In early 2015, the Nigerian insurgent group Boko Haram appeared unstoppable. After gaining notoriety by kidnapping 276 schoolgirls in April 2014 in Chibok, Borno State, the group transformed from a troublesome terrorist group to a menacing insurgency. It declared allegiance to ISIS, seized command of territory close to the size of Rwanda, and began mounting attacks in neighboring states. With more than 10,000 killed on all sides of the conflict during the year, the insurgency could legitimately claim to be Africa’s deadliest. In November of 2015, Boko Haram was declared the world’s deadliest terror group by the Global Terrorism Index.1

Now, Boko Haram is a menace in retreat (see Figure 1). The group has lost nearly all its former territory in Nigeria, maintaining outright control of at best three of Borno State’s sixty Local Government Areas (LGAs).2 The conflict claimed 2,700 lives in 2016, a quarter of the number killed in 2015 and the conflict’s lowest total since 2012.3 On December 24, 2016, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari declared victory over Boko Haram, after pushing the group out of its “last enclave” in Borno’s Sambisa Forest.4

Despite Buhari’s proclamation, Boko Haram is not defeated. The Nigerian government has claimed victory against the group half a dozen times before, only to see it re-form and adapt. In recent months, Boko Haram has launched waves of attacks near some of its former strongholds in Borno, causing thousands to flee, and is on pace to surpass the total number of attacks and victims it claimed in

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2016. Yet, Boko Haram is not an existential threat to the security of Nigeria and its neighbors. The vast majority of the insurgency’s toll in lives, displacement, and property has been inflicted on a fraction of Nigeria’s population in the country’s remote Northeast and surrounding areas.

In reality, Boko Haram is one of the world’s most poorly understood and frequently mischaracterized groups. The two most common perspectives on Boko Haram argue that the group’s fortunes are either best explained by Nigeria’s weak state institutions or by Boko Haram’s links to transnational Islamist insurgency. Yet, these perspectives only partially explain Boko Haram’s evolution from dissident movement to insurgency, and do very little to explain the group’s more recent decline. In many respects, Boko Haram is different from most insurgencies. By discerning these differences, it becomes evident that defeating Boko Haram is possible, but will require years of sustained political and military effort.

As with most insurgencies, Boko Haram was made possible by a combination of weak state institutions, outside support, and favorable geographic terrain. But here’s what’s unusual: Boko Haram became violent not in response to state weakness but as a result of state repression; it receives no support from foreign nations; and it began as a mass urban movement and not as a countryside guerilla campaign. As Boko Haram’s 2015 declaration of allegiance to the Islamic State indicates, the group’s links to transnational Islamic insurgency
are an important part of its strategy and identity, but not because of the amount of material support Boko Haram receives from the Islamic State, which is actually very little. Instead, Boko Haram’s communications, recruitment, and extreme tactics are as much a product of local political conditions and its leaders’ personalities as of Boko Haram’s relationships with outside groups. More than support from the international community, local militia groups have been essential in cooperating with security forces and in denying Boko Haram the ability to maintain control over populated areas for long.

Stepping away from generalizations based on state weakness and Islamic extremism allows us to see Boko Haram for what it is—a menacing, but not insurmountable challenge to regional security in Africa. While the challenges Boko Haram pose will not rapidly be overcome, a more refined understanding of the insurgency gives insight into the best ways to hasten the group’s decline. If authorities wish to prevent a return to large-scale violence, they will need to show restraint in dealing with dissident political groups, to carefully manage militias lest they be tempted to turn on their state allies, to invest extensively in rebuilding Nigeria’s shattered Northeast, and to improve coordination with regional forces in Niger, Chad and Cameroon to ensure the group is not able to reconstitute itself. These are the key lessons learned from the recent successes in the war against Boko Haram.

The rest of this essay proceeds as follows. The first section discusses the state’s role in the Boko Haram insurgency, arguing that it was the decision by the Nigerian government to repress Boko Haram that was the most direct cause of the group’s decision to turn to violence. The second section argues that it is Boko Haram’s origins as a local movement and not links with transnational Islamist insurgency that explains why the group has not been able to expand much beyond its strongholds in Borno State and the surrounding region. The third and fourth sections trace the group’s evolution from urban terrorist group to rural insurgency, showing how the decision by militants to rapidly expand was a strategic blunder. Though Boko Haram is distinct from most insurgencies as they are popularly understood, the final section offers a series of lessons learned relevant to confronting insurgencies in an era of increasing political extremism, urbanization, interconnectivity, and porous borders.

