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CHARTING BOKO HARAM'S RAPID DECLINE

(<http://warontherocks.com/author/nathaniel-allen/>) NATHANIEL ALLEN

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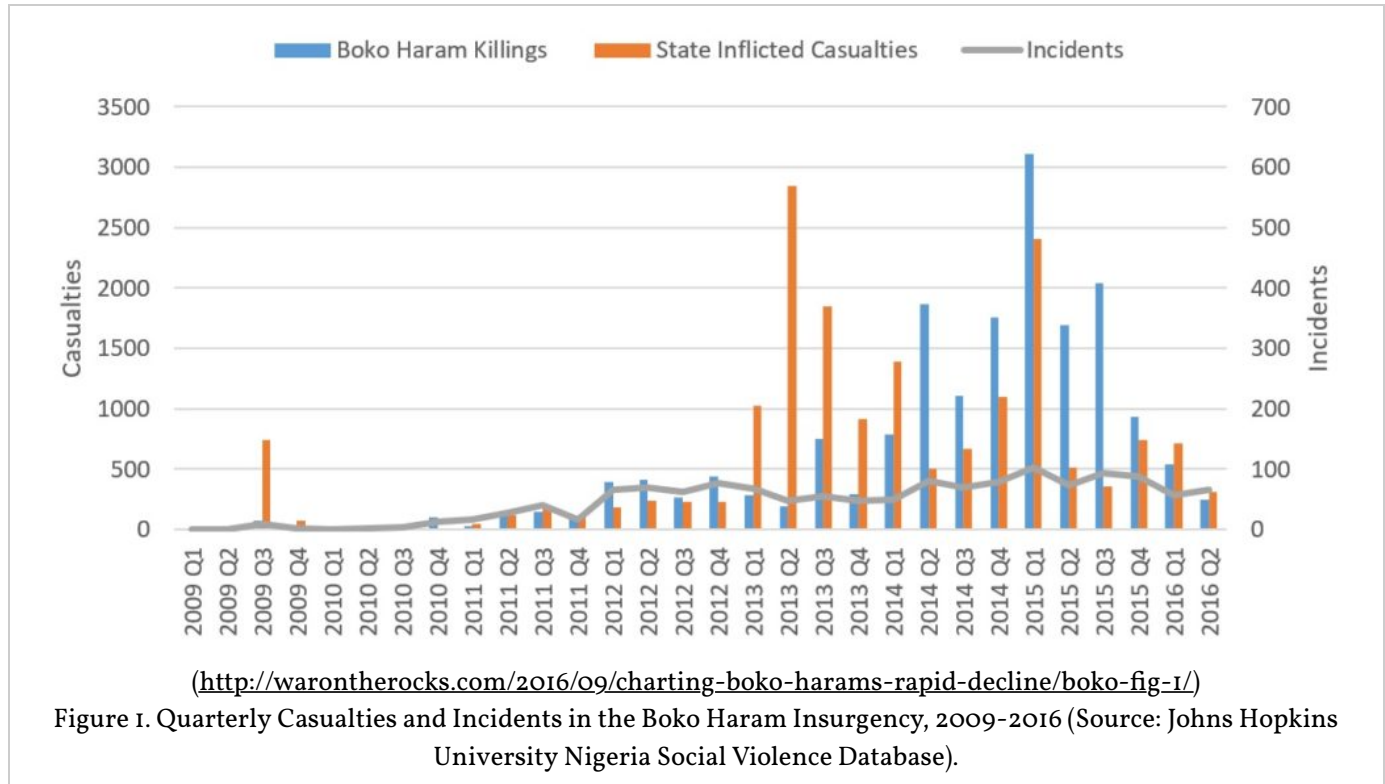
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After being declared the world's deadliest terrorist organization in 2015, Boko Haram is a menace in retreat. As a whole, the conflict is on pace to claim about 3,500 lives in 2016, a third the number of lives lost in 2015 and the conflict's lowest total since 2012. As illustrated in Figure 1, during the second quarter of 2016, the group was

responsible for 244 killings, the lowest in close to five years.

