and France buttress governments whose incompetence and venality help fuel and sustain insurgencies. Similar lessons apply to countries confronted by terrorism in the broader Sahel region, the band of fragile states spread precariously below the Sahara Desert. They include Mali, where a corrupt civilian government was toppled for bungling its response to a nationalist uprising that was subsequently hijacked "by extremist groups," including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). International actors—the key bilateral partners in this region being France and the United States—must resist the temptation to pursue quick fixes to deep-seated security problems and must balance engagement with governments with strategies to encourage broader governance reform. In tandem with these efforts, a long-term strategy must be devised to foster sustainable, African-led solutions to insecurity that draw in regional and sub-regional organizations like the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

The Rising Terrorist Threat in Nigeria and the Sahel. Parts of Africa have encountered terrorism for many years, but the threat has traditionally been confined to two distinct areas: coastal east Africa and the Maghreb. During the past decade, however, the zone of terrorist operations has expanded to include the Sahel, an impoverished region incorporating all or part of ten countries extending from Senegal in the west to Eritrea in the east. This region is now the epicenter of extremist activity, and a glance at its political, economic, geographic, and demographic features helps explain why.

The Sahel is one of the poorest regions in the world. It contains fast-

growing populations with few economic opportunities. Its people have learned to survive in a hostile, food-insecure environment, but their coping strategies are coming under intolerable pressure from climate change, which is accelerating the southward push of the Sahara. The core states of the Sahel—Mauritania, Mali, and Niger—are near the bottom of the UN Human Development Index, with Niger occupying the very last position, at 187.[2] Nigeria is an exception. It has Africa's largest population, largest GDP, and is the largest oil producer on the continent.[3] These riches produce a different set of problems, breeding a political elite dependent on oil rents and overseeing public corruption on an industrial scale. When the head of Nigeria's Central Bank, Lamido Sanusi, accused Nigeria's national oil company of failing to account for almost $20 billion of revenue, he was threatened with prosecution and forced out of office.[4] Nigeria's headline GDP figure obscures its deep economic inequalities. The six states that comprise Nigeria's northeast are the most impoverished in the nation, with high unemployment, poor educational outcomes, and non-existent public services.[5] It is a political backwater, neglected by a central government cocooned in Abuja and content to see an opposition stronghold wither. It is no coincidence that this is the region that produced Boko Haram.

While countries like Mali and Nigeria appear to have little in common, they share a woeful record of public governance that has helped add extra fuel to the flames of violent insurgencies.[6] Since independence, their ruling elites have governed in bad faith, operating unofficial networks and favoring special interest groups, whether regional or ethnic. Corruption has run rampant. Security forces have acted with impunity, protecting incumbent regimes rather than the public. Economic mismanagement and a lack of strategic vision have combined to deny opportunities for their increasingly young populations, whose aspirations for education and employment have been unmet. These conditions provide fertile ground for the growth of VEOs and organized crime networks that prey upon the thwarted ambitions of the region's young people.

Overcoming regional terrorism is an arduous, long-term endeavor requiring a combination of elements that have been absent from Nigeria's response.

For both countries, the results have been catastrophic. In Nigeria, Boko Haram has morphed in the space of a decade from an obscure religious sect into a vicious insurgency that has captured territory and murdered more than two thousand civilians in the first half of 2014 alone.[7] In Mali, the government's failure to quell an uprising in the north led to a mutiny in 2012, a coup d'état, and the transformation of the northern security crisis into a terrorist insurgency that rapidly engulfed two-thirds of the country before the

French military intervened. Terrorism, therefore, is a manifestation of deep-seated problems in these African societies.

The Response So Far: Halfhearted and Ineffective. Efforts by Nigeria and its neighbors in the Sahel to deal with terrorism have failed. In Nigeria, Boko Haram poses a more potent threat than at any time in its existence. In Mali, the terrorist grip on the north of the country was only loosened by a French intervention that was supported by West African states. The Malian authorities were mere observers.

