
Re-enforcing Radicalisation with bad PR? The Nigerian Army's Handling of Boko Haram

By: Yan St-Pierre¹

Governing today means giving acceptable signs of credibility. It is like advertising and it is the same effect that is achieved – commitment to a scenario.

- Jean Baudrillard

Introduction

The organisation formerly known as *Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād'* and currently known as *Wilāyat Gharb Ifrīqīyyah*, better known as Boko Haram, rose to international prominence in April 2014, when it kidnapped over 250 school girls from the Nigerian village of Chibok. Although the organisation is active since 2002 and began its violent insurgency in 2009, the mass kidnapping of the “Chibok Girls” attracted worldwide attention to the conflict, in large part due to the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, which was actively supported by U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama.

The attention however also focused on the Nigerian government and raised questions about its fight against Boko Haram, why the kidnapping occurred, what could be done to save the girls and how the terrorists could be defeated. This focus put pressure on Goodluck

¹ CEO/Counter-Terrorism Consultant Modern Security Consulting Group MOSECON GmbH

Jonathan's presidency and the Nigerian army to react to the kidnappings and produce results, turning the Boko Haram insurgency into a full fledged propaganda war. While there have been many military and political changes in the eighteen months since, it could be argued that the propaganda war has turned into the main front, thereby raising numerous questions about its impact on the battlefield.

Should the Nigerian government's PR campaign against Boko Haram be deemed a success or a failure? What impact does it have on its credibility? Is this an effective tactic for the Nigerian army? What impact does it have on Boko Haram's planning and operations? Does it hinder or strengthen terrorist recruitment? How does it impact the image of Boko Haram? Does the PR campaign act as a multiplier for the latter's rhetoric? Does it play a role in the radicalisation of individuals in northern Nigeria and the countries of the Lake Chad region – Cameroon, Chad or Niger?

This article will argue that because the Nigerian government and its army have waged a poor propaganda campaign against Boko Haram, they severely undermine their credibility and reinforce the credibility of their enemy, thereby positively impacting recruitment. I will first present a history of the conflict and the PR rhetoric presented by both sides since 2009. I will then discuss how Boko Haram, either purposely or as a consequence of its loose structure, consistently undermines the rhetoric of the Nigerian government, followed by an examination of the impact this has on the credibility of both parties. Furthermore, I will assess the effect this has on the so-called "fan boys" of Boko Haram and how its messages are received. Additionally, this article will discuss how the propaganda of other regional actors, such as Chad and Niger, add to the discredit of the Nigerian army, thereby undermining

Nigerian efforts in the propaganda war. Finally, I will suggest ways the Nigerian government and its army can modify their rhetoric to regain credibility.

The propaganda war 2009 – today

It could be argued that it was poor propaganda that acted as the trigger for the Boko Haram insurgency in 2009. While the group's founder and leader Muhammad Yusuf was considered dangerous by Nigerian authorities, it was his murder that led to the violent uprising as it is currently known under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau. Indeed, the suspicious circumstances of Yusuf's death and the Nigerian army's handling of the violence that preceded it led numerous human rights groups at the time to condemn Yusuf's death as an extra-judicial killing¹. This simply added to the terrible reputation the Nigerian army has about human rights abuses, something that is still an issue to this day² and keeps undermining the army's credibility.

The army's credibility was not only undermined by human rights abuses, but by what many saw as a failure in handling the fledgeling Boko Haram. Indeed, some described this as a failure of security services to deal with the threat in time, while others saw corruption and family ties as reasons for the poor response³. The criticism towards the government may have been justified, but it is nonetheless interesting to note when researching reactions to Yusuf's death that despite the violence perpetrated by his followers, the government actually bears the brunt of the criticism and anger expressed by citizens.

The status of Yusuf's successor, Abubakar Shekau, whom the government has declared dead at least three times now since 2009⁴ and most recently in September 2014, contributed to the credibility problems. Indeed, each time, Shekau resurfaced to threaten and taunt the

Nigerian government and other regional actors, discrediting the claims and government statements while strengthening his own mythology in the process⁵. The latter is not only an essential part of Boko Haram's propaganda strategy, but until the kidnapping of the Chibok girls, fuelled large portions of the rhetoric for both sides of the conflict.