The Insurgency and the State

Perhaps the most conventional of wisdoms is that weaker states are more vulnerable to insurgencies. David Galula, the famed counterinsurgency theorist and French officer during the Algerian War of Independence, wrote with particular attention to the “machine for control of the population,”6 including the political
administration, the police and the armed forces. These, he argues, are the state’s essential instruments for combatting insurgency. But a strong state apparatus is not enough; a healthy economy matters as well. Political scientists James Fearon and David Laitin find that, on average, $1000 less in per capita income is correlated with a 41 percent increase in the odds of civil war in a given year. Analysts debate whether these correlations mean that a lack of competent administrative infrastructure makes it easier for insurgent groups to organize or whether a lack of economic opportunity makes it easier for insurgent groups to recruit.

Boko Haram illustrates both these theories. The insurgent group’s operations are centered in northeastern Nigeria, a particularly impoverished region of a country that ranks 152 out of 188 on the UN’s Human Development Index. The region’s 76 percent poverty rate, 85 percent illiteracy rate, and poor infrastructure all compare unfavorably to the rest of the country. As one Nigerian analyst puts it, the insurgency is often portrayed as “the result of the failure of successive governments in Nigeria to fight corruption, provide public services, create economic opportunities, and establish accountable and effective security institutions.”

Nevertheless, weak state institutions in the general sense are just a proximate cause of the insurgency. The socioeconomic differences between Nigeria’s North and South as well as between Nigeria and the rest of the world have been there for decades. Though poverty in northeastern Nigeria rose between 1992 and 2010, it increased less than the national average. Poverty rose the most in Nigeria’s Northwest, from 36 percent to 78 percent – far more than in the troubled Northeast where Boko Haram operates. Moreover, the most rapid increases in poverty in Nigeria occurred during the oppressive regime of Sani Abacha in the 1990s. Other measures of state weakness—such as unemployment, child mortality, and school completion rates—follow similar trends. Poverty cannot explain why the Boko Haram insurgency began in 2009, and not 2002 or 1995. It also cannot explain why the insurgency’s operations are centered in the Northeast, when other areas of Nigeria are equally as poor or have experienced more rapid declines in living standards.

Nor can we conclude that poor security infrastructure caused the insurgency. Though it may not compare to the armies of the United States and other Western powers, the Nigerian military is the second largest on the continent, a major contributor to regional peacekeeping, and reasonably well equipped. With over 100,000 men under arms, a $2 billion budget, and considerable operational experience, prior to the uprising it was thought that few Sub-Saharan African countries could claim to be greater military powers.

We can more accurately say that the Northeast’s relative poverty provided the context, rather than the cause, for the insurgency. The Boko Haram insurgency
started not because Nigeria’s army is weak. Rather, the Nigerian army adopted an ineffective – even counterproductive – strategy for confronting social and political movements that oppose the state, and unintentionally helped spur Boko Haram’s rise.

Before turning to violence, Boko Haram emerged in the early 2000s as a dissident Salafist religious movement with about 280,000 followers centered in northeastern Nigeria. The movement’s adherents were diverse enough to include university lecturers and political elites, but came mostly from the urban poor who turned to Boko Haram for schooling, food, or other subsidies. Some elements of the movement had occasional dust-ups with Nigerian security forces, but the group did not openly embrace violence. In 2006, Muhammed Yusuf, Boko Haram’s leader at the time, publicly stated “I think that an Islamic system of government should be established in Nigeria, and if possible all over the world, but through dialogue.” From both the group’s activities as well as statements by its leaders, there is little indication that the movement wished to violently oppose the state.

In fact, between 2002 and 2009, the Nigerian state and Boko Haram entered into a political partnership. Boko Haram’s support was crucial to electing Ali Modu Sheriff governor of Borno State in 2003. In return for the group’s support, Sheriff promised to help spread Sharia law and provided Yusuf and Boko Haram with access to state resources. The governor’s patronage in turn helped the charismatic Yusuf reward and build his vast network of followers. For a time, this peaceful accommodation served both the state and the movement.