A number of factors explain this ineptitude. First, the scale and complexity of the threat must be recognized. Western nations and civil society activists who chastise the Nigerian government for failing to rescue the Chibok girls do not sufficiently acknowledge that any attempt to rescue such a large number of hostages, held in multiple locations by merciless fighters, would inevitably result in mass casualties. More broadly, conducting successful counterterrorism operations is a challenging task requiring patience, skill, and a long-term strategy—as the United States learned to its cost in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even so, Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts have been woefully inadequate, even counterproductive. There are major doubts about the commitment of the Nigerian authorities to tackle Boko Haram. As Nigerians in the northeast have been attacked, kidnapped, and had their homes destroyed, the ruling elite in faraway Abuja has shown more interest in using the crisis to trade accusations and seek advantage over their political opponents than in coming up with a serious response. The indifference shown by the Nigerian government to its own population illustrates just how detached Nigeria's political class has become from its citizens.

In neighboring Cameroon, a desire for self-preservation explains why the authorities were so slow in taking the offensive to Boko Haram. President Paul Biya was only jolted into action when his close confidante narrowly escaped a kidnap attempt in July. In Mali, the former government of Amadou Toumani Touré was long suspected by its neighbors of turning a blind eye to the activities of AQIM in the north, perhaps out of fear that a military assault would upset a fragile rapprochement with former rebel groups. Whatever the reasons for this inactivity, it turned out to be a costly miscalculation when the group overran vast swathes of the country in 2012.

In light of this official indifference, it comes as no surprise that populations in the region have sometimes displayed ambivalent attitudes toward the nonstate actors operating in their midst. This is particularly true in Mali, where groups like AQIM gained a foothold in communities by offering public services that the state was either unwilling or unable to provide. The almost total absence of any social compact between the state and its people is further illustrated by the way state security forces have interacted with civilians in areas affected by terrorism. In Nigeria, the federal Joint Task Force has almost matched Boko Haram in its brutal treatment of civilians, meting out collective punishment of communities suspected of harboring Boko Haram members,

detaining young people at random, and doing little to minimize civilian casualties. Human rights groups have made allegations, backed up by apparent video evidence, of extrajudicial killings carried out by the Nigerian military and officially sanctioned vigilante groups.[8]

The general incompetence of the military response has been staggering. The security forces in most of the Sahel lack training and leadership; they are demoralized, unprofessional, and in some cases deliberately under-resourced by coup-fearing civilian leaders.[9] In Nigeria, regular troops with the 7th Division have on several occasions refused to fight in Borno state, claiming their superiors have siphoned off funding that was meant to feed and equip them.[10] As a result, they are poorly prepared to launch counter-insurgency operations against a brutal, committed enemy.

Among the governments of the region, there is little appetite to think beyond military responses to terrorism and confront its root causes, because that would involve reflecting upon their own governance shortcomings. While Nigeria's National Security Advisor, Colonel (ret.) Sambo Dasuki, attempted to outline a more comprehensive approach to Boko Haram, including de-radicalization programs, community engagement, and efforts to address economic grievances, the Nigerian government has made little apparent effort to implement the plan.[11] Time and again, requests for international assistance involve little more than the submission of wish lists for military equipment.

A final, missing ingredient in Africa's response to the terrorist threat posed by groups like Boko Haram is the failure of states to work effectively together. The relationship between Nigeria and Cameroon highlights these shortcomings. Close cooperation between these two neighbors is critical for countering Boko Haram, which moves with ease over the poorly guarded international border, launching attacks on both sides. However, Nigeria denies Cameroon's military the right to pursue terrorists into its territory. In Cameroon, there are strong suspicions that the authorities, despite their denials, have fueled the insurgency by colluding with European powers in paying ransoms to free European hostages held by Boko Haram.

Embryonic efforts are underway to boost regional cooperation through the Lake Chad Basin Commission security initiative, including moves to set up a Regional Intelligence Fusion Unit.[12] These plans offer some cause for optimism, but it has yet to be seen whether this unit will be more effective than other regional efforts. A program to tackle AQIM—which involved establishing a Joint Operational General Staff Committee in southern Algeria with participation from Algeria, Mali, Niger, and Mauritania—has had negligible impact. Meanwhile, the African Union is years away from developing the kind of sustainable, rapidly deployable peace enforcement or peacekeeping capacity that would deter and defeat armed terrorist groups. Its planned African Standby Force is way behind schedule and an interim mechanism, the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises, is only just getting off the ground. The Mali security crisis demonstrated that the regional

ECOWAS body was willing to act but incapable of doing so effectively.

Searching for Solutions: International Engagement, its Shortcomings, and Ways Forward.

