

WORKING PAPER: MAY 2014

Nigeria's Boko Haram and the Lord's Resistance Army - Some Parallels

The abduction of approximately 230 schoolgirls from a boarding school in Chibok, Northern Nigeria, bookended by two bomb attacks in Abuja in April and early May has once more focused international attention on the troubled West African country (see Figure 4). At the time of writing, Boko Haram's leader Abubakar Shekau had recently released video footage in which he claimed the group was responsible for the schoolgirls' abduction, and declared his intention to "sell" the girls into forced marriage with members of the organisation.

The attack, and subsequent pronouncements of Boko Haram's leader have understandably drawn international condemnation and outrage, and led initially to demonstrations by parents of the abducted girls and Chibok community members, only to be joined by national protests and international outcry. The regime's clumsy handling of the aftermath of the attack has added fuel to the flames, with the Federal Government facing criticism for appearing to do very little to secure the girls' safe return. By early May, US special forces were on the ground in Nigeria to assist with the search, with further offers of support from other international actors, although it is yet unclear that a lack of capacity and resources is what has so far hampered rescue efforts.

In the midst of this focus on the government's (in)action, developing a full profile and clearer understanding of the

activity of Boko Haram itself is critical. Previous *Conflict Trends* reports have highlighted patterns in the group's tactics: the increasing targeting of civilians over time; with a geographic expansion in to neighbouring Nigerian states throughout 2012 – early 2013, followed by a concentration of activity in its stronghold, Borno, for much of late 2013 – 2014.

There are, however, growing similarities between the actions of Boko Haram and another African militant group, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), active in Central Africa and the Great Lakes region since the 1990s. A comparison of the two groups may help shed light on possible trajectories of violence. Vast ideological differences notwithstanding, the profile will highlight similarities in tactics; geographic scope; and the context in which violence is taking place in an attempt to draw useful lessons from previous experiences of violence on the continent.

Tactics:

The most immediate similarity between these two groups is the use of violence against unarmed, civilians. The LRA became notorious in the mid-2000s for its brutal campaign against communities in Northern Uganda, with widespread mutilation, and the abduction of children and forced recruitment of civilians making international head-

