

TACTICS USED BY THE TERRORIST ORGANISATION BOKO HARAM

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ABSTRACT

Boko Haram is no regular terrorist organization; although not as widely-known as the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram has been declared the deadliest terror group of 2014. Fortunately, the organization seems to currently be on the run; and the successes of the Nigerian government in countering it have been founded on a timely understanding of its modus operandi.

This paper represents an inventory and an analysis of the main tactics employed by Boko Haram in Nigeria and Cameroon during the spike of its insurgency, between the years 2009-2014. Acknowledging these tactics in a timely manner did not only contribute in a significant manner to the present defeat of Boko Haram, as it may also be of use to governments from other countries in anticipating and efficiently thwarting future terrorist plots.

KEYWORDS:

Tactics, terrorism, Boko Haram

1. Introduction

For some, it may come as a surprise that, in 2014, Boko Haram was the deadliest terrorist organization in the world. After all, Boko Haram has not received wide media coverage as did Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, nor has it been linked in any consistent manner by analysts and political deciders with the on-going refugee crisis; the actions of Boko Haram have not generated worldwide empathy for their victims, nor have they managed to unite the world's most powerful organizations and states in providing a decisive answer.

Still, the facts remain. According to the latest data (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015), out of the 20 most fatal

terrorist attacks committed in 2014, 9 have been claimed by or attributed to Boko Haram, with an average of 14 deaths/terrorist attack. The same year, the terrorist activity of Boko Haram generated no less than 6,644 deaths, the total number of related Boko Haram kills since the start of the insurgency in 2009 reaching the stunning number of 20,000.

If we were to provide a clearer picture of what Boko Haram means to its host country, let us just point out that in 2014 the organization generated over 80 % of deaths from terrorism in Nigeria, which thus witnessed the largest increase in such killings recorded by any other country (over 300 %). Nigeria thereby came to hold the

second highest number of terrorism-related deaths in the world, being exceeded only by Iraq – a country torn by war, insurgencies and sectarian violence.

Knowing in due time how the terrorist tactics of Boko Haram evolved was extremely important, as this knowledge represented a major factor for success in their defeat by the governmental forces.

2. Methodology

The current paper is a study of the tactics employed by the terrorist organization Boko Haram first in the country of Nigeria and then – as insecurity tends to overspill (Neag, Rațiu & Ispas, 2010; Grigoraș, 2015) – in Cameroon. As a research method we used the analysis and synthesis of social documents, based on the benchmarks depicted by Septimiu Chelcea in his 2004 reference book. The method allowed a necessary diversification of information and welcomed critical points of view based on the value and the limits of the consulted literature.

As the most recent complete data regarding the terrorist activity of Boko Haram have been compiled for the year 2014, the principal time frame for this article starts with 2009 (the beginning of the insurgency) and ends with 2014.

3. Results and Discussions

Between 2009-2014, most of the attacks carried out by Boko Haram were *armed assaults* (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2012, 2014 and 2015), in which firearms – especially machine guns – were the main types of weapons used (Table no. 1); according to data provided by the Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015), these types of attacks resulted in 63 % of deaths in 2014. Let us consider, as an example, the Nigerian town of Baga where, between January 3 and January 7, 2015 Boko Haram conducted a series of mass killings resulting in over 2,000 deaths.

Table no. 1

Types of weapons used by members of Boko Haram in their 10 worst terrorist attacks between 2009-2014

Rank	Date/Period	City/District	Fatalities	Weapon Type
1.	03-07.01.2015	Baga	2,000	Firearms
2.	05.05.2014	Gamboru Ngala	315	Explosives/Bombs/Dynamite
3.	27.07.2009	Maiduguri	304	Unknown
4.	14.03.2014	Maiduguri	212	Explosives/Bombs/Dynamite
5.	17.09.2014	Konduga	201	Explosives/Bombs/Dynamite
6.	13.05.2014	Kalabalge	200	Firearms
7.	18.09.2013	Beni Shiek	161	Firearms
8.	13.05.2014	Garawa	151	Firearms
9.	17.09.2013	Beni Shiek	142	Firearms
10.	24.10.2013	Damura	125	Explosives/Bombs/Dynamite

