

Intelligence brief | 12 March 2015

Reducing the supply of weapons to Boko Haram

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Summary

1. Boko Haram is known to possess large numbers of assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars and improvised bombs and shells. The group possesses an unknown number of tanks and armoured personnel carriers. They also possess a limited anti-aircraft capability.
2. Boko Haram's weapons are stolen, improvised or purchased. The group's arsenal is predominantly of Russian and Eastern European stock looted from police stations and military bases within Nigeria. Looted weaponry is augmented with improvised munitions and fighting vehicles. Any weapons Boko Haram cannot steal or improvise can be purchased on the black market, including weapons trafficked from Eastern Europe, Libya and the post-conflict markets of West Africa.
3. Funds for weapons purchases come from allied militant groups and the profits of various criminal activities, primarily kidnap for ransom and hostage trading. It is not known what effect the group's unverified pledge of allegiance to Islamic State will have on its funding, though no financial connections between the two groups have yet been identified.
4. Efforts by Chad, Niger and Nigeria to stem the flow of arms crossing into Nigeria may have some effect, as could intelligence-led operations targeting the major arms dealers within Nigeria. Nigerian security forces should consolidate and greatly increase security for police stations and military bases in order to make it harder for Boko Haram to acquire weapons from such facilities.
5. It will be impossible to stem the flow of weapons to Boko Haram completely. Operations to restrict the group's ability to operate will therefore be of the utmost importance. Ultimately, though, it will be efforts to tackle the deep structural socio-economic problems and political grievances in northern Nigeria that will have the most success in fundamentally weakening Boko Haram.



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Types of weapons

Analysis of the footage of Boko Haram forces available on social media reveals the group possesses tanks and armoured personnel carriers, though it is not known in what numbers. In January 2015, Boko Haram attacked the headquarters of the multinational Joint Task Force near Baga, and seized a large number of vehicles and weapons, including a tank and armoured personnel carriers. However, Nigerian forces pursued and engaged Boko Haram in February, and managed to recover many of these items. Boko Haram also has a large number of pickup trucks that have been adapted to carry heavy machine guns (these vehicles, known as 'technical's, are a common sight in conflicts across Africa).

In October 2014, Boko Haram released a video in which its leader, Abubakar Shekau, claimed his fighters had shot down a Nigerian Air Force fighter jet. The video also showed him firing an anti-aircraft gun mounted on a pickup truck. On 9 March 2015, the Nigerian Army recovered three anti-aircraft guns from retreating Boko Haram fighters who had tried to enter the town of Gombi. This all suggests the group possesses a limited anti-aircraft capability.

In terms of infantry weaponry, Boko Haram is known to possess large numbers of assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars. Its bombs and shells are mostly improvised, manufactured within Nigeria using stolen components and explosives. Overall, its arsenal is predominantly of Russian or Eastern European stock.

Sources of weapons

Boko Haram's weapons are stolen, improvised or purchased on the black market. The group's primary source of weaponry is the looting of police stations and military bases within Nigeria. Attacking en masse and wearing military fatigues, Boko Haram has time and time again been able to overwhelm the Nigerian security forces and raid their bases for weapons and vehicles. The Nigerian military has been forced to buy new weapons and equipment from both the black market and the legal arms trade to advance their fight against Boko Haram. It is unfortunate that some of these purchases may now be being used against them.

Boko Haram augments its stolen arsenal with improvised munitions and fighting vehicles. Agriculture in northeast Nigeria requires significant fertilizer inputs, which means local farms hold a ready stock of a key component of certain improvised explosive devices that Boko Haram can easily steal. Furthermore, at least one raid in search of dynamite, at a French-owned cement manufacturer, has been reported. Some of Boko Haram's bomb makers are reported to be Nigerian graduates attracted by the salaries the group are able to pay. As already mentioned, Boko Haram also has a large number of pickup trucks that have been adapted as improvised fighting vehicles to carry heavy machine guns.