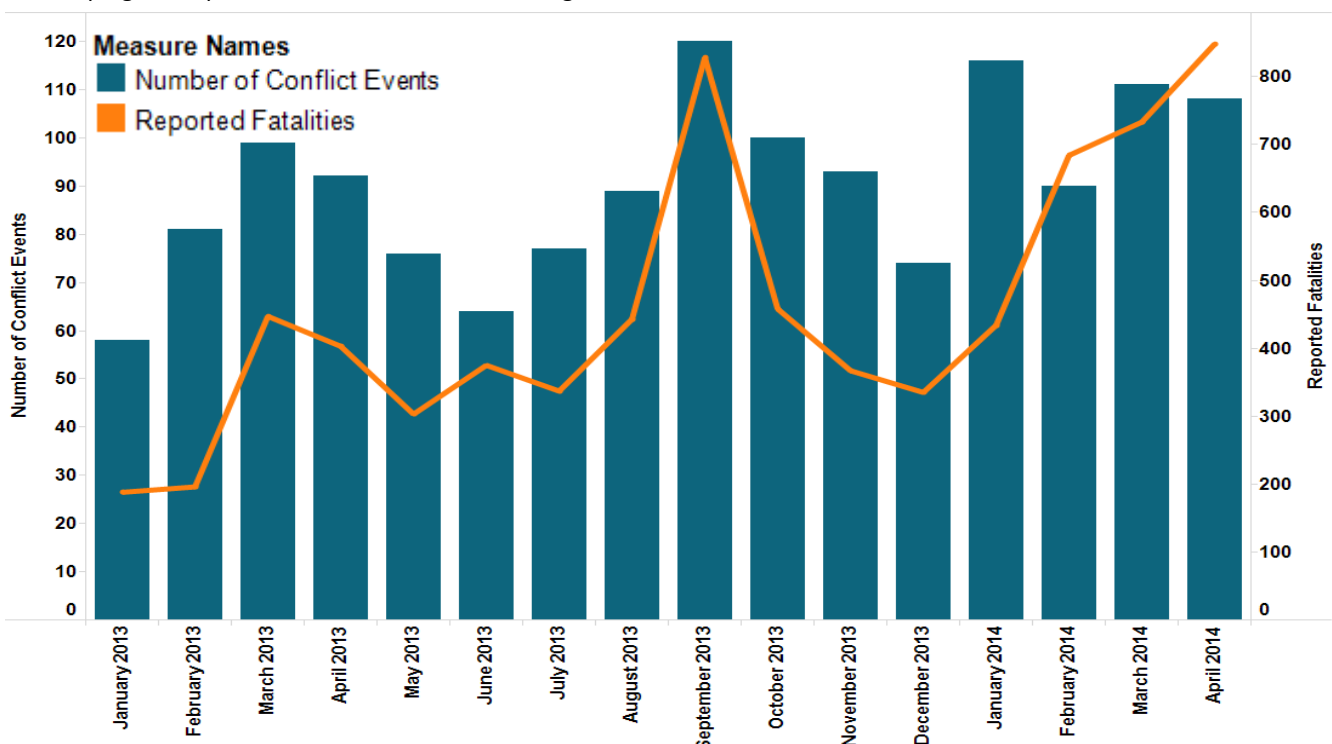


Figure 4: Conflict Events and Reported Fatalities, Nigeria, January 2013 - April 2014.

lines. Boko Haram has likewise increased its brutal targeting of civilians over time, and has been accused of recruiting child soldiers ([Human Rights Watch](#), 29 November 2013) and using forced conscription ([IRIN News](#), 12 December 2013).

The similarities, however, go beyond a commonality in tactics alone: there is also a distinct temporal pattern to the evolution of civilian targeting. Both the LRA and Boko Haram evolved as groups which initially primarily engaged in conflict with state military, with levels of civilian targeting evolving largely in line with (both directionally and

in terms of absolute levels) its engagement with armed forces (Phase 1). Both groups also witnessed a spike in activity corresponding with an intensified military campaign against them, before a drop in overall activity (Phase 2). This drop was in turn followed by a disproportionate increase in the levels of violence against civilians (Phase 3): that is to say, contrary to previous periods when violence against civilians was carried out roughly proportionate to, if not at lower rates than battles, civilian targeting became the primary activity of both groups (see Figure 5).