A close look at the data, drawn from Johns Hopkins University's [Nigeria Social Violence Research Project](http://www.connectsafrica.org/research/african-studies-publications/social-violence-nigeria/) (<http://www.connectsafrica.org/research/african-studies-publications/social-violence-nigeria/>), reveals four key factors behind Boko Haram's decline: a failure to spread much beyond Nigeria's extreme northeast, a loss of popular support, poor strategic thinking by the insurgents, and improved counterinsurgency operations. Though these factors have led to a decisive shift in momentum against the group, the conflict is far from over. Winning the war will require better regional coordination, the re-integration of former militants, and a systematic plan to re-build the northeast, where thousands are currently on the brink of starvation (http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2016/09/09/world/africa/ap-af-nigeria-boko-haram-starvation.html?_r=0).



The Conflict Contained

Overall, the war on Boko Haram has claimed over 30,000 lives and displaced millions, making it among the deadliest insurgencies in contemporary Africa. Nevertheless, the insurgency could have been much worse and the scale of the violence pales in comparison to some other contemporary and past conflicts. The Syrian Civil War, the war between Sudan and South Sudan, the Rwandan genocide, and the wars in Liberia each claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. Even in terms of conflicts within Nigeria, Boko Haram is a distant second to the 1967 to 1970 Biafran Civil War, which claimed at least (<http://necrometrics.com/20c1m.htm#Biafra>) 500,000 lives.

Though much has been made of Boko Haram's spread into bordering countries, equally important is that nearly three-quarters (22,928) of Boko Haram related deaths have occurred in Borno State, which is home to only three percent (<http://www.nigerianmuse.com/20070820063612zg/sections/important-documents/nigeria-2006-population-census-arranged-by-state-wikipedia/>) of Nigeria's population. The sect has utterly failed to gain a

foothold across the rest of Nigeria, despite a history of tension between the roughly evenly populated Muslim-dominated north and Christian-dominated south. As the map below indicates, the death toll in Borno is nearly ten times that of any other state.

There may be a number of reasons for this. First, the group's origins are found in the patronage network of the government of Borno State, where Boko Haram enjoyed financing (<https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR308.pdf>) and support (https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20140901BokoHaramPerouseMontclos_c) from the state's elite in exchange for a promise to implement Sharia. This led to a dense concentration of members and supporters in Borno before the insurgency began in 2009. It also likely led to (<http://allafrica.com/stories/201502180245.html>) an over-representation of the Borno-centered Kanuri ethnic group amongst its ranks, which may have made it difficult to actively recruit non-Kanuri members beyond Borno. In addition, infighting (<https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/boko-harams-dangerous-expansion-into-northwest-nigeria>) among the group's leadership, which has led to splinter groups and made the group's structure and leadership hard to pin down, may also have hindered the group's expansion. Finally, the group's turn towards increasingly brutal tactics that caused large civilian casualties, particularly among Muslims, may have led the group to be rejected by Nigeria's broader Muslim community. Whatever the reason, Boko Haram's failure to gain foot-soldiers, followers, and adherents in other parts of the country, despite its best efforts, has limited the reach, scale, and resiliency of the insurgency.