As mentioned in the introduction, things changed with the attention given to the girls' kidnapping. The international media attention and the social media #BringBackOurGirls campaign magnified the actions of the Nigerian government and its credibility took another huge hit. First, the army demonstrated its confusion by releasing a false statement claiming it had liberated more than 100 of the girls, which was later on forced to be retracted⁶. Second, Goodluck and Patience Jonathan, respectively President and First Lady of Nigeria at the time, aggravated the issue with their catastrophic public relations management. Indeed, Goodluck Jonathan blamed parents of the kidnapped children for their lack of cooperation⁷, while Patience Jonathan had one of the mothers of the abducted Chibok girls arrested because she felt "slighted" and even accused some of fabricating the abductions as a political move to discredit her husband's government⁸. Needless to say, the presidential couple did not come across as sympathetic to the plight of the Chibok residents.

The kidnapping of the Chibok girls was the beginning of what could be described as a showdown between the public relations department of the Nigerian army, led by Major Chris Olukolade, the office of the President of Nigeria and Boko Haram. In fact, the PR battle became so important that Goodluck Jonathan hired a new public relations company to improve his image following the Chibok fiasco, at the cost of more than a million dollars⁹.

In the summer of 2014, it became obvious that the Nigerian government was focusing more on the propaganda aspect of the fight against Boko Haram. While Major Olukolade multiplied the declarations advocating the battlefield successes of the Nigerian army, Boko Haram rapidly gained territory in north-eastern Nigeria, taking over towns like Gwoza and Damasak while attacking Maiduguri, Kano and Gombe with regularity. It is also during this time that Boko Haram began using children – girls – to carry out suicide bombings, sparking outrage worldwide. In the propaganda war, the terrorist organisation's actions were now speaking larger than the government's words.

Boko Haram also started to latch on the popularity and methods of the newly founded "Islamic State" (IS) with the release of a video in August 2014 in which Abubakar Shekau praises IS and declares himself Emir of the region surrounding Lake Chad, an area similar to the territory held by the former Kanem-Borno Empire in the 18th century¹⁰.

In the autumn of 2014, the propaganda war expanded to include other regional actors in Cameroon and Chad. First, a series of gains for the security forces in the region peaked with another declaration of Shekau's death, this time by the Cameroon army¹¹. The Nigerian government reluctantly supported this, whereas international analysts expressed serious concern about the veracity of the images and gave little credit to the declaration¹². These doubts proved founded as Boko Haram declared Shekau to be alive and that the dead man presented as being Shekau was in fact a high ranking figure of the organisation named Bashir Muhammed¹³. Once again, Boko Haram's propaganda outshone that of the Nigerian army.

Second, Chad President Idriss Déby declared in October 2014 to be mediating negotiations between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government. Meetings were held and a Boko Haram spokesperson interviewed, backed by multiple declarations by the Nigerian government supporting these talks¹⁴.

These negotiations however proved to be a hoax because the “representatives” of Boko Haram were not in a position to speak for the organisation, adding to the discredit of the Nigerian government and Chad's President for not being able to verify the authenticity of their negotiation partner¹⁵. These failed talks were followed with a violent string of Boko Haram attacks, which culminated with the massacre of hundreds of civilians in the area of Baga, Nigeria.

The Baga massacre proved to be another difficult PR challenge for the Nigerian government. First, that the local Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF) – comprised of troops from Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria – could be overrun by Boko Haram had surprised many¹⁶, and the absence of accurate information surrounding the number of victims, with the number varying between 200 and 2000, added to the confusion and outrage. The government and army PR departments did their best to minimise the shock of the attack, the propaganda simply fell short under the weight of the international media reaction to the Baga massacre, which was reminiscent to the reaction surrounding the abduction of the Chibok girls seven months earlier. If Chibok had discredited the government's reliability in dealing with Boko Haram, the deaths in Baga, so close to the presidential elections, dismissed doubts as to the army's and President Goodluck Jonathan's ability to defeat Boko Haram.

