

Policy Brief: The Boko Haram Issue and Implications on Security of Nigeria and the Wider African Continent

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Statement of Issue

The Boko Haram (BH) insurgency, based in NE Nigeria, aims to establish an Islamic caliphate covering the African continent. Since 2013, the group has killed 26,000 and displaced 2.4 million in Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad.¹ The frequency and lethality of attacks is increasing; a state of emergency has been declared in NE Nigeria, where the state has effectively lost control. BH numbers in the low thousands and is well-resourced, with large quantities of weapons and money.² BH has established rural strongholds (currently the Sambisa forest, where they retreated following regional coalition military action in 2015). BH has known operational links with Daesh. This is problematic: Daesh has all but lost control of their territory, and the African Union (AU) believes over 6,000 former fighters are returning to Africa.³ Security experts believe most will join BH, describing the situation as a ‘time bomb’.⁴ BH therefore poses a serious threat to regional stability if left unchecked.

Policy Options

Option A – Inaction: Continuation of current Nigerian and international response to BH. Intermittent counter-attacks, pushes into enemy territory, and small-scale clearance operations; cooperation between military and police to this end. Few civil projects in beleaguered regions.

Advantages: No further commitments required from Nigeria (already struggling with economy and military) or international community.

Disadvantages: Current policy is failing. Continuation is not likely to deal with threat of BH, particularly if joined by Daesh fighters.

Option B – Police Action: De-escalation of conflict. Insurgency handled primarily by Nigerian police, augmented by limited military force.

Advantages: Insurgency combated within rule of law. Arrests (versus wholesale destruction of enemy combatants) limit martyrdom.

Disadvantages: Police forces are widely corrupt and cannot be trusted to abide by the rule of law (see: widespread extrajudicial executions in 2010);⁵ risk of further degrading trust in government. Detention of fighters is unlikely to significantly affect enemy operations.

Option C – The Briggs Plan: Employment of tactics similar to those used during the Malayan Emergency. Nigerian security forces (with support of private or government contractors) construct secure and defensible compounds in NE region. Local populace is encouraged to rehouse here temporarily and live under martial law. Rules of engagement allow lethal force outside camps after curfew against targets not confirmed as friendly.

Advantages: Historically successful. Localization mitigates risk to civilians during combat operations. Construction and defence of compounds provides short-term employment.

Disadvantages: Operation will cost roughly £246 billion.⁶ Relocating millions of people and acquiring the relevant land is a logistical challenge. Improper execution (forced relocation versus encouraged) risks violating Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Option D – Trifold Solution: Multinational military and civil operation conducted in three phases: (I) Initial Assault, (II) Combined Action, and (III) Civil Reconstruction. Phase I: Multilateral military force, ideally ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Standby Force (with support from others for recce, etc.), seizes NE Nigeria, defeating overt resistance. Phase II: Squad/platoon-size Nigerian army and police elements embed in villages, providing local security, cooperating with civilians and gaining trust à la US Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam (also Iraq and Afghanistan, albeit smaller scale).⁷ Phase III: Major infrastructure/economic/social push, with assistance from international community and NGOs, aimed at drastically improving conditions and destroying Boko Haram’s ability to effectively recruit and gain support for their cause.

Advantages: Insurgency combated at military, criminal, and political level by each phase respectively. Opportunity for decisive defeat of group and its ideology as opposed to localized military victories. Supports Nigerian state post-BH by rebuilding trust and improving conditions.

Disadvantages: Logistically difficult. Requires binding decision by AU to commit to prolonged military presence (may be unpopular). Nigeria has not demonstrated capability to execute successful large-scale military action against BH, let alone police those regions; similar flaws with civil projects. Operation likely to fail without significant support; failure would embolden BH and other terror groups.

Recommendation

Rapid action is essential to defeat Boko Haram and return NE Nigeria to state control. Yet decisive defeat of the insurgency cannot be achieved solely by kinetic action. The AU must therefore begin a long-term effort to eliminate the lack of economic opportunity and poor education in rural areas that have allowed BH to flourish. Persistent regional security is only possible if Nigeria regains the trust of its citizens and restores law and order. Option C is economically and logically infeasible, and neither Option A nor B is decisive enough to defeat the threat. Although Option D may be initially unpopular with AU member states, it is the only solution likely to ensure long-term regional security and stability, benefiting Nigeria and other AU members in the long run. Therefore, **Option D is recommended.**

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