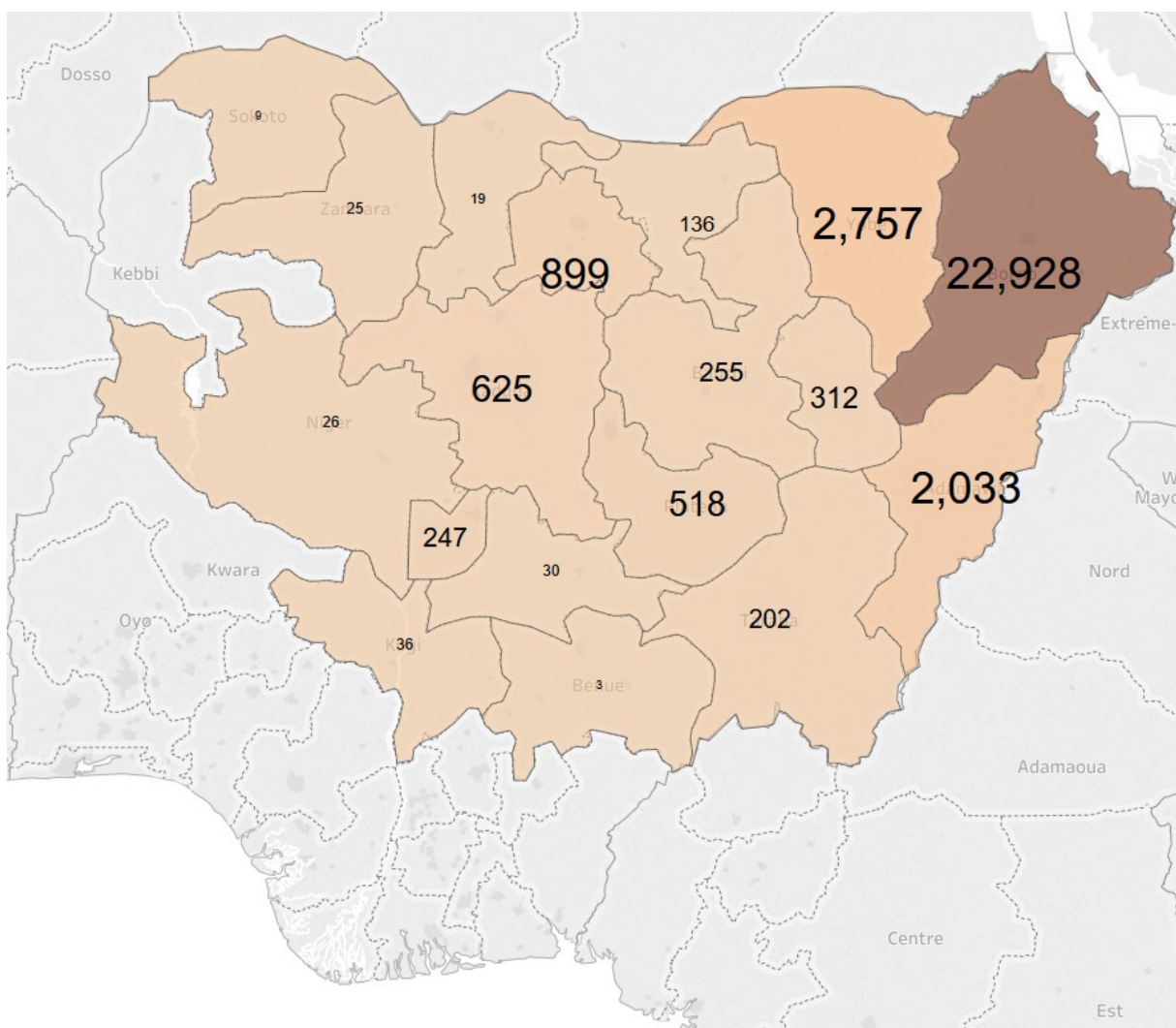


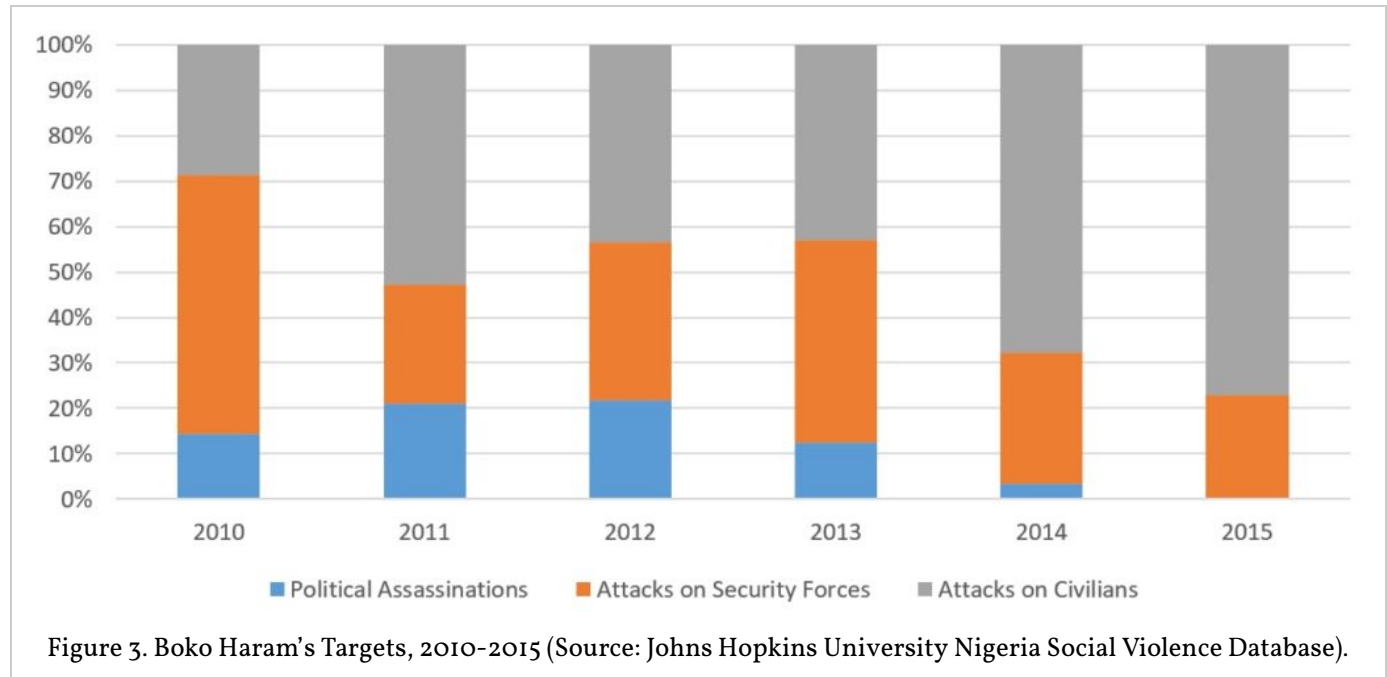
Figure 2. Boko Haram Related Deaths in Nigeria's North, 2009-2016 (Source: Johns Hopkins University Nigeria Social Violence Database).

Loss of Popular Support

Boko Haram did not begin its campaign by indiscriminately attacking civilians. Between 2010 and 2013, most of the group's targets were state security forces or cooperating officials and groups marked for assassination (see Figure 3). Yet, the group became steadily more brutal over time. As Figure 3 indicates, over three quarters of the incidents involving Boko Haram in 2014 and 2015 were aimed at civilians. Though the group's massacres, suicide bombings, kidnappings, and executions may have succeeded in grabbing international headlines, they also helped turn the local population against it, enhancing their eagerness to cooperate with state forces.

Fed up with Boko Haram's brutality, civilians began to form (<http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/weekly/index.php/top-stories/16115-who-are-borno-s-civilian-jtf>) local militias known collectively as the Civilian Joint Task Force (JTF) in mid-2013. Made up in some cases of former Boko Haram members, the Civilian JTF's knowledge of local terrain has provided state forces with information dominance it did not have in the early years of the insurgency. Despite concerns about over the Civilian JTF's identity as a vigilante force, there is little doubt that the organization has been

crucial in helping to turn the tide. By some accounts, the insurgents have come (<http://www.voanews.com/a/what-next-for-the-nigeria-vigilantes-fighting-boko-haram/3405851.html>) to fear the Civilian JTF more than the Nigerian military.



