

From Nigeria, a lesson in how to topple terrorists

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*(The Christian Science Monitor)* After the self-proclaimed Islamic State swept in from Syria in 2014 and grabbed huge swaths of Iraq, counterterrorism experts said the group's control of significant territory would make it considerably more difficult to defeat.

Now switch continents. In Nigeria, the Nigerian Islamist extremist group Boko Haram has been losing control of a growing slice of the territory it held just a year ago. The Nigerian military is pushing the group out of towns and villages it once controlled, and the impact of drought and the group's own scorched-earth strategy is forcing uprooted Boko Haram militants to surrender.

If Islamic State's land grab made it more difficult to dislodge, does it follow that Boko Haram's loss of territory in northeastern Nigeria is weakening the terrorist group and potentially putting it on the road to defeat?

Some counterterrorism experts say yes. What's more, they add that recent events in Nigeria hold a broader lesson: Denying terrorists territory is an "essential first step" toward defeating them.

"Boko Haram is significantly weakened from where it was a year ago, and a key factor in that is the loss of territory it's suffered," said Daveed Gartenstein-Ross of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies in Washington, D.C. "At this point they can still carry out devastating attacks," he adds, "but without secure territory to operate from, they are increasingly vulnerable to these mounting setbacks."

Boko Haram fighters have been entrenched in country's northeast for years, which made photos of hungry and emaciated Boko Haram militants surrendering to government officials last week all the more striking. The fighters appeared to be the victims of their own actions. The group's terrorizing forced farmers to flee, abandoning fields and crops. A drought has exacerbated conditions and added to

spreading food insecurity.

The group has torched dozens of villages and murdered thousands of civilians—in particular Christians and schoolboys getting what the group considered to be a Western education and who refused to join the terrorist organization. It is most known for kidnapping more than 270 schoolgirls in 2014 and enslaving the girls or forcing them into marriage with fighters. [Most of the girls' families are part of the Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria).]

Holding territory is key to the longevity and expansion of extremist groups like Boko Haram because it provides a steady stream of food and other sources of financial support. For example, the Islamic State financial model has changed as cross-border oil sales have become less secure, Gartenstein-Ross noted, now focusing on taxation of local populations.

Territory also provides a base at which to train fighters and build bombs, and from which to launch attacks. The importance of denying violent extremist groups a secure base of operation was underscored by two very different operations in the past few days: one by the United States targeting an al-Shabaab terrorist base in Somalia; the other by Islamist militants attacking Tunisia from a safe haven in Libya.

In Somalia, air strikes on Saturday killed more than 150 fighters, the Pentagon said. al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Shabaab has recently targeted African Union troops in Somalia on a peace and security mission.

In Tunisia, the Monday attack on a small border post raised new alarms about the threat posed by Islamic State-affiliated militants in eastern Libya. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack, but it followed a pattern of recent assaults launched from camps inside Tunisia.

U.S. concerns about the expanding hold the Islamic State has on parts of Libya were evident in a U.S. air strike February 19 on a militant training base just across the border from Tunisia.

Control of territory is a key feature of more established—and more dangerous—violent extremist groups, Gartenstein-Ross said. There is an organizational spectrum that ranges from “terrorist group” to “insurgency” to “insurgency plus,” with the last referring to a group is also a “governing force,” he adds.

The Islamic State is in that last group. Boko Haram was in the process of getting to that level, Gartenstein-Ross said, but appears not to have been able to consolidate that role before being hit with a series of setbacks.

“Boko Haram’s control and use of its territory hadn’t matured,” he said. “They were positioning themselves to strengthen their hold but that has been cut short before they could take root.”

As a result, the group that was on its way to being an “insurgency plus” in Borno state “no longer is,” he added.

That does not mean Boko Haram is near becoming a defeated terrorist group. The U.S. is planning to send several dozen Special Operations advisers to assist the Nigerian Army. And U.S. officials warn that the group will continue to pose a significant threat to the region.

Boko Haram’s loss of territory is a “first step” to defeating the group, Gartenstein-Ross said, but ending its threat will still take time. “I’d still say it’s a matter of years ... these groups tend to be resilient,” he said. “But denying them their [territorial] base is still an essential first step.”