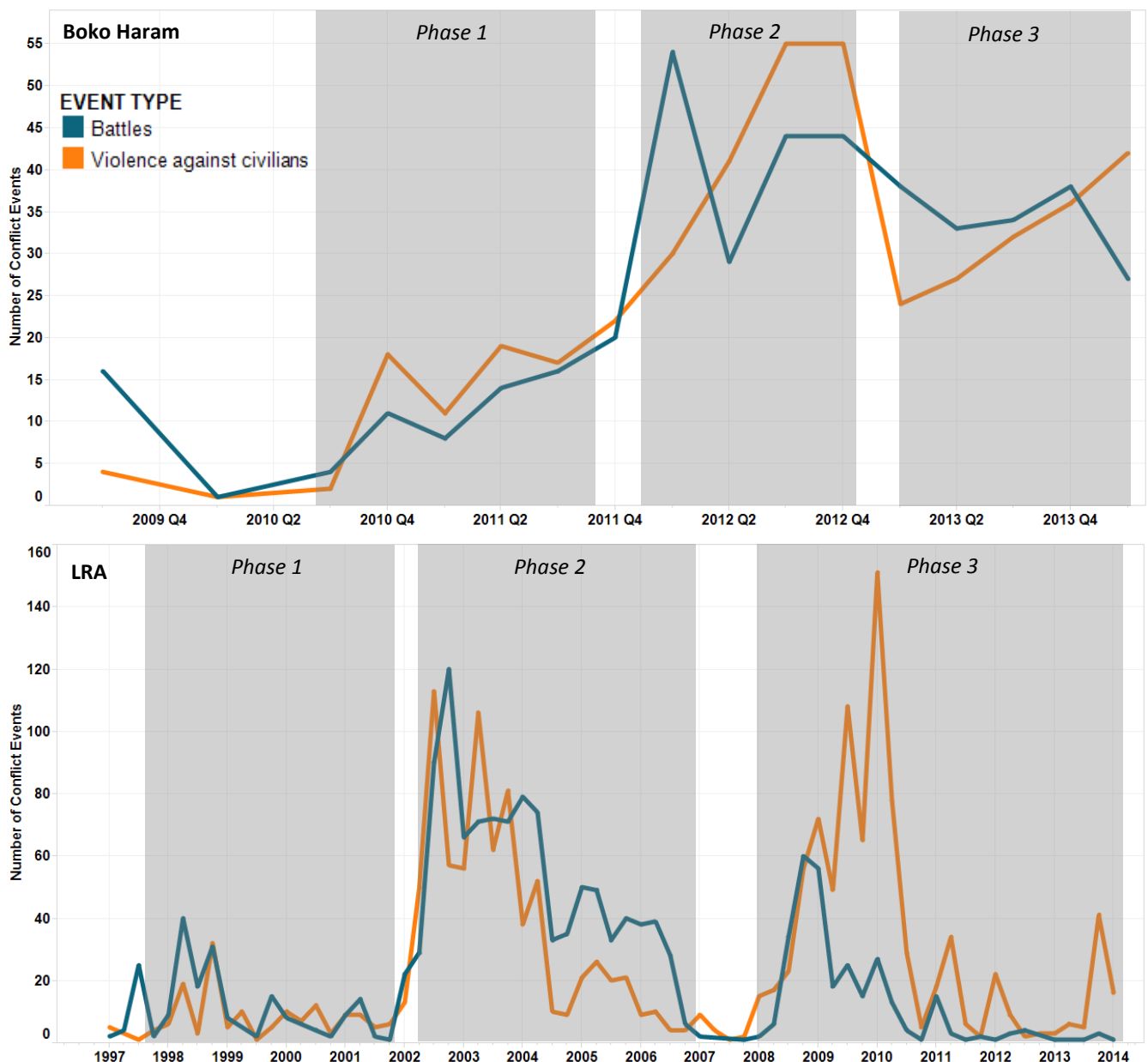


Figure 5: Conflict Events by Type, Boko Haram and LRA, by Quarter and Proposed Phase, 1997 - March 2014.

In the case of Boko Haram, the dynamics of this third phase is apparent only in the past few months when sharply increasing rates of violence against civilians outstripped conflict with armed actors, which is declining. It is too early to say with certainty whether this is the beginning of a medium- to long-term trend, as it may represent only a temporary spike in civilian targeting. However, it is worth noting that this pattern is relatively unique to these two groups: a wider analysis of active rebel groups on the African continent reveals distinct patterns in violence, none of which mirror the trends we see in Boko Haram and LRA violence (see Figure 6).

The drivers of this tactical change on the part of both groups also share some similarities: both groups had their operational capacity and territorial scope severely restricted by the limited successes of a sustained military campaign against them. In the case of the LRA, the Ugandan military's campaign resulted in the modest victory (for Uganda, at least) of pushing the LRA into neighbouring countries and largely routing them from former strongholds in northern Uganda. The Nigerian military has had more limited success still: where it has made gains since the declaration of a state of emergency in three northern states in May 2013, these have been predominantly in