An Ill-Conceived Expansion

The exponential increases in the conflict's overall levels of violence can also be traced to 2013, when a government offensive pushed the group out of its main base of operations in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State and spiritual home of the insurgency. Inspired by the Islamic State's dramatic seizures of territory in Iraq and Syria, Boko Haram began its own campaign of territorial conquest. The sect managed to seize close to half (<http://www.dailytrust.com.ng/sunday/index.php/news/19241-41-days-to-elections-13-local-govts-under-boko-haram>) of the local government areas in Borno state, as well as bordering territories in Chad, Cameroon, and Niger. Figure 4 illustrates how the number of attacks outside Maiduguri increased dramatically as Boko Haram began its campaign of territorial expansion.



Figure 4: Boko Haram Attacks in Maiduguri and Other Locations, 2010-2016 (Source: Johns Hopkins University Nigeria Social Violence Database; *Data from 2016 is through June 30).

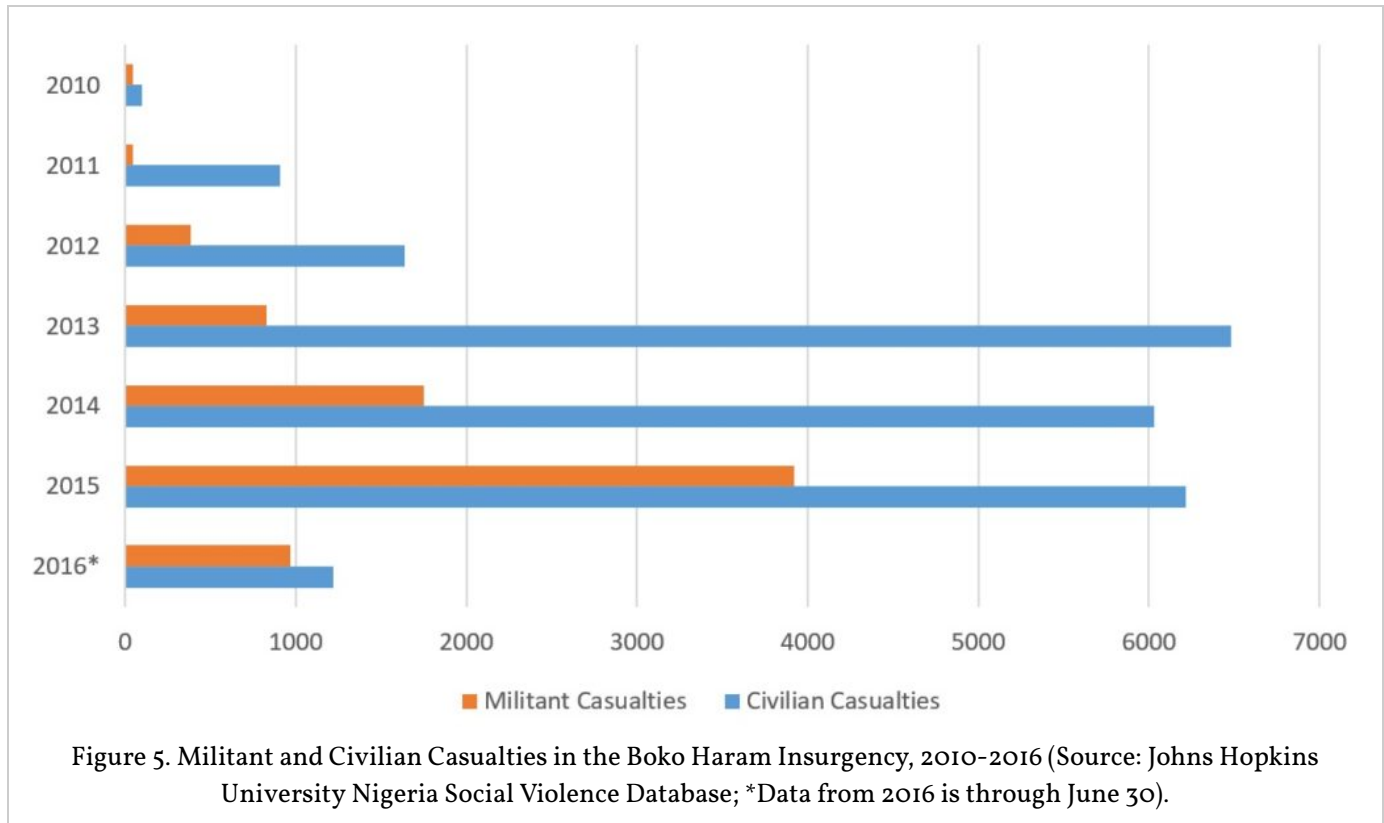
The campaign appeared a success but left the insurgency vulnerable. While centered in Maiduguri, the insurgency had a large pool of willing recruits and popular support among the urban poor and disenfranchised. By early 2015, however, the organization's five to ten thousand (<http://m.voanews.com/a/boko-haram-attacks-niger-border-town-/2631583.html>) core members were extended over a territory larger than the size of Rwanda with a mostly hostile local population that resented its increasingly brutal tactics.