In addition, Boko Haram is able to purchase weapons from allied militant groups and arms traffickers operating within Nigeria and across the Western Sahara region. Lower-end weaponry is available from the saturated post-conflict markets across West Africa, from Western Sahara down to Benin, plus Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has reported the seizure of weapons coming overland from Niger and Chad into Nigeria. In recent years, there has also been multiple weapons shipments intercepted coming east out of the Senegal-Liberia cluster and south from Libya and Algeria, suggesting these are major trafficking routes that Boko Haram could take advantage of. In particular, weapons depots in Libya were looted after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, and it is thought that some of these weapons made it through Niger to Nigeria.

High-quality weapons are purchased or trafficked from outside the region. UNODC has reported the seizure of weapons trafficked from outside the region into Nigeria by air near the border with Niger and by sea on Nigeria's southern coast. It should be noted that the weaponry seen in Nigeria is highly-durable Russian and Eastern European stock that, if maintained properly, will remain usable for many years. New shipments from sources outside the region are therefore not really necessary, particular as the region is already highly saturated from the many recent and ongoing conflicts. Indeed, Boko Haram can meet most of its armament needs from within Nigeria.

Sources of funds

In the past, Boko Haram is thought to have had links to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Shabaab, which were likely sources of funding, training and explosives. However, on 7 March 2015, Shekau apparently pledged allegiance to Islamic State (IS) in an as yet unverified audio message posted on Twitter. Boko Haram has long expressed sympathies for Islamic State on social media, and has referred to territory it holds in Nigeria as an Islamic state. If confirmed, this alliance would represent the continued expansion of Islamic State into areas previously dominated by al-Qaeda franchises, with groups in Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan-Pakistan and now Nigeria branding themselves as IS provinces.

Despite this potentially significant development, no financial connections between Boko Haram and Islamic State have yet been identified. Extensive surveillance of IS finances may make transfers to Boko Haram difficult, though they cannot be dismissed. The trafficking of goods-in-kind to its new West African partner should also not be dismissed. Furthermore, Shekau's 7 March audio message was given entirely in Arabic, instead of alongside the local languages of Hausa and Kanuri, reflecting Boko Haram's desire to attract support and sponsorship from the Middle East.

In addition to any limited funds the group receives from allied militant groups, Boko Haram is thought to generate the bulk of its income – an estimated \$10 million a year – from various criminal activities, including kidnap for ransom and the slave trading of hostages; the looting of banks, police stations and military bases; black marketeering of stolen goods; and extortion and the levelling of illegal 'taxes' and 'duties' in areas it controls.

Reducing the flow of weapons

The military forces of Chad and Niger are deployed in large numbers along their countries' borders with Nigeria. These deployments are vital to intercept cash shipments going out and weapons and supplies going into Nigeria. However, greater surveillance is needed to monitor Boko Haram and identify its supply networks, which can then be targeted by Nigerian or international forces. To that end, France has stated that they will send surveillance aircraft from Chadian bases to assist.

While there may be some successes in slowing the trafficking of arms across Nigeria's borders, it will be very difficult to track and intercept supplies from Nigeria's own informal weapons dealing network. Intelligence-led operations (with Western technical assistance) targeting the major arms dealers could at least reduce the supply. Law enforcement efforts limiting Boko Haram's ability to earn income from kidnapping and hostage trading would also limit the funds it had available for weapons purchases.

Consolidation of and greatly increased security for Nigerian police stations and military bases will increase the risk to Boko Haram of raids on such facilities, and reduce its single greatest source of weaponry. Alternatively, as Boko Haram has been known to attack in very large numbers, it might be necessary for Nigerian security forces to switch from deployments in small static bases to large mobile patrols, which would be less susceptible to attack.

However, it will be impossible to stem the flow of weapons to Boko Haram completely. Operations to restrict the group's ability to operate, including using legal measures to target the group's funding and leadership, will therefore be of the utmost importance. Ultimately, though, it will be efforts to tackle the deep structural socio-economic problems and political grievances in northern Nigeria that will have the most success in fundamentally weakening Boko Haram.

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