NSN SPECIAL REPORT: THE END OF BOKO HARAM?

Nigeria's rapid territorial gains and the role of foreign advisors

Nigeria's recent territorial gains

In recent weeks the tide of the conflict against Boko Haram has dramatically and suddenly turned in the government's favour. Up until February, Boko Haram had pushed government forces out of vast swathes of territory in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states after a rapid advance beginning around July 2014. Borno was worst affected, with as much as 70 per cent of the state's territory outside of government control and Maiduguri almost surrounded.
Most of the towns captured during Boko Haram’s recent offensive have now been re-taken, including Baga, Bama, Gamboru Ngala, Goniri, Dikwa, Buni Yadi, Marte, and Madagali. The only major town that remains under Boko Haram control is Gwoza, which the insurgents had previously claimed was the centre of their new state in north-east Nigeria. The security situation in the north-east is now far more conducive to holding safe elections than it was in February when the upcoming presidential election was postponed.

**What is behind the recent territorial gains?**

Last year, Nigerian security forces were struggling to resist Boko Haram’s attacks and re-take captured territory. Soldiers complained of being provided with insufficient equipment and ammunition. There were also numerous reports of heavy weapons and aircraft malfunctioning. Moreover, soldiers complained of not receiving pay for long periods.

The extraordinary gains made by the government in recent weeks, coupled with the performance of the Nigerian army last year, lends plausibility to claims made in the New York Times and Voice of America about foreign advisors playing a combat role. However, it does not confirm it.

There are alternative explanations for recent gains, including the involvement of a multinational force comprising troops from Nigeria, Chad, and Niger, as well as the involvement of Cameroon around the Nigeria-Cameroon border area. Chad in particular has been credited with re-taking some territory previously held by Boko Haram, including the Nigerian town of Gamboru Ngala.

Moreover, new equipment acquisitions and the deployment of more effective Nigerian military units, including special forces reportedly trained by the UK, have undoubtedly made an impact. Foreign advisors may also have made a difference in a non-combat role.

**The end of Boko Haram?**

Despite the recapturing of territory, Boko Haram has not been defeated. The insurgency does not need to operate like a conventional army, which can be expelled from territory in a series of pitched battles. Instead, it has the capacity to quickly melt away into the countryside and avoid large-scale confrontation. Its decision to engage in large-scale, open combat last year reflected its military advantage over the Nigerian army.

Now with foreign advisors, multinational forces, and better Nigerian military assets to contend with, Boko Haram can be expected to retreat into its hideouts and switch back to fighting the guerrilla campaign it was engaged in up until the middle of 2014. The use of suicide bomb attacks in recent weeks, including in Maiduguri, reflects the group’s capacity to engage in irregular warfare and use terrorism as its primary weapon.

**The facts about foreign advisors**

In recent days, there have been multiple reports about foreign advisors playing a role in the fight against Boko Haram in north-east Nigeria. Some reports, most notably reports in the New York Times and Voice of America, have suggested their involvement goes beyond a purely advisory or technical role, alleging that they are directly involved in combat operations.

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3. http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6c786ea6-b515-11e4-b186-00144feab7de.html#axzz3UozD86JH
What we know: confirmed reports

The Nigerian president has confirmed that foreign military advisors are present in north-east Nigeria, referring to them as “trainers and technicians”. According to the government’s official narrative, they play a purely technical and advisory role, helping to train Nigerian troops to operate and maintain equipment that has been acquired by the government.

One South African advisor is confirmed to have been killed in a friendly fire incident in Borno state. However, the origin of the other advisors has not been confirmed. A number of Western-looking advisors have been photographed travelling in convoys around Maiduguri, Borno state’s capital. NSN’s sources in Maiduguri also indicate they have sighted Western advisors travelling in convoys around the city and on foot around the University of Maiduguri Teaching Hospital.

Security analysts have identified new vehicles pictured in the fight against Boko Haram as being the Reva III, which is manufactured by a South African company. Nigeria has also reportedly been attempting to acquire weapons and military equipment from Russia.

Unconfirmed reports

According to reports published in the New York Times and Voice of America, the role of these foreign advisors goes far beyond that of trainers or technicians. These reports, which NSN has not been able to verify, claims hundreds of mercenaries from South Africa, Georgia, and Ukraine are taking a leading role in the fight against Boko Haram in Borno state.

Sources quoted in the New York Times claim the mercenaries have been using armoured vehicles, heavy weapons, and attack helicopters to push Boko Haram back from areas it had captured during fighting in 2014. They are allegedly conducting combat operations at night to avoid detection and are credited with re-taking or helping to re-take several towns.

According to sources quoted in Voice of America, the mercenaries are using heavy weapons such as rocket launchers and flying aircraft out of Maiduguri airport on attack missions against Boko Haram.

The risks of using foreign advisors

NSN is not in a position to verify the reports that foreign advisors have become involved in combat operations. However, in light of these reports, it is important to note the following concerns and risks.

Advisors or mercenaries?

Amidst the controversy over whether or not the private military contractors are advisors or mercenaries, it is important to note that this distinction can quickly break down under the right circumstances.