It is true that the MJTF troops did enjoy a certain level of success in February, March and April, and this provided them with good press and a positive rhetoric to promote. The number of people they rescued from camps in the Sambisa Forest or the towns they “liberated” like Gwoza or Damasak gave the impression that Boko Haram was on the run and becoming desperate, and numerous Nigerian citizens expressed joy and support for this success. Unfortunately, the government was unable to truly capitalise on this success for a variety of reasons, the most prominent being the more aggressive – and credible – PR activities of the MJTF members. In other words, Nigeria’s MJTF partners stole its thunder, an issue I will address below.

It must be noted that the government and army public relations efforts needed little outside help to thwart their efforts, as these were often countered by their own actions. While the propaganda evoked the great successes of Nigeria’s “gallant troops”¹⁷, the media regularly reported on the defections, mutiny – soldiers accused of firing at their commanding officer – and the logistical and material problems of the Nigerian army. A very public trial which led to over 50 soldiers being sentenced to death for treason and mutiny exposed the internal issues of the army, and the regular reports of lack of fuel for the vehicles and non-functioning weapons contradicted the army’s declarations of success¹⁸. Moral issues, embodied by the dismissal of over 700 soldiers for “lack of morale” in May 2015, became rampant and undermined the discourse of a strong, determined army.

Over the same period, Boko Haram’s propaganda only got stronger. The speculation surrounding Shekau continued as the rumours of a pledge to the increasingly successful Islamic State grew. The videos posted by the organisation in January became sleeker and more sophisticated, hinting at a possible collaboration between IS and Boko Haram, raising

questions about the latter's capabilities along the way. This culminated in Shekau's audio pledge to the Islamic State on March 8, 2015 and in the emergence of *Wilāyat Gharb Ifrīqīyyah* – Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) – IS' umbrella organisation in West Africa rooted in Boko Haram. The videos released by this organisation have the same style as the other IS propaganda material¹⁹, but they have yet to feature the usually prominently displayed Abubakar Shekau, which raised even more questions about his status.

Boko Haram's propaganda machine has a clear evolution and has become quicker and more effective than that of the Nigerian government. The status of Shekau ensures large media exposure as demonstrated in August and September when the first audio files with Shekau's "voice" since the pledge to IS were released. This gives Boko Haram/ISWAP mass media exposure²⁰ – as it always does – further strengthening the organisation's grip on the propaganda front. When Boko Haram talks, people listen; when the government speaks, it gets lost in the noise.

The other aspect demonstrated during the weekend of September 19-20, 2015 is that ISWAP is in a position to react immediately to statements issued by governments. Indeed, when France announced its financial and logistical support of Nigeria in the fight against Boko Haram, the Nigerian government underlined that it was winning the war, a week after stating it had destroyed the organisation's camps²¹. A mere two days after the Paris statement, Shekau's voice was heard once more, this time more forceful than it had been in months – responding to the government's statement, demonstrating strength and threatening Nigeria and its partners. The message was followed by immediate action with five bombings on that same weekend, two in Cameroon and three in the city of Maiduguri, north-east

Nigeria's main city and new headquarters of the Nigerian army, which was moved there purposely to improve the fight against Boko Haram. The bombs made Shekau's message credible and showed that ISWAP was immediately capable of providing an immediate counter-narrative to the government's propaganda.

Key observations emerge from the propaganda war between the Nigerian government and Boko Haram since 2009. The first is that Boko Haram's propaganda and narrative has evolved and adapted itself to the new contexts. Its use of Shekau changed – either by need or cunning – and it integrates current situations and real events, like the declaration of the Islamic State's caliphate or the Paris meeting, into its narrative, providing elements people can refer to, giving weight to its propaganda. The second is style evolution, becoming louder and using stronger imagery that is long lasting, like that of Shekau posing in front of the “converted” Chibok girls²². This style is also becoming more refined through the association with the Islamic State – itself extremely PR savvy – and more effective, as the response to the meeting between Presidents Buhari and Hollande showed. The third is Boko Haram's capability to back the messages with actions, which cements the credibility of its propaganda and forces security personnel and governments to take their threats seriously.

