

SPECIAL REPORT: NORTH-EAST NIGERIA ON THE BRINK

Losing control of the north-east: Boko Haram's seizure of territory

Nigeria is losing control of large parts of the north-east region. For the first time in its history, Boko Haram is seizing and holding onto territory outside of its hideouts in Sambisa and the Mandara Mountains. In recent days and weeks, the insurgents have seized a string of villages and towns, primarily in Borno but also in Yobe and Adamawa. Fig. 1 gives an indication of some of the population centres the group has captured or is contesting, and the extent of their operational presence.

Seized settlements in Borno are believed to include Gamboru Ngala, Dikwa, Gwoza, and Marte. Bama is also reported to have been captured but the Nigerian military and some local contacts are contesting these reports. Damboa was seized in July but is since reported to have been re-taken.

In Adamawa, Madagali has been captured. In Yobe, Buni Yadi has been taken.

Other communities in the north-east that are believed to have been seized or heavily contested include Banki, Kerawa, Ashigashiya, Ngoshe, Pulka, and Goniri.

Boko Haram have hoisted flags over many of the communities they have overrun, and are reported to be imposing their interpretation of sharia law on the population. They have been accused of beheading Christians and carrying out other atrocities in the affected towns and villages.

The insurgency has secured two major clusters of territory in Borno. As shown in fig. 1, the first cluster is in the north-east of the state and includes Marte, Gamboru Ngala, and Dikwa. The second is in the east along the border with Cameroon and encompasses the Sambisa area. It includes Gwoza and also extends into Adamawa and across the border into Cameroon.

Boko Haram have also mounted attacks in southern Borno and northern Adamawa, between Biu and Mubi, and around Borno's western border with Yobe, between Damboa and Buni Yadi.

Projection: the threat to Maiduguri, a Boko Haram state in Borno, and a humanitarian crisis

Nigeria is on the verge of losing control of Borno state, including the state capital Maiduguri. Boko Haram have seized territory along at least two of the main approaches to the capital and are reported to be preparing to strike the city. Their seizure of Dikwa and attacks on Bama could indicate a two-pronged assault from the north-east and the south-east. Attacks from elsewhere also cannot be ruled out. If Maiduguri falls, it will be a symbolic and strategic victory unparalleled so far in the conflict.

If Boko Haram are able to continue seizing territory in Borno, including the state capital, it is likely that almost the entire state will soon fall under the insurgency's control. This will be the realisation of Boko Haram's ambition to establish a caliphate in north-east Nigeria.

The insurgents have made it difficult for the military to respond quickly. In recent weeks, Boko Haram have destroyed a series of bridges, including on strategic approaches to Maiduguri, making it difficult for the army to reinforce the city and other towns in Borno. These include a bridge on the road from Biu to Maiduguri, a bridge near Gamboru Ngala that links Nigeria and Cameroon, a bridge in Potiskum that links Maiduguri and Damaturu to Abuja, and a bridge in Yobe that links to southern Borno and Adamawa.

If Borno falls to Boko Haram, parts of Yobe and Adamawa can be expected to follow. Parts of Cameroon along the border area would also probably be overrun. Unless swift action is taken, Nigeria could be facing a rapid takeover of a large area of its territory reminiscent of ISIS's lightning advances in Iraq.

Such a takeover would likely be accompanied by a major humanitarian crisis, involving the movement of possibly tens or even hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons fleeing Boko Haram, and atrocities carried out against civilians who remain in captured areas. Attacks against government workers and others in Maiduguri are very likely should the capital fall.

