



Boko Haram's Soft Targets: Refugees and IDPs

OE Watch Commentary: It was 2009 when Boko Haram launched its reign of terror; it was also 2009 when its founder and leader, Mohammed Yusuf, was killed. For the next several years, despite some civilian casualties, the group mostly directed its violence against the country's security forces. As a result, civilians were generally not afraid of Boko Haram. In fact, since the government was so disliked because of its brutal retaliations, in some regions the terrorist group was even able to garner sympathy. However, as the accompanying article relates, eventually Boko Haram expanded its list of targets to include people they felt were not truly Muslim for not practicing the terrorists' version of Islamic law. The situation became worse in 2016 when Boko Haram split into two factions with one, led by Abu-Musab al-Barnawi, mainly targeting security forces and the other, led by Abubakar Shekau, preferring a more indiscriminate approach. It is Shekau's faction that has been responsible for brutal attacks on the populace, including setting fire to buildings where civilians are locked inside.

It is also Shekau's faction that has been attacking two particularly soft targets: refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs). The majority of these attacks are carried out by female suicide bombers who attract less suspicion than men, and are thus better able to enter camps. Besides Nigeria, attacks have occurred in Niger, Cameroon, and Chad. As a result the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has called for additional security for displacement areas.

The article advances three theories as to why Boko Haram is targeting refugees and IDPs. The first theory is that "Boko Haram could be strategically generating migration to overwhelm governments in an attempt to force them to submit to its demands. It may be trying to make the cost of mass migration higher than its demands or future demands." Additionally, since Boko Haram controls the flow of these people to a large extent, targeting them increases the terrorist organization's bargaining position with those governments. The second theory is that these attacks turn communities against the refugees and IDPs, making it difficult for anyone - including those who want to leave Boko Haram - to return home. Finally, these soft targets, especially women and children, boost Boko Haram's visibility. Reports that the terrorist organization has been neutralized quickly dissipate when the television screen is filled with mangled bodies.

Having suffered heavy losses against the military, Boko Haram is finding attacking refugees and IDPs to be significantly less costly. As for the refugees and IDPs, they are finding Boko Haram's relatively new strategy to be quite costly. Without additional protection, these attacks are likely to continue or even increase. **End OE Watch Commentary (Feldman)**

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Refugees such as these are being targeted by Boko Haram.
Source: European Commission DGEcho/Flickr, <https://goo.gl/K3uV2y>, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Source: Aimée-Noël Mbiyozo, “How Boko Haram specifically targets displaced people,” *Institute for Security Studies (South Africa)*, 6 December 2017. <https://issafrica.org/research/policy-brief/how-boko-haram-specifically-targets-displaced-people>

Boko Haram’s surge in attacks on soft targets, including displaced people, in 2017 is clear. While violence against civilians and refugees was previously avoided, ‘legitimacy’ as a target has since been extended to people who reject Boko Haram’s interpretation and application of Sharia law. By this standard, those who have fled its control are ‘infidels’ for leaving the purity of Sharia, especially when fleeing to government land or protection, and are considered both the enemy and illegitimate.

Most recently, in late 2017, Boko Haram activity has surged across the region. Between May and August 2017, seven times more civilians were killed than in the preceding four months.

Boko Haram militants have reportedly been infiltrating refugee flows and camps... Additional reports have emerged of militants, attackers and would-be attackers disguising themselves as refugees so they can travel into towns to purchase supplies.

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