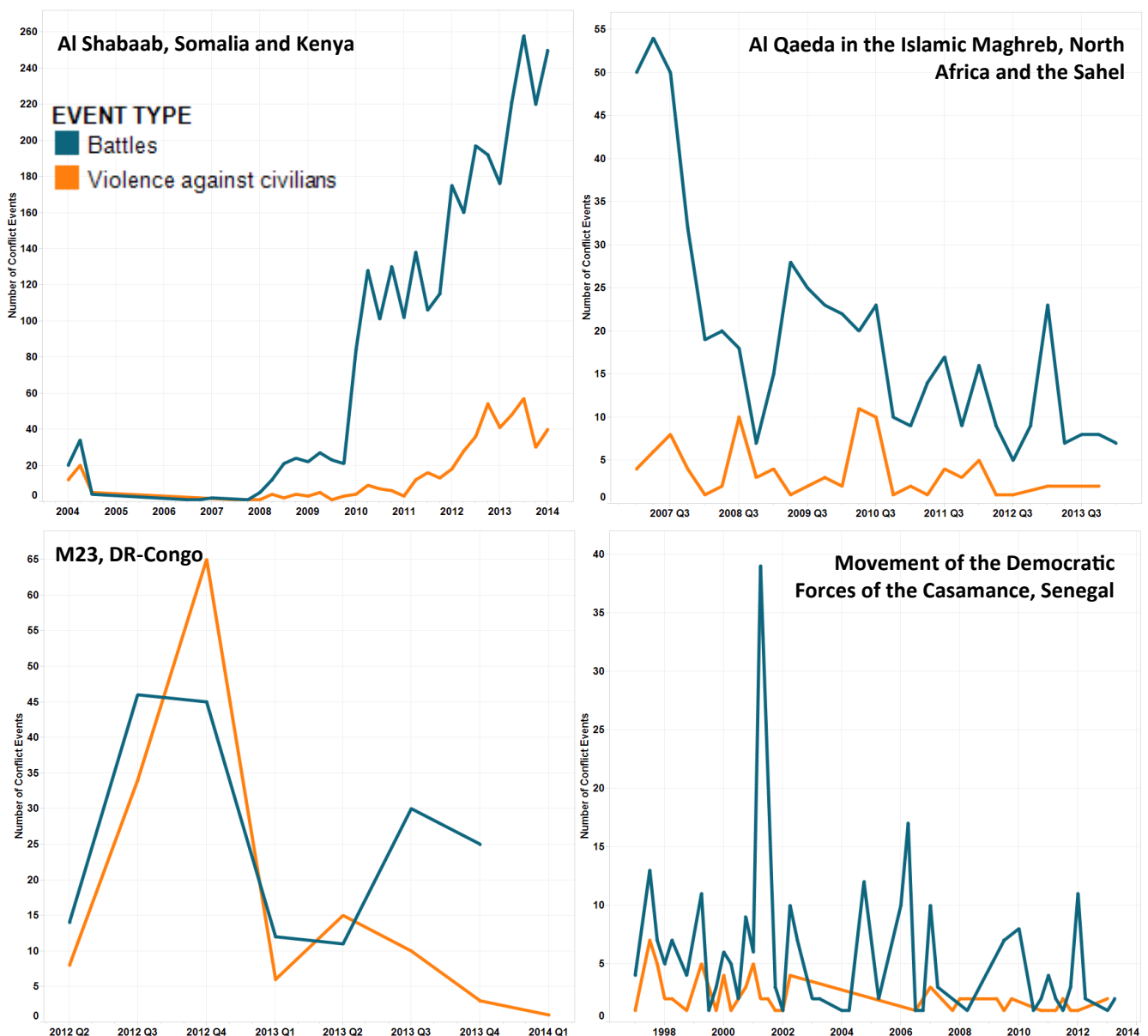


Figure 6: Conflict Events by Type and Actor, January 1997 - March 2014.

urban areas. Pushing Boko Haram out of its Maiduguri stronghold without concomitantly increasing security in surrounding rural areas has contributed to the group's increased targeting of highly vulnerable, soft targets such as schools around Borno.