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5 http://saharareporters.com/2015/03/13/nigeria-claims-mercenaries-are-technical-advisers
9 Two NSN sources in Maiduguri
10 http://www.voanews.com/content/reu-nigeria-drafts-in-foreign-mercenaries-to-take-on-boko-haram/2677160.html
11 http://www.voanews.com/content/nigeria-russia-10dec14/2553173.html
Private military contractors who advise, train, mentor, and maintain equipment can easily find themselves playing a combat role even if it was unintended. In order to carry out their role, advisors will often get close to the combat. The South African military advisor who was killed by friendly fire in Borno must have been close enough to a combat zone that he was mistaken for Boko Haram.

Equally, the advisors who are present in Maiduguri are extremely close to an active combat zone. Maiduguri has itself been attacked in recent months both by suicide bombers and by more conventional assaults. Indeed, the foreign advisors who have been photographed travelling in armoured vehicles are seen manning heavy weapons, clearly prepared to take part in combat should the need arise.

**Strengthening Boko Haram**

If foreign advisors are currently taking part in combat operations, or if they stray unintentionally or intentionally into this role in the future, it carries considerable risks and may ultimately backfire on the government. Particularly as these advisors have a Western appearance, their use in combat operations could generate considerable animosity amongst local people in north-east Nigeria and make them more sympathetic to Boko Haram’s anti-government, anti-Western agenda.

Borno state does not have a history of strong animosity towards the West. Nonetheless, there was a constituency for Boko Haram’s anti-Western messages before the group began its armed campaign in 2009. Boko Haram enjoyed a wide membership before it began its insurgency and its mosque in Maiduguri, where former leader Mohammed Yusuf would preach anti-Western messages, was well attended.

So far, NSN’s sources in Borno indicate that the foreign advisors are being welcomed by local people in Maiduguri. The city’s population, which is enlarged by refugees who have fled Boko Haram’s violence, is likely to be grateful for a perceived intervention that has reversed the insurgency’s territorial gains and eased the danger.

However, the situation could quickly change. If the advisors become involved in combat, it is likely they will unintentionally harm civilians in the course of the fighting. It is also possible that some may become involved in human rights abuses due to the lack of oversight and accountability for their actions. Once this begins to happen, opinion could turn against them, especially amongst those who were once sympathetic to Boko Haram’s messages. The advisors may start to be perceived as a force of occupation.

This could embolden Boko Haram and even swell its ranks. Due to the insurgency’s brutal attacks on civilian communities, it has struggled in recent months to attract voluntary recruits in Nigeria. However, if the group is able to grasp the opportunity, the presence of a foreign force in the north-east may serve as a useful recruiting tool and make it easier for Boko Haram to hide in sympathetic communities. If this happens, the insurgency will be harder to defeat in the long term.

**Western intervention?**

Though these foreign advisors are private military contractors and not therefore enlisted in the army of any Western state, Western governments should take note that this distinction could break down in the eyes of the local population. Though analysts may find it easy to understand the difference between a Western military intervention and private Western-looking military advisors, it is possible that some local people either through lack of information or political convenience may hold Western governments responsible for the advisors’ actions.

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13 NSN sources in Borno state
Conclusion and recommendations

Recent territorial gains by the government, though extremely welcome, are not the end of Boko Haram. The group is highly likely to melt back into the countryside and continue its campaign of terrorist attacks against civilian and government targets.

The use of foreign advisors to assist the Nigerian military is understandable given the pressures faced by the Nigerian government. Indeed, if these advisors are solely being used to train Nigerian troops and teach them how to maintain equipment, NSN supports their deployment as an important part of capacity building the Nigerian army.

However, if these advisors take part in combat operations now or in the future, NSN has serious concerns about how this may backfire on the government and make it harder to defeat Boko Haram in the long term.

Ultimately, the only sustainable solution to the Boko Haram insurgency is for the Nigerian government and security forces to engage in a long-term and comprehensive counter-insurgency campaign against the insurgents. Foreign support in the form of training and advice is an important element of this, but the final outcome is the responsibility of Nigeria alone.

Accordingly, NSN recommends that the Nigerian government:

- Avoids using foreign advisors in combat operations as much as possible in order to reduce the risk of their presence becoming counter-productive
- Makes use of foreign expertise and assistance, including that of foreign governments, to train and equip the Nigerian military, and places the emphasis on capacity building the Nigerian military to play the lead role in defeating Boko Haram
- Maintains its focus on a long term strategy to defeat Boko Haram, including military, political, and socio-economic elements and particularly concentrating on counter-radicalisation, public messaging, development, education, and civilian protection, as well as military operations

NSN also recommends that Western governments:

- Investigate the use of foreign advisors, particularly if they are believed to be their own citizens
- Ensure a clear public message that the presence of Western private military contractors does not mean Western governments are involved in the conflict

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The Nigeria Security Network is a group of Nigerian and international experts working on Nigerian security. For more information, visit www.nigeriasecurenetwork.org or contact anoakes@nigeriasecurenetwork.org.