That all changed in June 2009, when sect members were on their way to a cemetery to bury some of their colleagues who had died in a traffic accident. They were intercepted by security forces who asked why the mourners were not obeying laws to wear crash helmets. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the confrontation escalated until security forces opened fire, shooting 17 people. A month later, some Boko Haram members retaliated by attacking several police stations, according to news reports. For the first time, Boko Haram explicitly threatened the state with violence.

The Nigerian government could then have arrested the handful of sect members and leaders who had been involved. Instead, the state’s response was disproportionate and brutal. Within days, 800 of the sect’s most senior members, many of whom were moderates who surrendered to the state on their own accord, were extrajudicially massacred by security forces. Yusuf was one of the dead, killed in the custody of Nigerian police.

After Yusuf’s death, Boko Haram went underground and reconstituted itself under the more radical leadership of Abubakar Shekau. Though evidence is
scant, during this period it appears to have cultivated stronger relations with outside insurgent groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Al-Shabaab. What is clear is that between July 2009, the month of the crackdown, and August 2010, the month Boko Haram re-emerged and began attacking police officers, Boko Haram was transformed from a largely nonviolent political dissident movement to a terrorist group whose explicit aim was to destabilize the Nigerian state.

Nigerian security forces routinely respond to perceived threats with crude repression. In 1995, security executed nonviolent peace activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, an action widely credited with helping to start the insurgency in the Niger Delta. Most recently, the Nigerian military gunned down 350 members of the Shia Islamic Movement of Nigerian (IMN) after the group blocked the convoy of Nigeria’s chief of army staff in December 2015. The government’s repression of the IMN may or may not lead to further conflict. Yet, if the military’s goal is to deter actions that oppose the state through the use of brute force, the strategy of indiscriminately killing opposition forces carries high risks and appears to fail consistently, both in Nigeria and elsewhere. In other words, the most direct cause of Boko Haram’s turn to violence was not state failure, but rather state repression.

**A Transnational or Local Insurgency?**

Over the past decade, Islamist insurgency has become the preeminent driver of contemporary conflict. Militant Muslim groups serve as combatants in over 60 percent of all ongoing conflicts, according to the Council on Foreign Relations Global Conflict Tracker. The timing of Boko Haram’s insurgency coincides with the general spread of Islamist insurgency to much of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.

Boko Haram has many ideological, tactical, and material links with the transnational Islamist insurgency. The group refers to itself as Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihād (Group of the People of Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad), and was founded with the political goal of bringing Sharia law first to Nigeria’s North and then to the rest of Nigeria. According to Georgetown professor Alex Thurston, Boko Haram’s worldview is a noxious combination of “religious exclusivism that opposes all other value systems” and a “politics of victimhood.” It has allegedly received training and assistance from al-Shabaab,
al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and more recently, the Islamic State, with whom it declared bayyaat or allegiance in April 2015.

Nevertheless, we should avoid overstating the influence of other Islamist movements. Boko Haram was founded to spread Sharia law first across all of Nigeria’s northern states, which are predominantly Muslim, and then across the rest of Nigeria, according to Yusuf. Yet Borno State has seen nearly ten times as many deaths from the insurgency as any other state (see Figure 2), even though it is home to a mere three percent of Nigeria’s population. Why has the insurgency failed to make significant inroads across Nigeria’s North? It is not because of links (or the lack thereof) to outside insurgent movements, local poverty, or robust state institutions.

The most likely explanation for Boko Haram’s limited reach is simply that its spiritual and political home, before the fighting began, was in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State. Once the group turned violent, many of the same networks that Yusuf had built up with assistance from the state turned against it. The need for secrecy and a lack of preexisting political infrastructure across the rest of
Nigeria made it difficult for Boko Haram to establish much of a foothold elsewhere. To this day, most of Boko Haram’s senior leadership is drawn from the northeast-centered Kanuri ethnic group, which makes up less than 10 percent of Nigeria’s Muslim population. This has been virtually ignored by analysts of the conflict, even though it may be perhaps the most important reason the effects of the insurgency have been grave, but far from an existential threat to the Nigerian state.