What emerges from the government's end is confusion. The messages seldom reflect the realities on the ground, whether it is the reputation or status of the army or simply the results of military operations. Unfortunately, military statements often raise more questions than provide answers, even when the news is good, e.g. when hostages are freed²³. There are also numerous retractions that hinder the credibility of government or military propaganda. Finally, there is the lack of a coherent PR policy, embodied by the hiring of public relations agencies, first by Goodluck Jonathan to handle the Chibok girls crisis, and then the army in

July 2015 to improve the military propaganda. The latter also led to the re-assignment of Major Chris Olukolade, who was the main spokesman for the military. The PR policy of the government and the army – even after Buhari took office in May – could best be described as trial and error, lacking coherence and cohesion, both domestically and internationally.

However, the challenges of publicly dealing with the terror of Boko Haram must be recognised and these make it harder for the government and the army than for terrorists. The rumour mill exacerbated by social media makes it extremely difficult to control the narrative. This was obvious during the Baga crisis when the unconfirmed rumour of 2,000 victims spread like wildfire on Twitter and in the media, despite the fact that the accounts had to be verified, which added to the chaos. It is also an issue when other parties, such as Idriss Déby, sabotage the message with their own bombastic rhetoric, effectively throwing the government “under the bus” in the process and allowing it to politically capitalise at Nigeria’s expense. Additionally, the historical distrust towards the government means the latter must be even more effective and credible for its message to be accepted, something near impossible with its current reputation and that of the army. While the actual level of distrust can be debated, it nonetheless reveals that government credibility is an issue and that any rhetoric expressed by the Nigerian government will first be met with scepticism. Consequently, any propaganda material must take this reality into account if it is not only to be effective, but actually to compensate for the problems the lack of credibility is causing. An issue compounded by Boko Haram’s ability to undermine the governmental message.

Boko Haram's narrative

In any propaganda war, the control of the narrative is important and this is exactly what Boko Haram has mostly managed to do since 2009 and completely since April 2014. It has been able to achieve this control through the violence of its actions, the use of the mythology surrounding its leader Abubakar Shekau, spectacular imagery and the exploitation of the Nigerian population's distrust for governmental institutions.

Historically, the gruesome use of violence was deemed a forbidden zone for terrorist groups²⁴. While many argued that the attacks on New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 changed this²⁵ – announcing the era of “hyperterrorism”²⁶ – it could be argued that it is the violence of the attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram that signalled the change in the use of violence by terrorists. Indeed, while the terrorist group known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), that declared itself to be a caliphate called “Islamic State” or Daesh (it's Arabic acronym) in June 2014, may be known for mainstreaming decapitation and gruesome torture deaths, Boko Haram's reputation as “mad dogs” preceded IS. Boko Haram – despite the use of more conventional terrorist tactics such as car bombings (notably the attack of the UN headquarters in Abuja in 2011) – has been known since 2009 for its savage raids of villages, executing hundreds of people with machetes and other weapons, raping, kidnapping, burning and looting. The killing of students in their sleep in September 2013, the kidnapping of the Chibok girls, the attack on the Kano mosque in November 2014 and the Baga massacre in 2015 are exclamation points to near weekly attacks on villages and towns perpetrated by Boko Haram.

In June 2014, the organisation took its violence one step further when it began regularly using young girls, some as young as seven years old²⁷, as suicide bombers, a tactic that it still

uses to this day. Additionally, it began in August 2014 to kidnap young boys to fill its ranks, a “recruiting” tactic made famous by Liberia’s civil war and Joseph Kony’s *Lord’s Resistance Army* (LRA) in Uganda.

The savagery and ruthlessness of the attacks cemented Boko Haram’s reputation as mad dogs²⁸, a true organisation of terror whose goal is only to spill blood. The indiscriminate targeting of people, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and attacking mosques shows that all can be targeted and this unpredictability adds to the fear. In fact, the violence of Boko Haram is so gruesome that even representatives of Al Qaeda, the organisation accused of ushering in the era of “hyperterrorism”, denounce its actions, as it did when the Chibok girls were kidnapped²⁹.

If the violence on its own is terrifying, Boko Haram’s main propaganda asset is the way it promotes this terror. While it cannot control the rumour mill and the media hype, as seen with the Baga massacre, it fully controls the way the terror is presented, and it does so extremely well with the figure of Abubakar Shekau. The image of Shekau perfectly complements the violence of the organisation because of the way he presents himself. The messages released by Shekau, either as video or audio, are seldom calm and rational. They are rather bombastic, intense and emotional, a man trying to convey the passion of his actions rather than the ideas behind them. In other words, Shekau preaches, which is a stark contrast to the messages of IS’ Al-Baghdadi or Al Qaeda’s Al-Zawahiri for example, who are more composed in their messages. Preaching conveys a sense of righteousness as well as unpredictability, the latter amplified by Shekau’s large smile and mannerism, which again amplify the brutality of the violence.

