**The Right Way to Fight Boko Haram — and How theU.S. Should Help**

JANUARY 13, 2016[BY SARAH CHAYES](http://www.defenseone.com/voices/sarah-chayes/8512/)

Nigeria’s new president is wrong to separate his terrorism problem from his corruption problem.

* **Commentary**

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“I think technically we have won the war.” That’s the kind of claim that leaders have lived to regret. The leader [**in this case**](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35173618)was Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, talking about Boko Haram last month. ‘Not so fast,’ experts and residents of his country’s embattled northeast have been quick to retort.

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Buhari has hung his presidency on overcoming two apparently intractable threats to his nation: Boko Haram and the epic corruption that saps the foundations of Nigerian government and society. Yet he has failed to make the connection between the two. Doing so would buttress both efforts, and given their arguably slim chances of success, he can hardly afford to pass up the mutual reinforcement. The U.S. could help connect the dots. Its own counterterrorism efforts might benefit in the process.

Abuja has indeed made headway against the insurgency that established formal ties to the Islamic State group, or ISIS, last year, and whose grotesque atrocities have grabbed headlines. Even before Buhari’s election in March, a last-minute offensive mounted by the previous government, supported by South African mercenaries and troops from Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, [**reportedly**](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32416155) reclaimed tracts of territory that had been de facto ceded away. The airport in once-besieged Maiduguri is open again and some humanitarian organizations, likeUNICEF, are back at work.

Still, Buhari’s “technically defeated” claim sounded a bit like those innumerable press conferences in Iraq and Afghanistan, in which, year after year, the latest spectacular suicide bomb attack was talked down as a sign of the enemy’s desperation. “Boko Haram has reverted to using improvised explosive devices,” Buhari assured the BBC at Christmas. “But articulated conventional attacks on centres of communication and populations? …they are no longer capable of doing that.”

The defect of this analysis is that it misconstrues the nature of an insurgency. By definition, insurgencies wage asymmetric campaigns. Conventional tactics are the exception. The genius of insurgencies is to advance their objectives by achieving massive psychological effects with the smallest possible investment of resources.

**The U.S. could help connect the dots. Its own counterterrorism efforts might benefit in the process.**

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Signs are that Boko Haram is still creating such outsized effects. In my late-November conversations in the group’s birthplace, Maiduguri, displaced people said that although their living conditions were nearly intolerable they had heard too many stories of attacks on the few early returnees to feel safe going home. “We are afraid we will go and the army will leave us, and Boko Haram will come back,” explained one community elder. “There is a thick forest near our village. So long as they are there, we can’t return.” Others agreed, describing Boko Haram members transporting large quantities of supplies and materiel into mountain hideouts. One young man from the village of Bama, who lost four brothers in the attack that drove him and his neighbors to flee, said young people there are still voluntarily joining the insurgents.

What helps these movements keep rebounding from ostensible military defeat is the lack of attention paid to the underlying grievances that give rise to them — the disease of which their bloody actions are a symptom. Hackneyed admonitions that “force alone won’t make us safe” to the contrary, the overwhelming bulk of U.S. resources and effort are devoted to the symptoms — to killing insurgents.

Buhari, [**with his stress on the military aspects**](http://www.channelstv.com/2015/09/23/the-days-of-boko-haram-are-numbered-buhari-assures-nigerians/) of the counterinsurgency fight, is making the same mistake. That’s a surprise, because chief among the underlying drivers for Boko Haram — like most of today’s other militant puritanical religious movements — is Buhari’s other bugbear: corruption.

A decade of research into insurgent motivations (See: [**here**](https://web.stanford.edu/group/scspi/_media/pdf/key_issues/conflict_journalism.pdf),[**here**](http://www.fpri.org/articles/2013/04/understanding-afghan-insurgents-motivations-goals-and-reconciliation-and-reintegration-process), [**here**](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/violence_rule_of_law.pdf), and [**here**](http://www.time-series.net/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/EndersHoover10162011.40173735.pdf).) shows that poverty, [**which he has emphasized**](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/15/opinion/muhammadu-buhari-we-will-stop-boko-haram.html), does not correlate with the likelihood of joining extremist movements. Poor governance and injustice, especially in combination with deep social rifts, do. In just the latest evidence, [**a new study by Mercy Corps**](http://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/investing-iraqs-peace-how-good-governance-can-diminish-support-violent-extremism) links sympathy for armed groups to dissatisfaction with the government — and finds that support plummeted when expectations of the government rose after the ouster of former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. As the displaced Nigerian elder put it, “Initially, [Boko Haram] said they were fighting the government because they were corrupt, because of the injustices. And we thought it was very good. Because we are always cheated by them.”

**Buhari should get over it.**

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So why isn’t Buhari capitalizing on the intersection between his two main presidential objectives?

As a Muslim, he may not want to seem to be making excuses for Boko Haram. That’s a fair concern in a country riven by religious and regional divides. A second reason is deeper, to do with his own heritage. And, as different as our two countries may be, it is a psychological blockage Americans share.

Buhari is a member of a northern Nigerian aristocracy that traces its roots to an earlier puritanical jihad against a local elite seen as depraved and corrupt (the 1804-08 Fulani Jihad). It is almost too bitter a pill for him and other members of his community to absorb that it is now they who are seen as the depraved elite, and that today’s Boko Haram shares many characteristics with their founding fathers.

We Americans likewise celebrate our nation’s descent from a righteous insurgency.  And it is equally challenging for us to concede that the roles are now reversed, that in some ways we have become the Redcoats, associated with abusive and extortionate governments overseas. We also forget that our own Puritan forebears could be just as extreme and violent as today’s jihadis. Recognizing these facts would rattle our national mythology, our sense of exceptionalism.

In both cases, this mental resistance has undermined the ability to defeat terrorism. It has led to poor analysis of insurgents’ motivations and a vise-like attachment to military remedies — in spite of abundant evidence they’re not working.

Buhari should get over it, and state clearly that his anti-corruption campaign is part and parcel of his anti-Boko Haram campaign. And U.S. officials should back him up. They can then help translate newly powerful rhetoric into effective action in at least two ways.

First, they should recommend and support a thoroughgoing reform of the Nigerian police. The police are a main point of contact between the people and their government. Nigerians[**widely cite police as the most corrupt**](https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/08/17/everyones-game/corruption-and-human-rights-abuses-nigeria-police-force) members of a fantastically corrupt government. The police were at the origin of Boko Haram’s emergence and were the initial targets of its attacks. And they are similarly highlighted — “as ISIS’s most effective, if unintentional, recruiters” — in the Mercy Corps study of Iraqi sympathies for ISIS. “‘The police,’ one man said, ‘were ISIS makers.’”

A reform program for Nigeria’s police (a federal force) could be imagined something like kidney dialysis. Units would be pulled out of service, provided intensive training on policing techniques and general professionalism including anti-corruption, and given a pay raise. Then they would be redeployed, with a zero-tolerance rule on corruption. Crowd-sourcing techniques could be used to engage the Nigerian population in providing oversight.

Secondly, the U.S. should systematically review the training materials for its cooperation with militaries engaged in the anti-Boko Haram fight to ensure they highlight anti-corruption, especially by including it in scenarios.

If Buhari gets this approach right, if he makes significant and visible attention to underlying grievances — including anticorruption — central to his anti-Boko Haram campaign, his could be a model for counterterrorism efforts everywhere.