In fact, it is unlikely that the Islamic State actually influences Boko Haram’s day-to-day operations. An overwhelming percentage of Boko Haram’s funding and manpower comes from local sources as a result of taxes, theft, extortion or kidnapping. To lose the material support of transnational Islamic terrorist groups would likely not be a crippling blow. Since Boko Haram’s formal bayaat to ISIS, there has been little evidence of formal collaboration, apart from Boko Haram echoing the social media and propaganda strategy of the Islamic State.

Apparantly, the two groups made a fairly even symbolic exchange: Boko Haram gained the explicit support of the world’s preeminent Islamic extremist organization, while the Islamic State claimed a franchise in Africa’s most populous country. In keeping with that symbolic exchange, much of the influence the Islamic State has over Boko Haram is informal and even mutual, with both sides observing and adopting one another’s tactics. Shortly after the Islamic State captured significant territory in Iraq and Syria in 2014, Boko Haram declared its territorial ambitions. After declaring allegiance, Boko Haram changed its name to the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and its social media operations experienced a major upgrade. But the influence appears to have flowed two ways: there is some evidence to suggest that the Islamic State’s use of kidnapping and public beheadings as a strategic tool was learned by observing Boko Haram.26 This kind of strategic and tactical information exchange does not require close collaboration; these days, an internet connection may suffice.

Given the evidence that the Islamic State might actually have adopted some tactics from Boko Haram, Boko Haram’s brutality cannot fairly be attributed only to transnational Islamist groups or ideology. Different Islamist terrorist movements have very different ways of treating opponents, civilians and fellow Muslims. The Islamic State split from al-Qaeda in part because the former supported attacks on fellow Muslims it deemed apostates.27 And in August 2016, splits within Boko Haram itself over the issue of how to treat civilians and
manage fighters became evident when the Islamic State named Abu Musab al-
Barnawi head of the group in an attempt to replace Shekau. The ISIS announce-
ment was reportedly prompted by longtime leader Shekau’s reckless killing of
Muslims, fellow fighters and captives. Ultimately, the announcement only
appears to have further factionalized Boko Haram, with killings of civilians
often attributed to Shekau’s faction and attacks on soldiers to the Barnawi-led
faction.

It is therefore not enough to characterize Boko Haram solely as a subordinate
faction of Islamist movements such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The
group’s organizational network and operational doctrine are uniquely its own,
and are crucial to understanding Boko Haram’s success in destabilizing Borno
State, but failure to make inroads across much of the rest of Nigeria.

The Shift to the Caliphate

Until the conflict’s recent reversal of momentum, Boko Haram’s tactics became
steadily more brutal over time. These tactical shifts were not because of any affili-
ation with ISIS but because of strategic choices made by the group’s leaders. The
group’s initial violence in 2010 appears to have been motivated by little more than
revenge against the Nigerian security forces: it attacked police stations, beer halls,
and checkpoints where Nigeria’s police and armed forces were known to congre-
gate. The group also mounted an assassination campaign against prominent pol-
itical figures, including leading Islamic clerics Boko Haram saw as too close to the
state. But that shifted over the next four years. As illustrated in Figure 3, the

Figure 3: Boko Haram’s targets, 2010-2016

![Bar Chart]

Source: Nigeria Social Violence Database, Johns Hopkins University
percentage of its attacks targeted at civilians increased from less than 30 percent in 2010 to around 80 percent in 2015.

Boko Haram’s first series of mass bombings occurred in a series of churches in late 2010, killing around 50 civilians. It set off Nigeria’s first suicide bomb at Nigerian police headquarters in June 2011, killing six. In early 2012, it began attacking schools, killing hundreds and eventually forcing over one million children out of school. These attacks might have been partially motivated by vengeance at what Boko Haram saw as popular rejection, but also served a strategic purpose: to deter ordinary civilians and their leaders from cooperating with security forces. The strategy of targeting prominent Muslims and other officials who denounced Boko Haram appears to have partially worked. As of mid-2015, many prominent Muslim clerics were still reluctant to denounce the group.

However, the group’s increasingly brutal campaign against civilians soon backfired. Fed up in early 2013, civilians organized into local militias known as the Civilian Joint Task Force (JTF). The Civilian JTF’s knowledge of local terrain provided state forces with insight into the insurgency’s networks and inner workings it did not have in the early years of the conflict. In collaboration with security forces, they identified, fought against and evicted Boko Haram from much of Maiduguri, the Borno State capital, in 2013. By some accounts, the insurgents now fear the Civilian JTF more than the Nigerian military.

