POLICY BRIEF

How Boko Haram specifically targets displaced people

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Since 2009, Boko Haram has proven to be a highly adaptable foe, routinely realigning its tactics to suit changing circumstances. In recent years, this has increasingly involved focusing on soft targets, including displaced people (both refugees and internally displaced people). Understanding how Boko Haram has targeted displaced people and what some of its specific objectives might be is key to understanding their true threat.

Key points

▶ Countries have established that they view mass migrant flows as a growing issue. Extremist groups' unique ability to control these flows may become increasingly valuable to these groups, as it could strengthen their bargaining positions.

▶ Boko Haram could be strategically generating migration to overwhelm governments in an attempt to force them to submit to its demands. It may be trying to make the cost of mass migration higher than its demands or future demands.

▶ Boko Haram's arbitrary and concealed attacks on displaced people helps turn countries and communities against refugees, and turns victims into suspects.

▶ The use of soft targets, including displaced people, provokes a particularly high-profile media and international response, which reinforces Boko Haram's credibility as a formidable threat.

Limitations

This brief should not be read as a comprehensive analysis of Boko Haram behaviour. Summaries of Boko Haram activities are provided using available evidence to establish a trend of increased activity targeting displaced people (including refugees and internally displaced people). Other ISS documents and authors are available for more thorough understanding of Boko Haram.

Boko Haram's growing focus on 'soft' targets

In 2016, the Global Terrorism Index labelled Boko Haram the world's second-deadliest terrorist group, down from its position as the most deadly in 2015.[1] Since 2009, when the group launched its violent campaign, its reign of terror has resulted in the deaths of more than 20 000 people and displaced more than 2 million throughout Nigeria, and has spread across northeast Nigeria into Cameroon, Niger and Chad.[2]

Boko Haram's anti-government campaign intensified its violence following the 2009 death of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf. For some time thereafter, Boko Haram violence was predominantly aimed at security forces. Most civilians were not afraid of Boko Haram as it did not demonstrate strong intentions of targeting people who had not antagonised it.

Between 2010 and 2013, civilian casualties did occur, but the group often tried to minimise these and routinely carried out warnings in areas it planned to attack. It was even able to generate public support at the time, in opposition to an unpopular government within the target region. Many people were sympathetic to Boko Haram and more afraid of Nigerian security forces, which were considered particularly brutal in their retaliation.[3]

Over time, under the leadership of Yusuf's successor Abubakar Shekau, violence has escalated and the group's definition of 'legitimate' targets has expanded substantially. Muslims not aligned with Boko Haram's specific interpretation of Sharia law became increasingly targeted through the process of *takfir*, whereby people are declared unbelievers and no longer Muslim. Some of these targets were suspected to be anti-Boko Haram vigilantes or pro-government supporters.[4]

In August 2016, Boko Haram split into two factions. Abu Musab al-Barnawi now leads a breakaway faction that has aligned itself with Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) objectives and messaging techniques, and has demonstrated a preference for targeting security forces.[5] Long-time leader Abubakar Shekau's faction prefers a more indiscriminate attack profile and is responsible for the majority of attacks on displaced people.[6]

It is currently unclear whether Shekau's primary objective is to maintain a territorial caliphate or be a part of a global caliphate project.[7] It is clear, however, that Boko Haram, especially the Shekau-led faction, currently subscribes to a particularly brutal brand of violence that pays little or no attention to building relationships with civilian populations; nor does it intend to build a functioning society under its rule.[8]

Reports have emerged of extreme ruthlessness, including attacks on entire villages, locking civilians in buildings and setting them on fire, flogging or executing anyone trying to escape, and injunctions to kill anyone, including militants' own parents, who opposes the group's teachings.[9]

While some extremist groups strategically establish state-building practices, Boko Haram currently relies on fear and violence almost exclusively to maintain control.[10]

Most recently, in late 2017, Boko Haram activity has surged across the region. Between May and August 2017, seven times more civilians were killed than in the preceding four months.[11]

> In 2017 Boko Haram demonstrated a greater reliance on attacking soft targets – women, children and refugees

In 2017 Boko Haram also demonstrated a greater reliance on attacking soft targets – women, children and refugees. A recent United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report warned about a sharp increase in using women and children as human bombs.