No videos embody this more than those Boko Haram released after the kidnapping of the Chibok girls. In the first video released on May 5, 2014, Shekau is seen standing, smiling, agitated by nervous ticks and laughs, announcing to the world that the Chibok girls are slaves to be sold and wives to be and that this is Allah's will to do so³⁰. In this video Shekau really looks the part of an insane cult leader. The second video released on June 29, 2014, sees Boko Haram's leader sitting alone, admonishing Nigerians and the world, but the real threat comes from the images of the abducted girls, sitting and veiled, chanting and praising Allah. In this case, Shekau behaves as the righteous tormentor and Boko Haram used the children's own voices to publicise their ordeal³¹. The message is clear: We have the power, we are ruthless and we are in control.

While the release of any video produced by Shekau ensures the organisation immediate attention, the timing of the message also plays a huge role in Boko Haram's propaganda. Time and time again, claims made by the Nigerian government suggesting that the group is on the run, that its demise is a matter of weeks or months, are countered by Boko Haram attacks, proving once again the adage that actions speak louder than words. In 2013, President Goodluck Jonathan proclaimed Boko Haram would be defeated within six months³². Two years later, the group is still very much active. In February 2015, the government claimed to have the group on the run, yet the response has been for the group to pledge allegiance to IS and go on a terror spree in June and July 2015 unlike any it carried out in its existence, sending a clear signal to Nigeria's new President Muhammadu Buhari. He also set a deadline for the Nigerian army in July 2015, giving it three months to defeat Boko Haram. Two months in, there are no indications that Boko Haram is weakening and the devastating attack on Maiduguri on September 20, 2015 proves the terrorists are still able to strike at will, thereby countering the government's narrative.

Boko Haram has two other assets that also play a role in the dispersal and success of their propaganda. The first, which they control, is their access to resources. Like many other terrorist organisations, they are a large employer and are in a position to offer financial stability and status to many of the Lake Chad region's population. Boko Haram has been known to pay individuals 400\$ per month to become informants and for local support in Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon³³. The organisation also plays a role in developing infrastructure, building schools and mosques, as my own work in Nigeria has revealed. Boko Haram was therefore in a position to add to its credibility by filling some of the void the Nigerian government's absence and lack of support for the local populations created.

The second asset is the very nature of Boko Haram's structure which is not homogeneous. It is rather an amalgam of various djihadi and criminal groups that gravitate around a core and includes Shekau and other notable figures such as Amirul Jesh. This allows fringe groups to commit acts of terror, and for some of them or outright imposters to present themselves as representatives of Boko Haram. This unintentionally leads to situations as the one described earlier surrounding possible "peace talks" with the Nigerian government, which turn out to be worthless because the government is not discussing with an actual representative. This episode discredited the government even more and added an extra layer of confusion and caution surrounding Boko Haram's structure and intentions, which plays right into the hands of their propaganda.

The propaganda of Boko Haram is extremely powerful. It combines actions with strong imagery and uses mystery and rumour to accentuate it. It also uses the bait of the Nigerian government and army deftly, replying to their statements with attacks that have increased both in sophistication and savagery. This allows their message to be credible and taken

seriously, while the use of financial and political power allows them to create and sustain a certain level of sympathy among local populations, despite the ruthlessness of their attacks. As we will see, Boko Haram has in many cases positioned itself as the “lesser of two evils”, fostering sympathy, radicalisation and recruitment, consequently entrenching the conflict.

How is the Boko Haram message received?

Terrorism has never been about the conflict or the violence, but rather the messages and the symbols that define the cause. It is about securing credibility, a righteous alternative, changing the present for a bright future³⁴. This political vision is rooted in utopia, religious or ideological, and therefore the goal of terrorists is to win the battle of credibility in order to implement the vision³⁵. While this may be difficult to understand in light of the brutality of their methods, Boko Haram proposes such an ideal future, living under the Shari’a, to establish an emirate defined by religious principles³⁶. Their resources allow them to offer a viable alternative to what is offered by the Nigerian government, financial stability, employment and above all a status and an identity that can appeal to many disillusioned by their situation or the state of the country.