Boko Haram’s expulsion from Maiduguri marked another important strategic shift. Between 2010 and 2014, Boko Haram transformed from an urban-based terrorist group into a rural insurgency. As Figure 4 illustrates, between 2010 and 2011, nearly all of the group’s attacks took place in Maiduguri, home to over 1 million

![Figure 4: Boko Haram attacks in Maiduguri vs other locations, 2010-2016](Source: Nigeria Social Violence Database, Johns Hopkins University)
residents. In 2012, attacks in rural areas began to surpass those in urban centers, driven in part by Boko Haram’s ambitions to extend its reach across Nigeria. The uptick in attacks and the fact that they were frequently targeted against civilians and fellow Muslims helped to turn the tide of local popular opinion against the group. It also led to a stronger government response, beginning with President Goodluck Jonathan’s declaration of a state of emergency across much of the Northeast in mid-2013. By then, less than 20 percent of Boko Haram’s attacks were conducted in major cities, driven by the pressure the Civilian JTF and security forces were placing on the group in Maiduguri.

The effect of this transformation was significant. When Boko Haram was expelled from Maiduguri, it left behind a locale where it had ample supporting infrastructure and moved to areas where its leaders and members had little and knew few people. In Nigeria’s cities, Boko Haram was able to recruit adherents from disenfranchised youth without kinship networks, particularly among the urban poor. In the countryside, where Salafism is absent and many Muslims practice more syncretic forms of Islam, it had to recruit through coercion and kidnapping. Nevertheless, the group began seeking territory and declared itself a West African caliphate in August 2014.

These territorial ambitions meant even more conflict with the Northeast’s civilian populations. From mid-2014 to mid-2015, the insurgency had its bloodiest period, claiming well over 10,000 lives and displacing millions. This is the period of many of Boko Haram’s most spectacular attacks, from the Chibok kidnapping to bombing the grand mosque in Kano, which killed over 120 civilians. At its apex, Boko Haram controlled a large chunk of territory in Nigeria’s Northeast, and began significantly expanding its operations in Niger, Cameroon and Chad. Its rule over the population by coercion, intimidation, mass killings and fear rather than legitimacy, what CNA analysts Asfura Hein and Julia McQuaid call “enforcement terror,” appeared briefly to be working.

In sum, Boko Haram’s increased targeting of civilians between 2010 and 2015 was not due to any outside affiliation but more a product of changes in strategy and tactics. At the same time as it was expelled from Maiduguri by security forces, the group’s territorial ambitions and reliance on coercive methods such as kidnappings, mass killings, bombings and beheading grew.
The Ill-Considered Expansion

As it turned out, Boko Haram’s territorial expansion was a big strategic blunder. It placed the group, now a full-blown insurgency, into a strategically vulnerable position, with perhaps five or ten thousand fighters spread out over 10,000 square miles. Seizures of medium-sized towns such as Bama and Gwoza committed the insurgents to holding fixed positions, which made them easier targets for Nigerian civilian and security forces. And this occupation required governing a mostly hostile local population.

Before early 2015, the Nigerian government had mishandled the insurgency. Nigeria’s president at the time, Goodluck Jonathan, was seen as disengaged from the conflict and unable or unwilling to provide strategic direction. Early in the conflict, Jonathan admitted that Boko Haram had infiltrated his government and Nigerian security services, but failed to take decisive action to remedy the situation. He was also reticent to comment in the aftermath of the kidnapping of the Chibok girls, at a time when both international and local media attention on Boko Haram was perhaps at its highest. This left many with the impression that Jonathan was either out of touch with what was going on or that developments on the ground were out of his control.

The military was also not doing well on the battlefield. Despite its experience as part of peacekeeping missions in Sierra Leone, Liberia and elsewhere, the Nigerian armed forces had never faced an opponent like Boko Haram. Insurgents were well hidden among the population, possessed superior knowledge of the local terrain, and were equipped with rocket-propelled grenades and vehicle-mounted anti-aircraft weapons likely raided from Libya. Many units in Nigeria’s army were not nearly so well armed. In some cases, army units tasked with combatting the insurgency soldiers were left with 30 bullets and no food rations to fight an insurgency with superior arms and fuller stomachs, leading to mutiny. Boko Haram used suicide bombs, massed attacks at military checkpoints, roadside ambushes and other hit-and-run tactics to inflict hundreds of casualties. These casualties provoked the Nigerian army into a predictably disproportionate response, such as killing hundreds of civilians suspected of harboring insurgents after Boko Haram raids on an army barracks in Giwa, Borno State. These operations left civilians distrustful of security forces and unwilling to cooperate.

