

BOKO HARAM

A Gray Zone Challenge.

BY MAJOR CASEY MILLS

Where does Boko Haram's terrorist campaign fall in the context of Gray Zone conflict? The short answer is: it depends which viewpoint you are using to evaluate Boko Haram and their fight against the Nigerian establishment. As Capt. Philip Kapusta stated in his *Special Warfare* article, "Gray Zone challenges are perspective-dependent" and this statement holds exceptionally true for the Boko Haram conflict in northern Nigeria.⁰¹ From both the Nigerian Government and Boko Haram perspective, the conflict is tantamount to war. However, from a U.S. perspective the conflict lies closer to the Gray Zone area of concern. Evaluating two key characteristics of Gray Zone challenges, aggression and ambiguity, as they pertain to Boko Haram will provide insight and understanding of where they fall in the spectrum.

A BRIEF INTRO TO BOKO HARAM

Boko Haram ("western education is forbidden/sinful"), a northern Nigeria-based terrorist organization, has the goal of establishing Sharia Law throughout Nigeria and overthrowing the current government. Mohammed Yusuf, Boko Haram's first leader, established the group in 2002 in the city of Maiduguri. Between 2002 and his death in 2009, Yusuf preached Sharia Law, believing the current version practiced in the North was not strictly enough enforced, and spoke out regularly against the government. Yusuf was arrested several times but always released without any significant punishment until he was finally arrested and killed while in police custody in 2009. The extrajudicial killing of Yusuf, sparked outrage among his followers and resulted in months of violence between the group and the Nigerian police and military forces. Eventually, Boko Haram went underground until emerging again in 2010 with Abubakar Shekau at the helm. Under Shekau's leadership, Boko Haram has transformed from a grassroots type movement to protest poor governance into one of the most violent and destructive terrorist organizations in the world.



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BOKO HARAM AND AGGRESSION

There is no doubt that Boko Haram is an aggressive and dangerous organization. According to the Global Terrorist Index, Boko Haram was the deadliest terrorist group in the world in 2014, responsible for 6,644 deaths as compared to 6,073 attributed to ISIS.⁰² Yet, the idea of Gray Zone conflict is to display some level of aggression while refraining from the escalation to overt war and the potential consequences that accompany declared combat. Not only has Boko Haram steadily increased their aggression and violence, but they have also openly declared war. In November 2014, the group's leader Abubakar Shekau stated, "There is no ceasefire or dialogue with anyone; instead, it is war."⁰³ Boko Haram has kept good on its word, carrying out a brutal campaign of massacres, rapes, kidnappings and child suicide bombings among other attacks. In this regard, Boko Haram clearly sees the conflict as war, is increasing its aggressiveness as required to win and achieve their goal of an independent Islamic state in Northern Nigeria, and is emphatically not a Gray Zone conflict.

However, from a U.S. perspective, Boko Haram poses no direct threat to the U.S. homeland; has taken no direct action against U.S. citizens or facilities in Nigeria or abroad; has not successfully recruited foreign fighters other than those who share an ethnic commonality and are in the immediate surrounding areas of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon; nor does Boko Haram receive significant support from an expatriate community in the U.S. or other western countries. Outside of sporadic rhetorical threats made by Shekau during his propaganda messages and videos, Boko Haram has displayed little intention or capability of significantly harming U.S. interests. Boko Haram's message and mission also lacks resonance with Nigerian citizens or dual-citizens abroad, effectively mitigating the ability of Boko Haram to gain access to U.S. or western passport holders which could then make an attack on a U.S. facility more easily attainable.

01 Boko Haram is a Nigeria-based terrorist group that is most prominent in the areas highlighted in yellow.
U.S. NATIONAL COUNTER-TERRORISM CENTER GRAPHIC

That does not preclude Boko Haram from being a concern for the U.S. Government or counter terrorism community though. Boko Haram threatens the stability of the most populous country and largest economy in Africa. Additionally, Nigeria is the fifth largest exporter of oil to the U.S. and its capital, Abuja, plays host to the headquarters of the Economic Community of West African States. In March 2015, Boko Haram pledged allegiance to ISIS and eight months earlier in August 2014, declared its own Islamic Caliphate in northern Nigeria, just two months after the Islamic Caliphate declaration of al-Baghdadi in Iraq. ISIS' acceptance of Boko Haram's loyalty further establishes ISIS as a global franchise and potentially offers a boost to Boko Haram's stature. However, it is also important to note that despite allegiance to ISIS, Boko Haram does not appear to have benefited significantly financially or through an influx of foreign fighters. In fact, its allegiance to the most recognized terrorist group in the world has done little to increase its global salience among the international jihadist community. Several questions arise from these points such as: Why are individuals around the world inspired by and dedicated to ISIS but not another declared Islamic caliphate of Boko Haram? Is it because ISIS has a greater claim of legitimacy or a broader population of disenfranchised Sunni Muslims around the world from which to draw? Yet not all who attempt to support ISIS are Muslim; sometimes they are middle class, caucasian teenagers from Colorado. Is it because of the greater media coverage afforded to ISIS, despite the fact that Boko Haram is a more deadly organization? On the other hand, has ISIS capitalized on the use of social media and invested heavily in its recruitment campaign through online forums and its written publication, Dabiq, while Boko Haram barely releases any messages or videos in anything other than the local Hausa language?