This is where the credibility comes into play. Boko Haram wins, pays, has an aura of invincibility and since March, is affiliated to an organisation, IS, that is extremely successful and has Westerners worried. This means ISWAP exudes power, reliability, and above all looks to be a winner, which is always attractive. Furthermore, like many other terrorist organisations, it preys quite well on the weaknesses of its enemies, which in this case is the carelessness, short-sightedness and utter lack of credibility of the Nigerian governments, federal and local. This gives Boko Haram the opportunity to present itself as a credible alternative to the current situation.

Intelligence work done by MOSECON has allowed me to observe the effect the Boko Haram propaganda has on the population of the Lake Chad region and how it is promoted online by the so-called “fan boys” of Boko Haram³⁷. The intelligence revealed the sympathy and the distrust of portions of the population:

“I am from Maiduguri and I graduated in March. I joined Boko Haram because I can't keep my family safe without them because the government is inept. I am prepared to be a martyr as I know Boko Haram will protect and support my family which is more than the government will do.”³⁸

This man is one example for the gratitude towards Boko Haram unfortunately found in larger numbers in the north-east of Nigeria. Boko Haram, despite its reputation, is seen as a guardian, a provider of security, which is usually the role of the state. His words also express the disappointment, frustration and complete lack of trust towards the Nigerian government. His example, like many others I have observed, clearly demonstrates that Boko Haram is winning the propaganda war and possesses a level of credibility the government and its institutions do not.

The level of distrust is such that in many circles doubt that Boko Haram is actually behind the violence persists and many suspect the government is actually behind the attacks:

“If the violence and bombings continue and Boko Haram is destroyed, it proves the conspiracy that the corrupt authorities are behind the attacks and therefore there is no way the community will support the government.”³⁹

This could easily be dismissed as conspiracy theorists. However, the large number of similar observations obtained by our investigation clearly suggest that, regardless of the form it takes, the Nigerian government has zero credibility in large portions of the north-eastern population. Most concerning is that even the extreme brutality of the Boko Haram attacks does little to change the perception that they are the lesser of two evils.

The sympathy for Boko Haram is also observed by the well-known insider Ahmad Salkida, who advocates a grass roots and socially oriented approach to fighting the terrorist organisation. His idea takes into account the lack of credibility the government has and underlines the threat increasing sympathy for Boko Haram represents for the short-term and long-term security of Nigeria:

“Unfortunately, a growing number of people in the region are becoming sympathetic to the message of resistance against those perceived as purveyors of modern day corrupt practices and injustice against the larger Muslim world. As irrational as these views may be, it has become the unassailable grounds of indoctrination”⁴⁰.

Salkida's words are clear: Boko Haram is winning the hearts and minds of local populations through an effective rhetoric, propaganda and increasing credibility, regardless of the violence. And this is a message that well exceeds the boundaries of north-east Nigeria.

The enthusiasm and reach of the “fan boys” network play a large role in how the propaganda of Boko Haram spreads and increases their support and numbers. The reactions observed following the attacks in Maiduguri on September 20 and the release of the Shekau

audio the same weekend was exuberance and satisfaction that a statement was made and that undoubtedly more was to come⁴¹. Many were also suggesting tactics and targets, which raises the question of just how much influence the “fan boys” may or may not have in the planning of certain attacks⁴². They are also a key component in expanding the Boko Haram network outside the region of Lake Chad. Some of these groups are known to be located outside Nigeria in places like Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya, Algeria or the United Kingdom, an issue of great concern considering that Boko Haram now operates under the network of ISWAP. This means access to more resources and a much larger radicalisation network.

It is clear that the propaganda of Boko Haram is not only well received, but actually shared. This is possible with a perfect storm of financial, political, ideological and religious credibility; the frustrations of populations who feel neglected and fully distrust the Nigerian government; demonstrations of power; and the use of modern platforms like social media and the internet to create pockets of supporters outside Boko Haram’s regional base, thereby expanding the group’s network and access to resources. To this point, the Nigerian government and the army have had huge difficulties countering this narrative, a problem compounded by the propaganda of its neighbours.

