

Why Boko Haram May Be a Bigger Threat Than ISIS

Boko Haram was the world's deadliest terror group in 2014, ahead of the self-proclaimed Islamic State, according to a report released on 18 Nov. by the Institute of Economics & Peace. It was responsible for 6,664 deaths in 2014, more than any other terrorist group in the world, according to the Global Terrorism Index; it said Islamic State had killed 6,073 people during the same period.

The Index, which tracks attacks globally, also said the Islamic State and Boko Haram were responsible for half of all global deaths attributed to terrorism. Both are known for singling out Christians in their attacks.

With the world's attention on Paris and the 132 lives lost on 13 Nov., the radical Islamist group Boko Haram killed 49 people in two attacks in less than 48 hours in northern Nigeria.

On 17 Nov., 34 people lost their lives in a suicide attack in a busy vegetable market, in Yola, Adamawa State. Some 80 others were injured.

The following day, 15 people were killed and 53 injured in twin blasts in a popular phone market in Nigeria's main northern city of Kano. According to local sources, two female suicide bombers detonated their bombs.

Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, who vowed to eradicate the Islamist insurgency, condemned the attacks. He called on Nigerians not to despair, and to renew vigilance in order to reduce the frequency of such attacks.

In recent months, dozens of towns and villages in northeastern Nigeria, taken over by militants last year, have been

liberated by the Nigerian military. But the situation is still volatile as the radical group has intensified suicide attacks both in Nigeria and neighbouring Chad, Cameroon and Niger.

Boko Haram's regional security threat was debated at a meeting in the UK Parliament on Tuesday (17 Nov.).

A Christian woman, held captive last year in Boko Haram camps after the killing of her husband and two sons, gave a chilling testimony of the attack on her town of Mubi, in Adamawa State, on 29 Oct., 2014.

"As we were trying to escape, we met with [Boko Haram] on our way. They stopped us and asked, 'Are you Christians or Muslims?' We answered, 'We are Christians'. They told us to lie down on the roadside.

"I heard them shooting a gun. I thought they were shooting in the air. But I soon realised that my husband and two sons were shot dead."

The woman, along with other Christian women and children, were taken by Boko Haram and put in a house.

"We were about 30 women. We pleaded with them to let us go, but instead, they always terrified us. Sometime they came with guns and started shooting into the air.

"Sometimes, they put us into a narrow patch of ground at gunpoint and asked again: 'Christians or Muslims, Christians or Muslims, Christians or Muslims?' Just to terrify us."

As the time went by, their captors transferred the women from one house to another.

"We kept begging them to let us go, but instead, they kept challenging us over our religion," she told the London meeting. "When we told them we are farmers, they said, 'You should join our religion so that you will not suffer, because all things will be brought to you. You will just cook and

eat'."

The living conditions, she said, were bad, and food scarce.

"They only gave us rice and oil, and it's not enough for all," she said. "Most of the time, it's only the young ones who could eat. Some were just two-weeks-old and the oldest was 9-years-old."

On 29 Nov. 2014, she escaped captivity following a military operation.

Growing radicalisation

The Boko Haram insurgency is the natural progression of growing intolerance, which has resulted in widespread discrimination against Christians in northern Nigeria, said Suleiman*, who oversees the work in West Africa of Open Doors, which provides practical support to Christians facing persecution, and which organised the meeting.

The insurgency began in the 1990s and reached a violent stage in 2009, after 12 northern states adopted Islamic sharia law.

"Christians were treated as second-class citizens, and were denied their basic rights, like access to certain jobs [or promotion], no matter their level of qualification. Admission to school is still difficult; abduction of Christian girls was common practice long before the advent of Boko Haram," Suleiman explained.

"In many states, the school curriculum has been changed and Islamic studies for all were introduced in government schools. Radical imams preached a rigorous version of Islam, openly calling young people to rise and fight for jihad.

"They sowed hatred in the minds of young people, and we reaped religious violence and attacks against Christians.

“Anything can be used as a pretext for anti-Christian violence. In 2006, extremist Muslims organised attacks in six cities, destroying, in Maiduguri alone [in the northeast], 56 churches and a number of people were killed. What was their excuse? Somebody drew cartoons of Mohammed in Denmark. Israel attacks Hamas in the Middle-East? Christians will pay the price.

“The indoctrination and the hate messages they have been pumping into the minds of young people have grown over time and led to Boko Haram’s insurgency in 2009, which has now become a well organised attack against Christians.”

Widespread suffering

The insurgency has created widespread suffering in northern Nigeria, added Atta Barkindo, researcher and Ph.D. student at the London School of Oriental and African Studies.

Both Christians and Muslims have paid a very high price at the hands of Boko Haram, he said. Muslims who are not supportive of the insurgency have been killed, while others have to flee to save their lives.

He spoke of a sudden increase in “night madrassas” (schools where the Quran is taught) and a sharp drop in attendance at “Western-education” schools (Boko Haram means “Western education is forbidden.”).

Barkindo explained that in Nigeria education is often overseen by state authorities, rather than Federal Ministries. He spoke of one example he knew personally, where an imam was teaching 300-400 pupils without any external regulation or any kind of medical checks.

He also referred to the existence of other Islamist sects, such as Aljanna Tabbas (in Gombe State) and Kala Kato (in Bauchi State).

According to the UN, some 25,000 people have lost their lives in six years, due to the Boko Haram insurgency, while 2.5 million others have been displaced in the Lake Chad region since 2013.