



# Time to Talk to Boko Haram?

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## **Now that Boko Haram has been significantly decimated, should Nigeria and its international partners begin to consider a political approach through negotiations with the group?**

Nigerians heaved a heavy sigh of relief when news filtered in on 29 December 2016 that Boko Haram had been completely dislodged from the dreaded [Sambisa Forest](#). For the Nigerian people, especially those living around the area of Boko Haram's operations in North-east Nigeria, the successful military operation signalled the return to a long-anticipated peaceful era, and the beginning of a new life after the reign of terror began in 2009. On the part of the government, the success recorded by the military is an opportunity to once again prove the seriousness of the Buhari administration and placate the army of frustrated Nigerians who are increasingly aggrieved over the poor state of the economy, which fell into an unprecedented recession in the middle of 2016.

Indeed, the achievements recorded in the counter-operations against Boko Haram under President Muhammadu Buhari are substantial enough to restore Nigeria's lost image as a capable regional power in the international scene. Under the previous administration of Goodluck Jonathan, the world had become worried about the fate of not only Nigeria but also the West African sub-region following the rising growth of Boko Haram and the distressing numbers of casualties from its attacks reported on a daily basis. [Reports](#) indicate that 21,506 deaths had been recorded by the end of Jonathan's administration in 2015. Boko Haram had become the world's most deadly terrorist organisation with a record-high 300 percent increase in terrorism deaths, according to the [Global Terrorism Index](#). The group had also

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created its own version of an Islamic State within the Nigerian state following its control of twenty local government areas.

But now that Boko Haram has been significantly decimated (based on the Nigerian government's perspective), what options are available for the Nigerian government as a next stage in completely eliminating the threat of Boko Haram and achieving sustainable peace? Studies have proven that a military action on its own does not end terrorism, so should Nigeria and its international partners begin to consider a political approach through negotiation to consolidate on the gains recorded so far in reining in Boko Haram?

### **Signposts to Boko Haram's decline**



Image credit: [Tim Green/Flickr](#).

Notwithstanding the deluge of criticisms by the local opposition around the veracity of Buhari's victory claims, it is clear that the present administration has demonstrated a strong capacity and willingness to counter Boko Haram. Clearly, the military action against the group has never been executed with so much vigour and determination demonstrated by the recent successes. Increasingly, indicators are emerging to show that the terrorists have been dealt a deadly blow to the extent that they have increasingly lost the capacity to launch massive attacks against civilians or even engage the military in major battles as they were able to about two years ago.

The [Nigerian Security Tracker](#), a database created by the US Council on Foreign Relations, which catalogues incidents of violence in Nigeria especially those related to Boko Haram, shows a significant drop in the number of deaths from

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Boko Haram violence. At the end of 2016, it was reported that the number of deaths reduced from over 10,000 deaths recorded annually since 2013 to about 2000 deaths, out of which a significant number was recorded on the side of the terrorists. Regular social activities have also resumed in many deserted and most affected areas in the epicentre of Boko Haram terror especially towns including Baga, Damboa, Mubi, Damaturu, Kareto, Gwoza and Biu in North-east Nigeria.

The Nigerian military has further reported that the group is not concentrated anywhere in the country at present as all its camps were successfully dismantled in the December 2016 Camp Zero operation. Although the military's claim was countered by Abubakar Shekau in a video he released shortly after the state declared victory, he failed to say whether he was still in Nigeria or had escaped to some other safe haven outside the country.

### **Why Buhari is winning the war**

Buhari's success in the war against Boko Haram can be attributed to many factors.

- Firstly, Buhari's credentials as an ex-General in the Nigerian army with a remarkable experience of fighting wars and insurgencies has had a positive impact on the military campaign against Boko Haram. Upon assuming office, Buhari's immediate strategy as a veteran soldier was to restructure the existing military and rebuild the multi-national military force involving the Lake Chad Basin states to effectively fight the war against Boko Haram.
- Secondly, Buhari's anti-corruption crusade played an appreciable role in not only identifying criminal diversion of defence funds, one of the major

problems that stalled the previous attempts to contain the group, but also ensured an effective use of the funds allocated to fight Boko Haram.

- Thirdly, Buhari's strong will and capacity to defeat Boko Haram earned him a good international reputation; hence, the tremendous support – military training, intelligence sharing, military deployment, military equipment, and humanitarian and development aid – he has received from the world powers including the United States, Germany, United Kingdom, France, and other African partners, in its counter-terrorism agenda.
- Fourthly, the popularity that brought President Buhari to power and his emergence from northern Nigeria – the epicentre of Boko Haram terror – earned him substantial local support especially from the communities close to operations of Boko Haram, unlike the previous administration. This further boosted his counter-terrorism efforts.

### **The contradictions in the success stories**

Despite the successes recorded so far, it cannot be denied that the threat of Boko Haram is still as clear as daylight. There are many unsettled issues which clearly suggest that the war is far from over. For example, the stories of victory do not sound very convincing considering that the key leaders of the group have not been apprehended, and are still out there orchestrating attacks on civilians. Since the government declared a victory over Boko Haram at the end of 2016, there has been a sudden increase in suicide attacks by the group. [The latest](#) (at the time of writing this article) was an attack on Muslim worshippers during the Islamic dawn prayer at the University of Maiduguri mosque.

Similarly, the claim that the group has been defeated is somewhat confusing as 220 of the abducted Chibok girls, which gained global attention in April 2014, are still in the custody of the terrorists. Certainly, the claim that all the major



camps of the group have been cleared is incongruent with the reality that a large number of the abductees of the group are still nowhere to be found.

There is every reason to believe that the group might have succeeded in migrating to other parts of Africa to continue terrorist activities in the West African sub-region. There might be some lull in their activities in the face of the superior gunfire from the military but experience in other cases of terrorism show that there is a great possibility of a re-strategisation by the terrorist organisation and a large-scale come-back which might be more disastrous than anything that has been experienced so far.

### **Talking to the terrorists**

In light of [empirical evidence](#) showing the ineffectiveness of using military approaches alone to end terrorism, there are calls that Nigeria should explore alternative approaches to the conflict. Indeed, the previous administration attempted some political solutions to the crisis, but they failed to work. It is clear that the failure of the past efforts was as a result of the timing of negotiation efforts. Introducing negotiations at the early stages of conflict and most especially at the peak of terror attacks are usually counter-productive. It is more reasonable to introduce negotiations which will lead to a political solution at later stages especially when the group's capacity has been substantially degraded. It is at that point that the leaders of the group would be pushed to the point of having no choice but to come out of hiding and negotiate a cease-fire with the government.

At this point of the war against Boko Haram, the question is whether the recent progress provides the best avenue to renew non-military alternatives to end the terror. I believe the answer to this is "yes". Successful cases of dialogue with

armed groups such as that of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) occurred when the groups realised their substantial loss of capacity to launch attacks. With the loss of their major camps which has forced a significant retreat, it is reasonable to argue that Boko Haram leaders may now be open to negotiations. Nigeria and its international partners should, therefore, see this time as propitious to renew calls for a cease-fire and advance strategies for a workable political solution that will permanently confine the violence to history.

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