Pushing a formerly urban organisation into an isolated or rural operating environment has several other, disturbing consequences. One of these is that where militants might have formerly resided in their homes or communities where they have social ties, an organisation which is forced to operate in an increasingly isolated and clandestine way – including establishing camps in forest reserves ([This Day](#), 29 April 2014) and isolated regions of neighbouring countries ([Al Jazeera](#), 4 March 2014) – may be more likely to abduct girls and young women for forced marriage and sex slavery. This practice was common among the LRA, which abducted large numbers of girls and young women, with harrowing consequences (see for example, [Carlson and Mazurana, 2007](#)).

Geographic features:

There are also some similarities in the geographic features of both groups. Geographically, having emerged as domestic, nationally-oriented organisations, both began to be active in neighbouring states, but without much evidence of a corresponding trans-national agenda. That is to say, while the LRA's activities have for several years been primarily concentrated outside Uganda, its agenda for action, and engagement with regime leaders has remained resolutely focused on the Ugandan regime (IRIN, 31 May 2007), and – recently – the possibility of return to Uganda (see [Daily Monitor](#), 27 January 2014; [BBC News](#), 27 January 2014).

Boko Haram's activity outside Nigeria is considerably lower (see Figure 7): however, it has been increasing in recent months, with growing speculation as to its transnational linkages. This activity, however, has been dominated by logistical needs for safe spaces to establish bases and operate, much as the LRA's migration was, rather than a genuinely transnational agenda. This is not to minimise the impact of Boko Haram activity in neighbouring states: kidnappings and attacks attributed to the group have a serious cost both in terms of human security and regional stability. However, this is quite different from an organisation with a genuinely transnational agenda. Boko Haram's main focus and interest remains the Nigerian state, a point which is sometimes obscured by the association of Islamist violence in particular with a monolithic, global movement ([Dowd and Raleigh, 2013](#)).

Context:

Finally, there are important similarities between the context in which both these groups operate. As mentioned above, the Federal Government of Nigeria has come under fire for its apparent inaction in the search for the missing Chibok schoolgirls. When the military has responded to Boko Haram activity in the past, however, it has faced criticism for the heavy-handedness of its approach and accompanying human rights abuses ([Human Rights Watch](#), 1 May 2013) and reprisal attacks by security forces ([Amnesty International](#), 30 March 2014, *warning: graphic imagery*). The sense of frustration over the government's failure to act on the Chibok abductions is widespread, palpable, and remarkable only in its outspokenness: "Nobody rescued them," an official in Chibok told the *New Yorker* of the escape of four of the original abductees. "I want to stress this point. *Nobody rescued them*. They escaped on their accord. This is painful." ([New Yorker](#), 30 April 2014).

Less openly expressed is a suspicion that this governmental duality has fostered among some northerners that Federal failure to tackle Boko Haram has either been a deliberate strategy – or a convenient means – to keep the region in a state of emergency and thereby restrict northern political power ([Daily Trust](#), 18 December 2013). An alternative theory, and equally corrosive to north-south relations, among some southern Nigerians is that Boko Haram is sponsored by northern elites, precisely as a vehicle to return northerners to political power through intimidation.

This duality was also a feature of the Ugandan military's response to the LRA: speculation that the government had abandoned northern populations to their fate at the hands of the brutal group, and could have brought the insurgency to a halt much earlier, was accompanied by the experience of abuse at the hands of the same military when they did carry out action ([BBC News](#), 16 July 2003; [Human Rights Watch](#), 21 September 2005; [Human Rights Watch](#), 4 April 2012). There were echoes of similar theories in northern Uganda that the government had resolved not to conclusively defeat the insurgents in the country's economically marginal north because it served to suppress dissent and bolster the regime's international profile as one tackling a terrorist threat.