There are no easy solutions to the scourge of Boko Haram and other VEOs. What is clear, however, is that the countries and regions in which they reside bear primary responsibility for dealing with them. Their governments could start to salve some of the grievances that provide the extremists with their recruitment message by ruling in a professional, accountable, just, and transparent manner. Unfortunately, the worst-affected countries lack the leadership, the political will, and—in some cases—the resources to achieve this. The international community faces a quandary. It must deal with the terrorist problem in the short-term in order to protect its own security interests while trying to nurture homegrown institutions in these regions that will be able to tackle the problem in the long run.

While an assortment of actors is engaged in Nigeria and the Sahel—both bilaterally and multilaterally—the United States and France are two of the most important. French involvement has been mainly security-focused. In July, it unveiled a new regional security strategy called Operation Barkhane to follow its military offensive in Mali. The United States has a range of programs, including broad-based security, development, and diplomatic engagement with Nigeria and an ambitious—and stuttering—civil-military effort to address the causes and symptoms of violent extremism in the Sahel, the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP).

These efforts are well-meaning but overly focused on technical fixes that do not sufficiently appreciate the political economies of the countries in which they operate. It is all very well to try to build strong institutions, but these are countries that are led by dominant individuals or groups, ruling through informal networks. Institution-building, important as it is, must be accompanied by pragmatic strategies to work with, and through, political elites. The key challenge is finding ways to work with these elites, whose buy-in is required in order for anything productive to happen. A careful balance must be struck between addressing their self-interests without undermining core objectives of long-term stability and sustainable development. A perpetual problem for the United States and other donors is that flashy military equipment and training is gladly accepted by African governments who then block or subvert additional support that runs against their interests, such as assistance to countervailing institutions like legislatures and civil society. The result of this engagement is to strengthen incumbent regimes whose very continuance acts as a powerful recruitment tool for armed opposition. One wonders whether Western counterterrorism objectives in the Sahel are best served by programs that enable increasingly illegitimate leaders, like Paul Biya of Cameroon and Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso, to remain in office even longer.

Too often, it appears that short-term, reactive responses to terrorism trump longer-term efforts targeting

its root causes. The demand for quick wins means it is easier to fire off a Hellfire missile than devise a long-term approach to counter-radicalization that may take years to bear fruit or fail to produce measurable outcomes of the type demanded by budget-makers in Congress.

It is partly for these reasons that the United States privileges military approaches over civilian ones. While there are merits in increasing the capacity of African military institutions (although police should not be ignored), these efforts merely empower the next generation of coup-makers if they are not subordinate to civilian authority. In Mali, a military that benefited from generous U.S. support mutinied in the face of an armed threat, and a U.S.-trained officer, Mamadou Sanogo, took the opportunity to overthrow the civilian government. Should the United States be strengthening the security forces of countries where civilian rule is shaky, such as Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, nevermind non-democratic regimes like those in Chad and Cameroon? The security services in these countries may be incapable of fighting VEOs, yet they are still the most powerful domestic institutions, influencing politics and gobbling up funds in the name of national security that could be used to improve education and health outcomes.

The "train and equip" approach to developing Africa's security institutions appears to be broken, but few alternatives have been put on the table. President Obama's announcement at the U.S.-Africa Leaders' Summit last August of a new fund to develop a rapidly deployable peacekeeping capacity was more of the same. Of the six countries chosen to receive funding worth $110 million for each of the next three to five years, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda show no interest in establishing democratic rule.[13] Meanwhile, the United States Agency for International Development has no mission in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger; neither Cameroon nor Niger has U.S. ambassadors due to Congressional delays in approving President Obama's nominations. The absence of key personnel makes it harder for the United States to demonstrate its seriousness in tackling the diplomatic and developmental challenges of this complex region and weakens efforts to energize host countries into taking a regional approach to insecurity.

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The United States has tried to take on board some of these critiques through its flagship engagement program in the Sahel, TSCTP. This State Department-led program spreads a relatively small amount of money across a large, ten-country region. It has also been weakened by interagency coordination issues and policy differences. However, the TSCTP at least signals an attempt to take a more comprehensive approach to extremism and its underlying causes.

The United States and its international partners should be offering a similarly comprehensive menu of support to Nigeria in its fight against Boko Haram. This should include economic assistance to the northeast, education reform, counter-radicalization strategies, community engagement, security sector reform, and more accountable, inclusive governance. All of these ingredients are required to turn the tide against Boko Haram and all depend upon the buy-in of a Nigerian government that to date has shown little interest. For the time being, however, limited deployments of advisors and intelligence-gathering assets appear to be the order of the day, although they have done little to bring back the Chibok girls or tackle the wider scourge of terrorism that wreaks an ever-greater toll on the citizens of Nigeria.