Improving Counterinsurgency Efforts

During much of the administration of President Goodluck Jonathan, the Nigerian military's efforts to combat the insurgency were ineffective. State forces faced a murky enemy that not only had better knowledge of the local terrain but were also equipped (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-un-arms-idUSTRE80PIQS20120126>) with rocket-propelled grenades and vehicle mounted anti-aircraft weapons. In some cases, soldiers were left (<https://www.yahoo.com/news/nigeria-soldiers-sentenced-death-commuted-10-years-125050364.html?ref=gs>) with 30 bullets and no food rations to fight an insurgency with superior arms and fuller stomachs.

Boko Haram's massive expansion between 2014 and 2015 prompted a re-invigorated state effort to contain the insurgency. With their own countries threatened, the armies of Chad, Cameroon, and Niger began cooperating with the Nigerian government to prevent it from so easily fleeing across porous borders. In early 2015, the Nigerian government began prosecuting the counterinsurgency campaign with increasing professionalism (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/nigeria-challenge-military-reform>), a trend that has continued under President Muhammadu Buhari, who took over from Jonathan in the middle of the year. Better supplied, better armed, and equipped with better intelligence, the counterinsurgency campaign is conducting more targeted operations against insurgent strongholds, which have led to fewer civilian casualties, and, if government

reports are to be believed, the deaths of almost five thousand militants in the past year and a half alone. As shown in Figure 5, the total is more than the government managed to kill in the previous four years of counterinsurgency operations.



Keeping the Pressure On

As evidenced by the decline in violence, a combination of unforced errors and improved counterinsurgency efforts have done a great deal of damage to Boko Haram.

Nevertheless, the group remains a threat. In classic guerilla fashion, Boko Haram responded to increased pressure in Borno by stepping up attacks (<http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20160915005593/en/Number-Cross-border-Boko-Haram-Attacks-Rose-Islamic>) in neighboring countries, particularly in Niger. Without better regional coordination of counterinsurgency operations, opportunities to expand remain. The appointment (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36963711>) by the Islamic State of Abu Musab al-Barnawi, who was promised to focus the group's attacks on security forces, Shi'ites, and non-Muslims, is evidence that at least some in the group recognize that indiscriminate killings are counterproductive and are attempting to change course. Finally, the conflict has also created a humanitarian crisis, displacing over 2.4 million people and threatening (<https://www.naij.com/879948-sad-see-children-starving-death-borno-photos.html>) up to 50,000 civilians in camps for the internally displaced with starvation. Without concerted efforts to rebuild areas shattered by conflict and to re-integrate former militants, Boko Haram — or a group like it — could easily rise again.

Nathaniel Allen (<https://twitter.com/natedfallen>) is a PhD Candidate at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and Researcher at the Nigeria Social Violence Research Project. The author thanks American University's Bridging the Gap for providing support for the research and writing of this article from Nigeria.

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