When Boko Haram expanded between 2014 and 2015, the situation changed dramatically. Beginning in early 2015, the Nigerian military’s performance on the battlefield significantly improved for several reasons. First, Boko Haram’s holding fixed positions allowed the Nigerian military to engage it in a more conventional manner, striking with massed attacks against cities and towns where the group was vulnerable. Second, the Jonathan administration
feared losing an upcoming election, which may have prompted it to take the conflict more seriously. Recently purchased equipment and supplies began more consistently reaching the conflict’s front lines. Private mercenaries were reportedly hired from South Africa to spearhead an offensive against the group.\footnote{Better equipped and better directed, the army fought with strengthened morale.}

At exactly the same time, other countries began reacting against Boko Haram’s incursions into their territory. The governments of Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger set up a Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to prevent Boko Haram from easily fleeing across porous borders.\footnote{Until 2015, Boko Haram had been able to retreat into the no-man’s-land of the border region among the four countries. But these smaller armies fought Boko Haram with surprising efficiency, particularly the army of Chad whose soldiers are practiced in counterinsurgency and which receives significant training and assistance from the West.}

In 2015, the Nigerian military’s battlefield performance significantly improved for several reasons.

Until 2015, Boko Haram had been able to retreat into the no-man’s-land of the border region among the four countries. But these smaller armies fought Boko Haram with surprising efficiency, particularly the army of Chad whose soldiers are practiced in counterinsurgency and which receives significant training and assistance from the West. The insurgent group could not hold up against the simultaneous pressure of four militaries at once. Within five months, between January and May 2015, Boko Haram was pushed out of nearly all of the areas it formerly held. It could no longer claim to be a territorial insurgency.

Today, the threat posed by Boko Haram appears significantly diminished from what it once was. The MNJTF continues to pursue the group, though relations between the four principal countries are at times tense.\footnote{Since President Muhammadu Buhari took over from President Goodluck Jonathan in mid-2015, the Nigerian military has been fighting the insurgency with increasing professionalism. Better supplied, better armed, and equipped with better intelligence, a more coordinated campaign is targeting insurgent strongholds. Fewer civilians are now harmed or killed. According to the Nigeria Social Violence Database, almost 5,000 militants were killed between 2015 and 2016, more than the Jonathan government managed to kill in the previous four years.}

Nigeria and its partners are doing several things right. They are preventing the insurgents from escaping across international borders. They are keeping the local militias on the governments’ side of the conflict. And they are allocating the military resources necessary to keep Boko Haram out of major cities. If this keeps up, it is difficult to see how Boko Haram can ever again command significant territory. Without territory, the group will never be able to threaten to seize the state by force. Nevertheless, the group is likely to remain a persistent terrorist threat for the foreseeable future.
Lessons for Confronting Modern Insurgency

When academics and policymakers study insurgency, it is important to think carefully about what is new and different about a conflict, in addition to how they fit into standard models. A careful analysis of the Boko Haram insurgency reveals that it is a grave but not existential threat to Nigeria and its neighbors. For now, the group is being contained; conceivably, it can eventually be eliminated. Looking at the war against Boko Haram with fresh eyes, we can draw at least four key lessons about confronting contemporary insurgency:

First, states should treat politically dissident social movements with restraint and impartial justice, not with an iron fist. More than any single factor, it was the Nigerian government’s brutal repression of Boko Haram that allowed the group’s more radical elements to take control and turn it toward violence. Had Nigerian security forces responded to Boko Haram’s initial attacks with negotiations and arrests rather than indiscriminate violence, there might be no insurgency today. At the very least, security forces might have been better able to contain a violent uprising by exploiting the movement’s divisions.