NOTES

1 Drew Hinshaw, "In Nigeria, Parents Tormented by Stumbling Search for Girls Kidnapped By Boko Haram," *Wall Street Journal*, 8 May 2014, Internet, http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304655304579550050970946552 (date accessed: 29 November 2014).

2 United Nations Development Program, *"Human Development Reports 2014*," Internet, http://hdr.undp.org/en/data (date accessed: 29 November 2014).

3 U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Nigeria Country Analysis Brief Overview," 30 December 2013, Internet, http:// www.eia.gov/countries/country-data.cfm?fips=ni (date accessed: 29 November 2014).

4 BBC, "Nigeria Central Bank Head Lamido Sanusi Ousted," 20 February 2014, Internet, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-26270561 (date accessed: 29 November 2014).

5 *See* International Crisis Group, "Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency," 3 April 2014, Internet, http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/africa/west-africa/nigeria/216-curbing-violencein-nigeria-ii-the-boko-haram-insurgency.pdf. haram-insurgency.pdf (date accessed: 29 November 2014). *Also* Ambassador John Campbell, "Why Nigeria's North South Distinction Is Important," Council on Foreign Relations, 7 February 2011, Internet, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/amb-john-campbell/why-nigerias-north-south-_b_817734.html? (date accessed: 29 November 2014).

6 Since independence in 1960, Mali has experienced two coup d'états, a revolution, and three Tuareg rebellions. Nigeria suffered four successful coups and a civil war before an aborted civilian handover in 1992 led to yet another military takeover. Civilian rule was restored in 1999, but the country has since endured insurgencies in the Niger Delta and northeast as well as serious bouts of communal violence in the Middle Belt.

7 Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria: Boko Haram Kills 2,053 Civilians in 6 Months," 15 July 2014, Internet, http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/15/nigeria-boko-haram-kills-2053-civilians-6-months (date accessed: 29 November 2014).

8 Heather Murdock, "Amnesty International: 'Gruesome' Videos Show Human Rights Abuses in Nigeria," 5 August 2014, Internet, http://www.voanews.com/content/amnesty-international-gruesome-videosshow-human-rights-abuses-in-nigeria/1971726. html (date accessed: 29 November 2014).

9 For an overview of the challenge of professionalism facing militaries in the region and specific examples of the Malian military's shortcomings in responding to the northern rebellion, see Emile Ouedraogo, "Advancing Military Professionalism in Africa," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, July 2014, Internet, http://africacenter. org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/ARP-6- EN.pdf (date accessed: 29 November 2014). *Also* Philippe Leymarie, "The Sahel Falls Apart," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 2012, Internet, http://mondediplo.com/2012/04/05sahel (date accessed: 29 November 2014). *Also* Oladiran Bello, "Quick Fix or Quicksand? Implementing the EU Sahel Strategy," *FRIDE* Working Paper 114, November 2012, Internet, http://fride.org/download/WP_114_Implementing_the_EU_Sahel_Strategy.pdf (date accessed: 29 November 2014).

10 *See* Sahara Reporters, "Near Mutiny at Army Barracks in Maiduguri Over High Number of Nigerian Troops Casualty in Gwoza," 7 August 2014, Internet, http://saharareporters.com/2014/08/07/near-mutiny-army-barracks-maiduguri-over-high-number-nigerian-troops-casualty-gwoza (date accessed: 29 November 2014).

11 International Crisis Group, "Curbing Violence in Nigeria (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency," 3 April 2014, Internet, http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/africa/west-africa/nigeria/216-curbing-violence-innigeria-ii-the-boko-haram-insurgency.pdf (date accessed: 29 November 2014).

12 For more details, see Lake Chad Basin Commission, "Remarks of the Executive Secretary at the Meeting on Insecurity," 22-23 July 2014, Internet, http://www.cblt.org/en/ remarks-executive-secretary-meeting-security (date accessed: 29 November 2014).

13 White House factsheet, "U.S. Support for Peacekeeping in Africa," 6 August 2014, Internet, https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/06/fact-sheet-us-support-peacekeeping-africa (date accessed: 29 November 2014).