BOKO HARAM AND AMBIGUITY

Ambiguity is typically prized and sought after by the instigator of a Gray Zone conflict but Boko Haram leaves little to the imagination when it comes to its campaign of terror. After kidnapping more than 250 schoolgirls from Chibok in northern Nigeria, Boko Haram's leader released a video not only claiming responsibility but also stating his intention to sell them as slaves and marry off the others. Shekau has not shied away from claiming responsibility for Boko Haram's attacks and taking a page direct from ISIS, began showing murders and executions of infidels and traitors in video messages. Boko Haram routinely threatens the government, local religious leaders who speak out against the message, the military and all civilians who attempt to resist, and then claim its attacks publicly once carried out. It is clear that Boko Haram has declared their war against the government and non-believers and wants it to be known who they are and what violence should bear their brand name.

Despite the fact that a few of their leaders are known to the international CT community and its open claims to its attacks, there is a great deal of ambiguity that surrounds the group itself. Boko Haram's leadership and operational structure remains largely unknown. It is accepted that Shekau is the overall leader and front man of the organization, but whether or not he power-shares with others or operates through decentralized cells with independent leadership remains a mystery.

There has long been suspicion of collaboration with other terrorist groups in Africa such as al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb to explain Boko Haram's financing and introduction of new tactics, techniques and procedures such as IEDs, but the connections are mostly circumstantial and hard proof has been elusive. Boko Haram certainly draws financing from criminal activities such as bank robbery, kidnapping, extortion and smuggling, but if there is a large source of foreign financial existence, it has yet to be identified. Even Boko Haram's political goals remain ambiguous. They claim to want to establish an Islamic government run under Sharia Law, but have shown little to no effort to effectively govern the population. Whereas ISIS provides services such as electricity, employment, courts and laws; Boko Haram appears uninterested in establishing the basic fundamentals of governance. Although, early in its existence the group did provide food and shelter to portions of the population, that type of support has waned and brute force is now the driving mechanism for compliance. Aside from carrying out a reign of terror, Boko Haram has provided minimal guidance to the population and essentially has done nothing to increase economic development.

Perhaps the most ambiguous aspect of the Boko Haram conflict is the level of support afforded the group by the local population. Determining the exact level of resonance of Boko Haram's message and mission among the population is difficult. Verifiable information coming from the hardest hit regions of the country is minimal at best. Additionally, Boko Haram has made it clear through messaging that anyone who speak against the group will be targeted, and they have convincingly backed up the threat with violence. This makes it difficult to evaluate the level of support Boko Haram receives, for many may simply fear retaliation and choose complicit silence instead of violent retribution. Despite Nigeria's president stating in December 2015 that Boko Haram was "technically defeated" and unable to hold terrain and launch conventional attacks due to several military successes against the insurgent group, Boko Haram remains a daily threat. In February of this year, Boko

ACCORDING TO THE GLOBAL TERRORIST INDEX, BOKO HARAM WAS THE DEADLIEST TERRORIST GROUP IN THE WORLD IN 2014.



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Haram slaughtered more than 65 people in the village of Dalori, burning children alive in their homes. In the year since kidnapping hundreds of girls in Chibok, Boko Haram introduced female suicide bombers, inflicting more than 750 deaths and 1,200 casualties throughout the region and neighboring countries. The government has had tactical, military success but still struggles to ensure the safety of its constituents.⁰⁴

CONCLUSION

While aspects of the terror group remain ambiguous and there are more questions than answers about the leadership, construct, alliances, financing, support, etc. one thing remains crystal clear: Boko Haram wages a violent campaign in northern Nigeria that decimates the local population and threatens stability in the region. Does the battle against Boko Haram fall into the Gray Zone? For the U.S., Western Allies and several neighboring countries of Nigeria the group perpetuates grotesque, but largely limited violence, thereby constraining its action to regional effects. However, as Boko Haram has made clear through its

actions, and the Nigerian government has reciprocated with an increased military campaign to defeat the terrorist organization, from the viewpoint of the two belligerents, the conflict falls squarely in the black spectrum of all out warfare. In the end, the ambiguous categorization of Boko Haram makes it a Gray Zone challenge to be sure. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Boko Haram Chibok kidnapping gained U.S. national attention in 2014 when First Lady Michelle Obama posted this photo to her Twitter account.
U.S. GOVERNMENT PHOTO

NOTES 01. Kapusta, Philip. Oct - Dec 2015. "The Gray Zone." *Special Warfare* 18 - 25. 02. Institute for Economics and Peace. 2015. *Global Terrorism Index 2015: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism*. Institute for Economics and Peace. 03. Noakes, Andrew. 2014. "What does Boko Haram want?" *New Internationalist* magazine: People, ideas and action for global justice. 116. Accessed 02/17, 2016. <http://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2014/11/06/insight-into-boko-haram/>. 04. Zenn, Jacob. 2016. "Nigeria: Boko Haram is Not 'Defeated' but Buhari's Strategy is Working." *allAfrica*. January 5. Accessed March 22, 2015. <http://allafrica.com/stories/201601051226.html>.