The impact of other regional actors in the propaganda war

The insurgency of Boko Haram has long been presented as a Nigerian problem, but the organisation was never limited to Nigeria and always conducted its operations in the region surrounding Lake Chad. It began its activities in the Diffa region of Niger and in Maiduguri⁴³, Nigeria, and set up camps in northern Cameroon. With Boko Haram turning into ISWAP, huge portions of the Sahel and North Africa became affected by the organisation and what was once localised truly became an African problem⁴⁴.

However, only since Boko Haram became an actual security threat to Cameroon, Chad and Niger did Nigeria's neighbours get involved. Militarily, Cameroon and Chad, as part of the MJTF, have been most active and not without a certain level of success. In fact, much of the joint task force's success in February and March was due to their operations, something that also created problems with the Nigerian government and its army⁴⁵.

That problems occur in a coalition is typical and in itself not a sign that the parties involved cannot collaborate. In the case of the MJTF however, the public statements made by representatives of Niger and Chad – especially its President Idriss Déby – undermine Nigeria's contribution to the fight against Boko Haram, something politically unacceptable within a coalition or for so-called regional partners. Bluntly put, Chad and Niger's public relations campaigns related to this conflict humiliated Nigeria and made it look weak, which did not help a government suffering from a near complete lack of credibility.

Niger's statements have focused on the competence of the Nigerian army. In February, Niger labelled Nigerian soldiers as cowards: "Our soldiers are not like Nigerians. They don't run," a statement that infuriated the Nigerians. This led to the counter-accusation that Niger's soldiers are looters and supporting Boko Haram⁴⁶. A very public spat that added to the Nigerian army's poor reputation and demonstrated that Niger did not respect Nigeria's role and contributions to the fight.

The accusations of "cowardice" were reiterated a month later shortly following the liberation of the Nigerian border town of Damasak, this time both by Niger and Chad. Soldiers and officials from both countries were complaining that the Nigerian army was not relieving them after they liberated the town, despite their call to do so⁴⁷. This was

exacerbated by the fact that as soon as the Chadian and Nigerian troops left the town, Boko Haram proceeded to attack the town several times⁴⁸. This was another case of both Chad and Niger capitalising on the Nigerian army's troubles, making it look incompetent while they presented themselves as effective and generous liberators, adding to Nigeria's credibility woes.

However, the worst regional political propaganda came directly from Chad's President Déby, whose bombastic statements were made to give the impression Chad is the most effective regional member against Boko Haram. His statements may have proven to be just empty rhetoric, but they nonetheless allowed him to politically capitalise on the conflict and present Chad as a leading figure in the region. He claimed to have mediated the "negotiations" between the Nigerian government and Boko Haram in October 2014; in January, he sent troops into Nigerian territory without informing the country's officials, claiming to "come to the help of Cameroon"⁴⁹; in March, he claimed to know the location of Abubakar Shekau and gave him a three day ultimatum to surrender⁵⁰, something that failed to materialise; and more recently, he claimed to know Shekau's status, claiming that he was injured and that another man, Muhamad Daoud, was now speaking for the organisation and that he was willing to negotiate, a situation akin to the one experienced in October 2014⁵¹.

The propaganda of Nigeria's neighbours in the conflict against Boko Haram is rooted in the dismissal and humiliation of Nigeria. It mocks the country's contribution to the battle, pretends to be a negotiating partner with terrorists, gives unfounded ultimata and presents itself as the generous liberator of territories occupied by Boko Haram. It does so by raising its own status while diminishing that of Nigeria, something that is usually taboo among partner states, especially those who are part of a coalition like the MJTF. This means Nigeria must

not only contend with the propaganda of its enemy, but that of its allies as well, the result of which is a negation of its own credibility and propaganda.

Conclusion

In light of the above, this article's suggestion that the Nigerian government and its army's poor performance in the propaganda war against Boko Haram is contributing to the radicalisation of individuals in the Lake Chad region and beyond, a phenomenon observable with the increasing support given to Boko Haram, is validated.