But as they were starting to be put on the run by the Nigerian security forces, the terrorist switched tactics. As a follow-up to the special military training that the terrorists received from other similar groups, in 2014 tactics such as *bombing* increased 3 times, from 35 incidents in 2013 to 107 incidents in 2014. Yet, the increase of deaths from bombings was far more consistent: in 2014 approximately 1,490 people died in bombings, 14 times more than the 107 people who died in the same manner in 2013. And, as predictable, many bombings targeted civilians in public places: 38 % of the ones killed by Boko

Haram in 2013 were private citizens, whereas in 2014 the percentage arose to 77 %.

Consequently, the year 2014 also brought a spike in *suicide attacks* conducted by Boko Haram. Although until then these types of tactics were rather rare, in 2014 Boko Haram accounted for 31 suicide attacks (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015), the majority of them targeting, again, civilians or education and religious institutions.

Actually, for the entire 2012-2014 period, a clearer picture of the targets and types of weapons used by Boko Haram is provided, based on data made available by the Global Terrorism Database (2015), in Figure no. 1 and Figure no. 2.

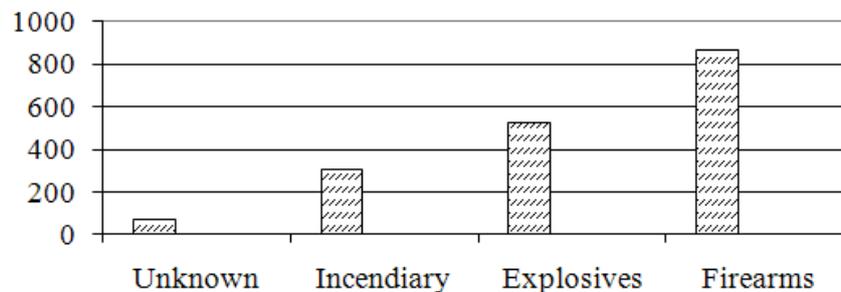


Figure no. 1 Targets of Boko Haram in various attacks committed between 2012-2014

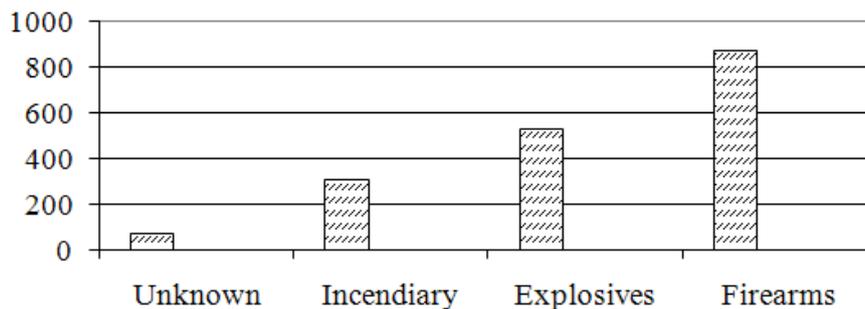


Figure no. 2 Types of weapons used by Boko Haram in various attacks committed between 2012-2014

A different tactic of Boko Haram, which had actually become a trademark of this group, was *the use of women in terrorist actions*. Within the organization, women had either simple support roles, or they were actively involved in unlawful and

violent deeds, such as arms smuggling, armed assaults or suicide bombings.

Using women in terrorist activities is not a new tactic, and the reasons behind it are rather simple: women are less suspicious than men, they are often searched in a

looser manner and their clothes permit them to easily conceal weapons or bombs.

But lacking the successful propaganda and appeal of organizations like the Islamic State, the majority of women involved by Boko Haram in terrorist attacks were forced to do so. As one editorialist wrote in *The New York Times* (Searcey, 2016), “of all the many horrors of Boko Haram’s rampage across West Africa – the attacks on mosques, churches and schools; the mass killings of civilians; the entire villages left in ashes after militants tear through – one of the most baffling has been its ability to turn captured women and girls into killers”.