Since 1 January 2017, four times more children were used in attacks than in 2016. Of these 83 children, 55 were girls (most under 15 years old), 27 were boys, and one was a baby strapped to a girl. The sex of the baby used in the explosion was impossible to determine.[12]

Evidence that Boko Haram is targeting displaced people

Direct attacks

Evidence indicates that Boko Haram is actively targeting refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

An ISS database of Boko Haram attacks demonstrates a significant rise in attacks that target displaced people, including IDPs and refugees. The first attacks on refugees occurred in September 2015. According to this database, there were four attacks in 2015, ten in 2016 and 15 in the first nine months of 2017.

Notably, female suicide bombers perpetrated a significant majority of these attacks, probably because they attract less suspicion and can access camps more easily than male militants.

The 18 September 2017 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Lake Chad update indicates that the number of attacks targeting sites for displaced people has increased in both Cameroon and Nigeria. It further claims these activities are raising fears that Boko Haram has adopted new tactics that directly target IDP or refugee sites, and threaten the safety of both displaced people and aid workers.[14] As a result, it has called for increased security in and around displacement areas.

FEMALE SUICIDE BOMBERS PERPETRATED A SIGNIFICANT MAJORITY OF BOKO HARAM ATTACKS THAT TARGET DISPLACED PEOPLE, INCLUDING IDPS AND REFUGEES

Table 1: Boko Haram attacks targeting displaced people[13]

Date	Location	Casualties	Description
09/09/15	Yola, Adamawa	7	The first successful IDP attack; an improvised explosive device (IED) was left in a tent in Malkohi IDP camp.
10/10/15	Baga Sola, Chad	37	A suicide attack targeted a refugee camp and fish market.
09/11/15	Fotokol, Cameroon	5	Two female suicide bombers hit a truck full of Nigerian refugees.
22/11/15	Maiduguri, Nigeria	8	A female suicide bomber (aged 20), disguised as a refugee returning from Dikwa, detonated while people were being screened.
28/01/16	Kerawa, Cameroon	6	Two female suicide bombers targeted a public school housing IDPs.
10/02/16	Dikwa, Nigeria	58	Two female suicide bombers stormed an IDP camp and blew themselves up; a third refused when she realised her family was in the camp.
30/03/16	Mozogo, Cameroon	1 (failed attack)	A perpetrator tried to attack a rice distribution centre but was killed before he could do anything.
20/04/16	Banki, Nigeria	8	Two female suicide bombers targeted an IDP camp.
07/05/16	Gonori, Nigeria	7	An IED bomb was targeted at IDP returnees.
04/07/16	Monguno, Nigeria	3 (failed attack)	Three female suicide bombers hit a borehole 3 km outside a camp.
29/10/16	Maiduguri, Nigeria	5	A female suicide bomber hit Bakassi IDP camp in the morning.
30/10/16	Maiduguri, Nigeria	1 (failed attack)	A male suicide bomber in his 30s was sighted by a sniper and killed in Bakassi IDP camp.
19/11/16	Maiduguri, Nigeria	1 (failed attack)	An attacker was spotted trying to enter Muna Garage IDP screening camp and was shot while trying to detonate.
21/11/16	Kolofata, Cameroon	1 (failed attack)	A female suicide bomber with nine explosives on her tried to detonate in the IDP camp but was shot dead by the MNJTF force.
31/01/17	Doublé, Cameroon	3	An adolescent suicide bomber attacked a camp 20 km from Mora.
24/02/17	Maiduguri, Nigeria	2	A female suicide bomber tried to enter Banki IDP camp but detonated when she was spotted by troops.
22/03/17	Maiduguri, Nigeria	8	Five bombers attempted a coordinated attack in Muna Garage IDP camp.
20/05/17	Maiduguri, Nigeria	4	12 IDPs went outside Dalori IDP camp and were attacked by Boko Haram.
29/05/17	Nguro, Nigeria	5	Knife attack killing IDPs.
02/06/17	Fotokol, Cameroon	6	Two suicide bombers.
18/06/17	Maiduguri, Nigeria	2	Two female suicide bombers attacked Dalori IDP camp.
30/06/17	Diffa, Niger	4	Two female suicide bombers attacked a refugee camp.
23/07/17	Maiduguri, Nigeria	1	A female suicide bomber was sighted by vigilantes and detonated a bomb while trying to flee.
23/07/17	Maiduguri, Nigeria	5	One male and one female suicide bomber targeted a camp within hours of the previous Dalori attempt.
29/07/17	Dikwa, Nigeria	14	Two female suicide bombers attacked an IDP housing complex.
15/08/17	Konduga, Nigeria	30	Three female suicide bombers detonated at the camp entrance; the first to create panic, followed by two others.
01/09/17	Banki, Nigeria	18	A knife attack targeting ex-Minawao refugees on their return.
08/09/17	Ngala, Ngeria	7	Rocket-propelled grenades were fired into the camp from two pickup trucks.
20/09/17	Daima, Nigeria	9	Gunmen attacked people who took daily trips outside the camps to work on farms. Some survivors fled back into Cameroon.