In any conflict, the most difficult battle to win is the propaganda, and the conflict in the Lake Chad region involving Boko Haram is no exception. The intensity of this battle only increased as the terrorist group's frightening reputation grew in accordance to its military success, while the failures of the Nigerian army compounded an already dismal reputation of brutality and unreliability, which worsened their own credibility as well as the government's. Clearly outmatched on the propaganda front since the tragic abduction of the Chibok girls in April 2014, the Nigerian government and its army have completely lost their credibility and left a void that is being filled by Boko Haram, to the extent that, despite its reputation as a "mad dog", it is now garnering increasing support, both in the Lake Chad region and beyond, which allows it to replenish its resources and its personnel.

I also demonstrated that Nigeria's propagandistic challenges are often the results of its own doing. Numerous retracted statements, especially as the world was watching in the wake of the Chibok kidnappings, and a lack of empathy shown to the victims by President Jonathan and his wife strengthened the reasoning that the government did not care. Deadlines that produce no tangible results, lofty expectations that cannot be realistically achieved and

statements of success that are immediately proven wrong by attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram, all of which have damaged the government's reputation and cast serious doubts as to its ability to defeat the terrorists.

The credibility issue is exacerbated by the fact that Boko Haram only strengthen theirs with gruesome and constant attacks, a tactical and strategic evolution, the cunning use of symbols and mythology and the capability to respond to government statements and threats. These strengths are re-enforced by financial and soft power that preys on the government's absence, and a growing network of supporters that adds an international dimension to Boko Haram's propaganda. As if this wasn't enough, the pledge of allegiance to IS, which led to Boko Haram's rebranding into ISWAP, linked the organisation to an even stronger structure. This allows it to be associated to a "winner" and adds to the credibility – and the fear – necessary to increase their support.

Finally, Nigeria's regional partners have done little to support the Nigerian propaganda. On the contrary, they saw this as an opportunity to score political points and raise their own status in the region, and no one has been more active than Chad at using this tactic. By demonstrating a clear disregard for Nigeria's sovereignty, its policies and its sphere of influence, the country's regional partners undermine Nigeria's propaganda, its reputation and its credibility, which is now attacked both domestically and internationally. This leaves Nigeria with little chance to turn the tide and clearly benefits the terrorists.

Nigeria's poor credibility has roots in the country's history, and the current situation is not helping. People distrust the government more than they do the terrorists, something that was visible even when Boko Haram was just beginning as a violent threat. This means the

government and its institutions must work much harder to achieve an absolute minimum of credibility, and the real solutions can only be found in a long-term process.

The solutions in the short-term begin with credible and more sober statements. Saying that all Boko Haram camps have been wiped out while there are clearly many others, and while the enemy is still in a position to attack at will, can only backfire. Setting absurdly unrealistic deadlines like giving the army three months to defeat a group of insurgents that only increased in strength over the last few years also gives the wrong impression. If anything, it only sets the army up to fail, which is neither good for morale nor credibility. Obviously addressing the army's poor human rights record is a good start and President Buhari certainly took steps in this direction by acknowledging Amnesty International's report and ordering reforms.

In the long term, Nigeria needs a plan that goes beyond the military and actually begins to fill the structural void it created. This starts by building working critical infrastructure and institutions that allow the population to realise the government is in a position to provide a level of security to its citizens. Such initiatives are the government and legitimate equivalent of what Boko Haram is achieving on the battlefield. Boko Haram is taken seriously because it is in a position to back its words with actions. The governments in Nigeria must do the same, show that they mean what they say, that their policies are visible and benefit the general population. This would re-enforce the work done by deradicalisation programs and prevent individuals, like those observed by MOSECON and mentioned here, from choosing to turn to Boko Haram.

Considering the challenges of corruption, poor economic diversity, ethnic and regional divisions, and tensions that go beyond Boko Haram, such as those in the Niger Delta region, the implementation of such policies appears to be nearly utopian. Yet, it is essential for these problems to be tackled simultaneously and immediately as well as initiate CVE programs, in order to provide an effective counter-narrative to the one offered by Boko Haram. As it stands, the terrorists are rapidly monopolising the rhetoric and winning the propaganda war hands down, and this has an impact that no military operation can overcome.

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