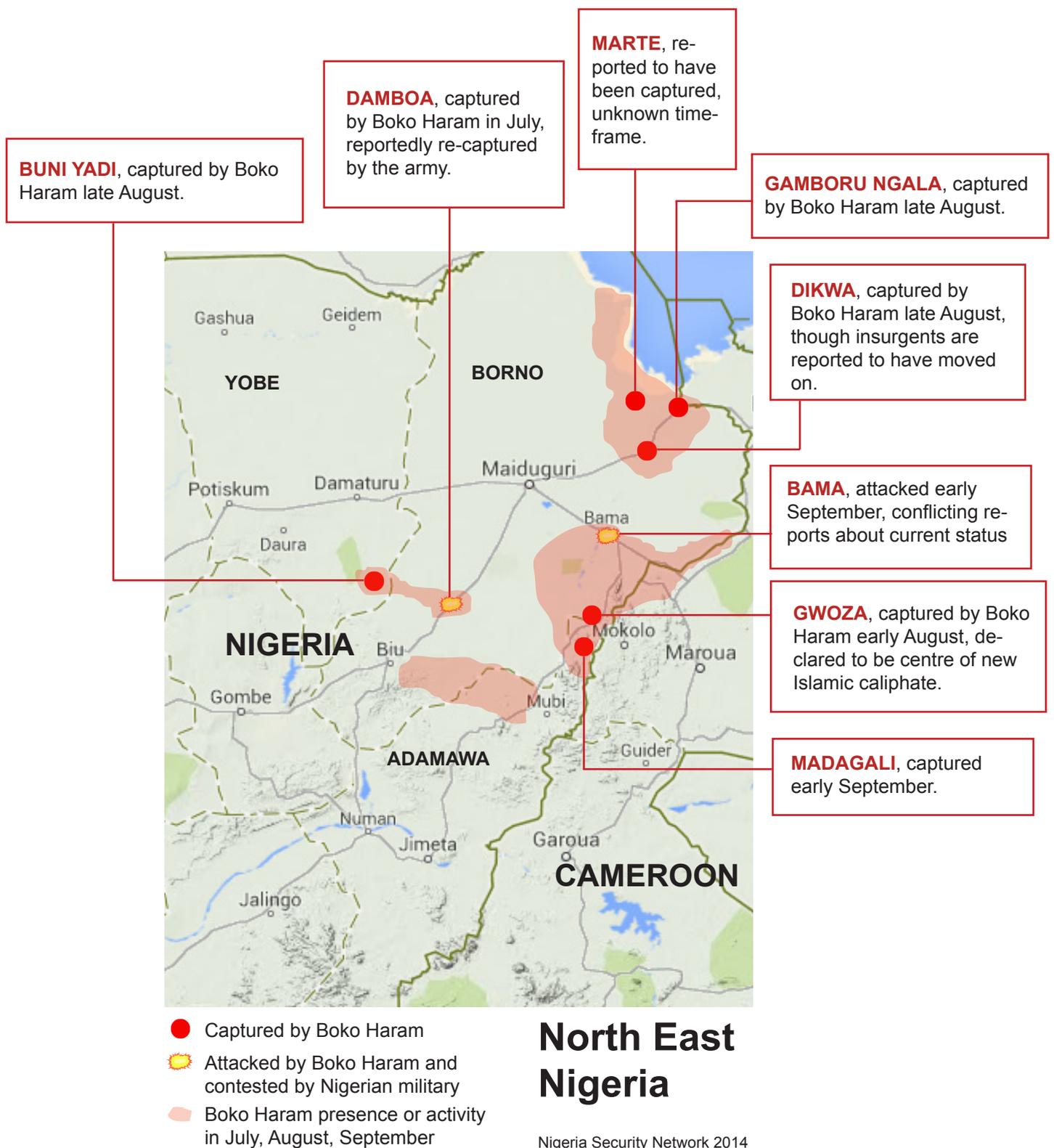


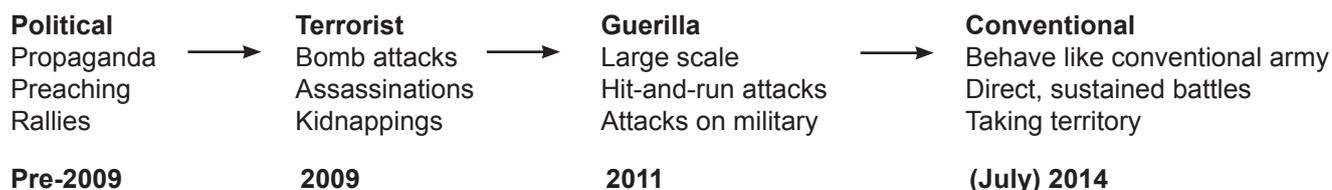
Fig. 1

Boko Haram's new strategy in the north-east

Since July 2014 the Boko Haram conflict has entered a dangerous new phase. As shown in fig. 2, in the north-east Boko Haram have reached the most advanced stage of insurgency, in which they are beginning to operate like a conventional army. This marks a major change from how the insurgency operated before July, when it focused on carrying out short-lived hit-and-run assaults and attacking undefended communities. It is also different from how the insurgency operates elsewhere in Nigeria. Outside of the north-east Boko Haram behave more like a terrorist organisation, carrying out a small number of attacks for psychological effect.

However, in Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe states the insurgents are now aggressively challenging the Nigerian military through direct confrontation in open and sustained battle. They are reported to be using armoured vehicles, including tanks, and heavy weapons.

Fig. 2 Generic stages of an insurgency and when Boko Haram reached each stage



The Nigerian military's response

Despite the bravery of individual soldiers on the ground and the best efforts of the Nigerian government and military to support them, the response to Boko Haram in recent days and weeks has been insufficient to halt the group's dramatic advances.

There are numerous reports of soldiers refusing to counter-attack, fleeing from combat, and even deserting. These reports reflect the low morale in the Nigerian army due largely to soldiers being provided with inadequate equipment and insufficient ammunition. One report suggests soldiers are sent into combat with only 60 rounds of ammunition to face Boko Haram fighters using heavy weapons and tanks. At this point in time, the Nigerian military does not appear to be in a position to stop Boko Haram.

Recommendations: how to turn the tide

To the Nigerian government:

- Urgently reinforce Maiduguri, including by air transport if necessary, in order to prevent the city from being overrun
- Attempt to secure Borno's road networks and remaining bridges
- Make preparations to defend Adamawa and Yobe states from attack
- Provide soldiers with sufficient ammunition and equipment to give them the confidence to stand against Boko Haram in battle, including heavy weapons and armoured vehicles

To the Cameroonian government:

- Send reinforcements to defend the border areas with Nigeria and re-take any captured territory
- Prepare for a larger assault by Boko Haram on the border areas

To the international community:

- Consider providing the Nigerian government with non-lethal military assistance, including reconnaissance and transportation
- Continue to facilitate and strengthen regional cooperation to tackle the Boko Haram threat, following agreements reached at the recent conferences in Paris and London

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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.nigeriasecuritynetwork.org.