Infiltrating flows

Boko Haram militants have reportedly been infiltrating refugee flows and camps.[15] In July 2017, the Borno State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) claimed that at least nine insurgents and 100 accomplices were identified among a group of 920 refugees returning from Cameroon. SEMA did, however, admit that some of those identified had been forcefully conscripted.[16] Additional reports have emerged of militants, attackers and would-be attackers disguising themselves as refugees so they can travel into towns to purchase supplies.[17]

Boko Haram militants have a well-established history of disguising themselves in order to execute attacks. Militants have masqueraded as travellers, herdsmen, workers, hunters, preachers and sick people.[18] In 2017 stories emerged of militants pretending to have epileptic attacks or be injured, only to detonate themselves when people gathered round to help them. This pattern has increased since late 2015 following Boko Haram's strategic and territorial losses. Militants have been known to hide in disguise in workshops, markets, motor parks, bridges and abandoned buildings.[19]

The practice of posing as refugees not only makes Boko Haram more elusive but also has the unique effect of turning Boko Haram victims into suspects. It increases the feeling of insecurity in general and diminishes the prospect of people helping one another, even though many are in acute need. Boko Haram has achieved the same end by using women and children as suicide attackers.

Why is Boko Haram targeting displaced people?

While there is some analysis of the increases in civilian violence by Boko Haram, no literature to date has isolated displaced people as a distinct subset of civilian targets. It is worth considering whether IDPs and refugees have unique value to Boko Haram beyond indiscriminate violence, and further examining this concept.

Strategic coercive migration

'Mass migration, it needs to be said, has long been exploited by devious entities as part of a new military genre: asymmetrical warfare.'[1] – Catherine Shakdam

In her 2010 book, Kelly Greenhill describes coercive migration as 'those population movements that are deliberately created or manipulated in order to induce political, military and/or economic concessions from a target state'. In summary, this method involves weaker challengers strategically engineering migration to manipulate more powerful targets. Greenhill argues that the use of migration flows as non-military instruments of persuasion is highly prevalent but under-recognised. Strategic migration has been a component of many conflicts but, due to its embedded nature, its significance as a strategic tool is underestimated – 'a phenomenon that has been hiding in plain sight'.[20]