Using women and girls in terrorist actions was definitely a planned and thought-out tactic that started with the kidnapping of some 300 girls in April 2014, from a school in Nigeria. Since then, hundreds of women and girls were abducted, forcefully trained and used in terrorist attacks. The results were almost immediate.

Since the 2014 kidnapping, Boko Haram used at least 100 women and girls in suicide attacks carried out in public places such as markets, schools, river docks or even refugee camps for internally displaced people. Also, out of the 34 suicide bombings perpetrated in the neighbouring Cameroon, 80 % involved girls and women aged 14 to 24 years (Al Jazeera, 2016). Note, for example, the February 2016 attack in a Nigerian camp, where two female bombers (aged 17 and 20) blew themselves up, killing approximately 60 people and injuring around 80. According to CNN (Abubakar, Melvin & Busari, 2016), a third female bomber refused to carry out the attack, after realizing that her family was accommodated in the camp.

But as security forces became more and more aware of the threat posed by female suicide bombers, the terrorists again changed their tactics: they started to literally *disguise themselves as mad people*, in order to gain unsuspecting access to public places and detonate themselves. Moreover, in January 2016, two male

suicide bombers even disguised themselves in mad women, to obtain access in a public market, thus killing approximately 10 people and injuring many more. The Nigerian governmental forces shortly noticed this behaviour and, in response, casted security alerts to citizens, advising them “to be wary of mad persons approaching markets, public places or crowded areas” (*Premium Times*, 2016).

Another terrorist tactic of Boko Haram consisted of *raids on towns and villages* in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria. According to an Amnesty International report (2015), “some attacks were carried out by just two or three gunmen on a motorcycle, some by hundreds of fighters supported by tanks and anti-aircraft weapons mounted on flat-bed trucks”. In a series of these raids, terrorists conducted indiscriminate killings, robberies and abductions, while in others they simply assassinated individuals identified ahead of time. In most of the raids, serious damage has been inflicted on the critical infrastructures of the communities; as argued (Badea, Oancea, Coman & Ionescu, 2015), the damages generated an even heavier strain on the overall state of security of those affected communities. Moreover, some villages, like Kayamla, were raided on multiple occasions, thus ensuing large fluxes of internally displaced persons.

Finally, a more elaborate tactic favoured by Boko Haram consisted of *taking control of towns and villages*. When this was the case, hostilities usually respected the following sequence of events (Amnesty International, 2015): first, large numbers of terrorists assaulted the communities, initially targeting police or military institutions and facilities; after government forces were neutralized or determined to abandon their posts, the terrorists captured the arms and ammunition left behind; then they targeted civilians, either gunning them down as they tried to escape or executing them in their own homes; simultaneously, terrorist looted

shops, collected private valuables, set houses on fire and abducted residents.

4. Conclusions

Currently, the intensity of the terrorist activity of Boko Haram has been diminished, mainly thanks to the concerted actions taken by the Nigerian government. It remains difficult to foresee whether the organization will be capable of bouncing back, but for now at least on aspect is clear: the submission of the terrorists started with the comprehension of the tactics they used.

And it seems they used them all: armed assaults and bombing, suicide attacks, exploit of women in terrorist actions, disguising as mad people to gain unrestricted access in public places, raids on towns and villages or even taking control of entire communities.

Acknowledging in due time the tactics of Boko Haram allowed the authorities to score significant successes, by: planning and conducting efficient counterterrorism actions; warning in reasonable time the local population on the *modus operandi* of the terrorists; anticipating and even preventing further terrorist actions, thus saving an inestimable number of lives.

Moreover, we consider that knowing the tactics employed by Boko Haram could be of use in countering other terrorist organizations. Having a complete inventory of these tactics, authorities from other countries or regions may anticipate and efficiently thwart future terrorist plots. After all, as is widely accepted, to defeat an enemy one must first know how it acts.

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