Second, restraint in confronting civilian populations is just as important as restraint in dealing with potentially dissident groups. Boko Haram’s own brutality prompted civilians to organize a militia to fight it, which was crucial in eventually helping the state launch more targeted, intelligence-based operations against insurgents. Local civilian cooperation did far more to help expel the insurgents from Maiduguri and other major population centers than did the state’s at times indiscriminate and retaliatory violence against civilians whom they suspected might have been harboring insurgents. Using local militias to combat Boko Haram has widely been considered a success. Chad, Niger, and other states are looking into adopting a similar approach.

But of course, as we know from similar conflicts in Latin America and other parts of Africa, state forces need to tread carefully here. The Nigerian government will need plans to monitor, incorporate or employ youth from such militias once the conflict winds down. Otherwise, they may themselves threaten the state with violence. One need only look to southern Nigeria, where a government amnesty program for former Niger Delta militants has ended – and where those former militants are again attacking Nigeria’s oil infrastructure. Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari recently announced that he will employ 250 Civilian JTF members in Nigeria’s army and police forces. That is a good start, but the state
will likely have to do even more to ensure former combatants get stable jobs and are reintegrated into society.

Third, political leadership matters. Early on, President Goodluck Jonathan paid little attention to Boko Haram, allowing the conflict the chance to metastasize. His government did not fully engage with the insurgency until early 2015, when he was faced with the prospect of losing an election. That was the kind of leadership that had been needed in confronting the insurgency all along. President Buhari deserves credit for the firm steps he has taken: moving the command against the insurgency to the Northeast, replacing key commanders, and improving coordination with allies. On the other hand, his government’s continual claims of victory have stoked unrealistic expectations that Boko Haram’s decisive defeat is imminent.

Finally, allegiances with transnational insurgent movements cannot compete with state allies. Though Boko Haram’s Islamic-State inspired expansion in late 2014 and early 2015 appeared unprecedented and terrifying, once four national militaries worked together to oppose it, Boko Haram quickly lost the territory it held. The lesson here is that states must cooperate to contain contemporary insurgencies. It is of utmost importance that cooperation continues between Nigeria and its regional partners to deny Boko Haram and other militant groups the ability to establish cross-border safe havens. The African Union’s planned 25,000-strong Rapid Reaction Force could become an important weapon against insurgencies, if and when it becomes operational.

It is too soon to claim victory over Boko Haram. The group has killed over 30,000 and displaced millions, making it Africa’s most violent contemporary insurgency. State decisions prompted the insurgency’s rise; how states act in the coming months and years will make the difference between Boko Haram’s survival or extinction. It took the combined efforts of four national militaries and sustained cooperation with local militia groups to evict Boko Haram from most of Borno State. It will take continued strategic restraint, cooperation with the local population, sound political leadership, and cooperation with regional and international partners to prevent the group’s resurgence.

But that is not enough. The Nigerian government is under considerable economic pressure from the steep fall in oil prices. It has not yet considered how to rebuild the North’s shattered infrastructure and education systems; reintegrate the children and women the insurgents took as captives; restore the state functions that Boko Haram has successfully destroyed; and reform the legal, economic, political, and security functions that are in disarray from years of civil war. Only once these tasks are completed can victory be declared, because only these steps will ensure that Boko Haram – or a group like it – will never rise again. Even if the insurgent group is defeated, it will take Nigeria a generation to undo the damage that has been caused.
Notes


3. Unless otherwise specified, all the data presented in this article is created by the author from the 2016 Nigeria Social Violence Project (NSVP) database, maintained by Johns Hopkins University. A project summary is available at http://www.connectsaisafrica.org/research/african-studies-publications/social-violence-nigeria/.


Though the NSVP has yet to update its figures for 2017, other databases that track the conflict indicate that both the total death toll and the number of incidents related to Boko Haram are on pace to modestly surpass their 2016 totals. See the Council on Foreign Relations Nigeria Security Tracker at https://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483 and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project at https://www.acleddata.com/data/realtime-data/.


8. Ibid.


Poverty figures are relative, reflecting the percentage of households spending two-thirds or less of the regionally-deflated weighted mean household per capita expenditure.


22. According to a recent report by the UNDP, 71 percent of individuals in Africa who join extremist groups do so because of government action such as the arrest or killing or a friend of family member. See United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Journey to Extremism in Africa. UNDP Regional Bureau for Africa (2017), http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf.


