

The Boko Haram insurgency, by the numbers

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The abduction in April of nearly 300 schoolgirls from Chibok, a northeastern Nigerian village, by fighters of the extremist group Boko Haram received wide attention from social media campaigners and the news media.

But events in Nigeria have been overshadowed in recent months by news from Iraq, Gaza and Ukraine. The escalating violence in northern Nigeria has at times been cast as a local curiosity (in the same vein as the Lord's Resistance Army in central Africa) even by those attempting to encourage greater action against Boko Haram.

In fact, the insurgency in Nigeria's northeastern states is growing into one of the largest areas of violence in Africa, and a major conflict in global terms. A new dataset compiled at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) that tracks social conflict in Nigeria offers perspective on just how deadly the Boko Haram insurgency has become.

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The data makes clear that Boko Haram-related violence is the most lethal conflict that Nigeria has confronted in decades. Since 1998, at least 29,600 Nigerians have been killed in more than 2,300 incidents reflecting a wide range of ethnic, religious, political and economic tensions across large portions of the country. Since July 2009, when the Boko Haram conflict escalated, at least 11,100 people have died on all sides of the insurgency. This accounts for almost 40 percent of the total deaths in our dataset, more than any other source of social violence.

The conflict is rapidly intensifying. We estimate that 7,000 people died in incidents related to the insurgency between July 2013 and June 2014, compared with fewer than 1,900 in the preceding year. These deaths account for more than a quarter of all the recorded deaths in the past 15 years. Since January, more than 5,000 people have died, making the past eight months almost as deadly as the preceding five years.

These statistics firmly place the Boko Haram insurgency as one of the most significant conflicts in the world. Nigerian casualties are now running more than double those in Afghanistan, and substantially higher than in Iraq just a few years ago. An estimated 3,120 civilian and military casualties were recorded in Afghanistan last year. In Iraq, 4,207 fatalities were estimated in

2011 in the wake of the surge. The worsening conflict in northern Nigeria already has suffered more casualties this year than the world's most publicized contemporary wars.

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After a year of regrouping, Boko Haram emerged under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau with a more militant agenda and brutal tactics. Since then, there has been an escalation of attacks by insurgents and a growing response by the Nigerian military. As the violence has concentrated in the northeast, Borno State has become a de facto war zone. The group's tactics have shifted and diversified from attacks on government installations to bombings, robberies, kidnappings, assaults on churches and mainstream Muslim targets, and most recently the occupation of villages and towns, indicating greater confidence and capacity.

In May 2013, the government declared a state of emergency in the northeastern states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa. In its current phase since July, the insurgency has mimicked the tactics of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, declaring a local caliphate and shifting approach from guerrilla-style attacks to the conventional capture and consolidation of territory. On Sept. 2, the insurgents seized the strategic town of Bama, located 45 miles away from Maiduguri. Maiduguri itself remains under threat.

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For the moment, Boko Haram is a network with local foundations and goals, but the rising scale of conflict belies the easy dismissals of some observers. This is clearly the most lethal conflict that Nigeria has confronted in decades. It is being fought on a scale that is comparable to serious civil strife in other parts of the world. The levels of casualties, internal displacement, social disruption and government failure are fomenting a widespread crisis, spilling over the borders of neighboring states such as Niger, Cameroon and Chad.

Political rulers, when confronted by an approaching existential threat, might normally be expected to mobilize national resources to aggressively confront the insurgency. Yet Nigeria's elites seem to be detached, mired in political infighting, or distracted by opportunities to profit from poorly monitored security budgets.

Although the motivations and strategic objectives of Boko Haram remain unclear, the increasing sophistication of the group's attacks and the acceleration in its lethality underline the importance of a strong, coherent response — and the consequences of Nigeria's failure to mount such a response.

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