One tool Greenhill mentions is a 'challenger' using migration to create conflict so that it becomes less costly to concede to its demands than it does to withstand the burdens associated with the migration. In short, 'challengers' try to inflict costs on the target country that are higher than the stakes under dispute. This includes what she labels as 'capacity swamping' – overwhelming a target's capacity to cope with an influx of migrants. She stipulates that locations where ethnic tensions are elevated, resources are limited, and questions about the legitimacy of the existing regime are particularly rife, the threat of mass migration can present a real and persuasive threat.[21]

> Boko Haram's target countries are struggling to manage human displacement caused by the group

This theory suggests that Boko Haram could be generating migration strategically as a means of overwhelming governments so they will submit to its demands. By inserting a security factor, particularly in the current global political climate that views refugees as suspicious, Boko Haram could well be further weakening these governments' positions. Boko Haram's target countries have very clearly established that they are struggling to manage human displacement caused by the group and that they view this as a growing issue. It is possible that the group's unique ability to control migration flows – including increasing or decreasing them – may become more valuable to these countries than eliminating Boko Haram. If true, this could increase Boko Haram's bargaining position. While the group

has routinely refused to bargain with 'illegitimate' governments, this leverage still constitutes a power shift that could be exploited in a variety of means.

Allegiance with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

Boko Haram's alignment with ISIL and other international extremist groups could provide further insights into understanding its strategy of targeting displaced people. Specifically, if ISIL decides to focus its strategies on migrants, then Boko Haram could follow suit.

Extremist groups have established a history of targeting migrants, if not through direct attacks then by causing forced displacement and other strategic efforts.[22] Specifically, ISIL has strategically focused on migrants in Europe using a variety of methods, including claiming to infiltrate refugee flows and declaring attacks that they may not even have perpetrated. ISIL wants Europe to view refugees as a security threat instead of as victims.[23] This is partly because people fleeing to find safe havens undermines ISIL's position that the caliphate is a refuge, and partly because it relies on messages that 'east' and 'west' cultures have unresolvable differences and the caliphate is their best option.[24]

> If ISIL decides to focus its strategies on migrants, then Boko Haram could follow suit

A more thorough examination of Boko Haram messaging towards displaced people would help to determine whether the group's targeting of refugees is strategically aligned with other global extremist groups and agendas.

Conclusion

Boko Haram's surge in attacks on soft targets, including displaced people, in 2017 is clear. While violence against civilians and refugees was previously avoided, 'legitimacy' as a target has since been extended to people who reject Boko Haram's interpretation and application of Sharia law. By this standard, those who have fled its control are 'infidels' for leaving the purity of Sharia, especially when fleeing to government land or protection, and are considered both the enemy and illegitimate.

The act of arbitrary and concealed attacks on displaced people by Boko Haram ostensibly achieves at least three objectives:

1) They turn countries against displaced people – this has already occurred in earnest, including acts as drastic as the forced returns of refugees out of Cameroon. Boko Haram may well be trying to make the cost of mass migration higher than its demands or future demands.

2) They turn communities against displaced people – Boko Haram's demonstrated ability to disrupt and threaten communities via displaced people runs a high risk of communities rejecting and ostracising refugees. In turn, it punishes those who have fled Boko Haram, giving them nowhere to run, and deepens the group's ability to control using violence and fear.

3) They boost visibility – Using soft targets, including children, women and refugees, provokes a particularly high-profile media and international response. This potentially serves to reinforce Boko Haram's credibility as a formidable threat and rebukes government claims that it has been neutralised.

Boko Haram has established its ability to adapt to evolving contexts. Following military losses, the growing propensity for using soft targets is a particularly horrifying prospect. The humanitarian toll this approach could take is profoundly disturbing. It must therefore be considered for its unique properties beyond indiscriminate violence.

To this end, we recommend a deeper analysis of Boko Haram and other extremist groups' messaging toward or about migrants and displaced people to determine what strategic value they might have to the group. Similarly, we recommend conducting a deeper examination of the unique properties and strategic value of displaced people as a specific subset of civilian targets for Boko Haram and other extremist groups.

Notes

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