The truth to these rumours is not the focus of this profile: their very circulation is powerful. In the case of Nigeria, the theories themselves are both products of, and further reproduce, internal distrust and mutual suspicion in an already divided country, with profound implications for

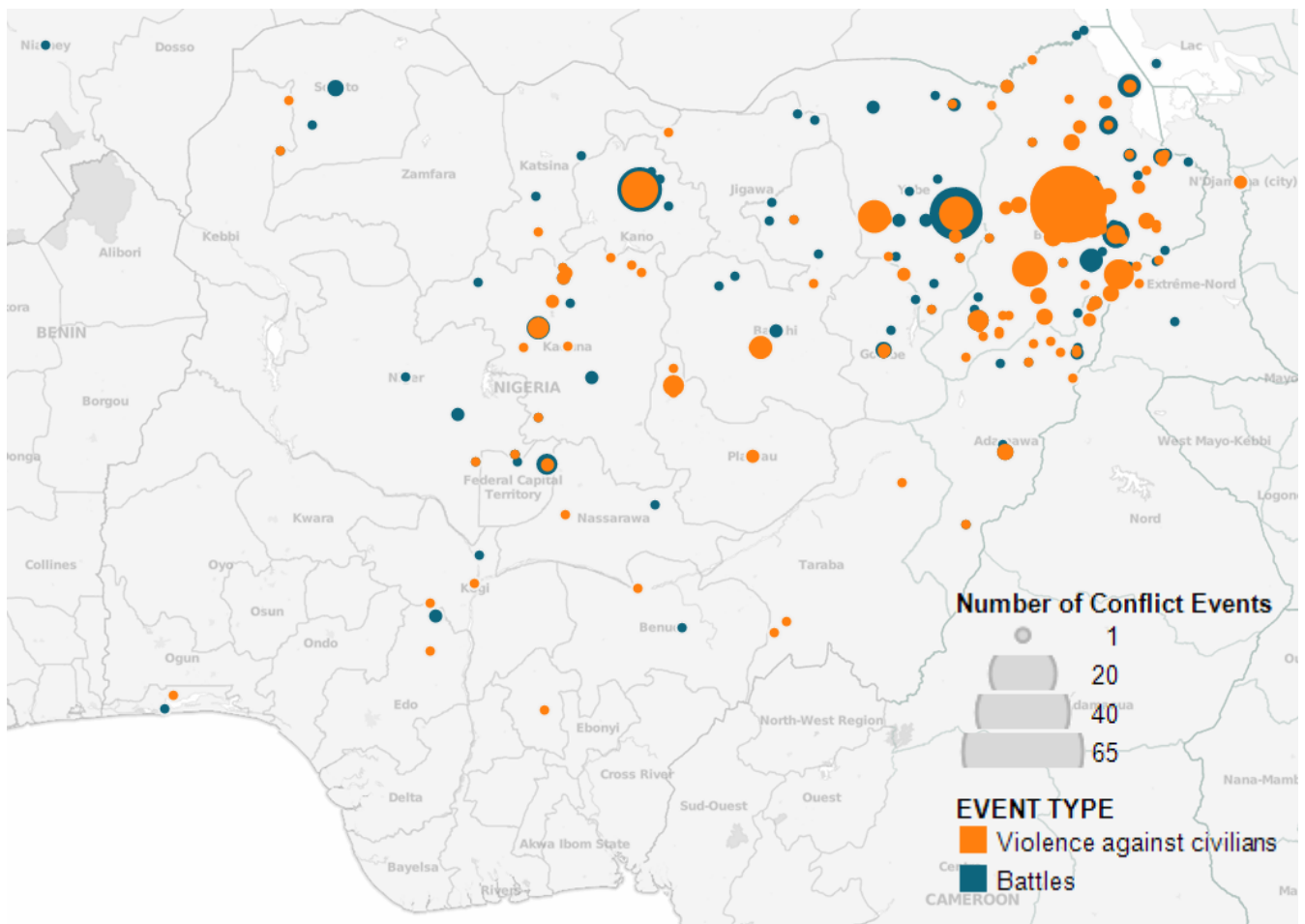


Figure 7: Boko Haram Conflict Events by Type and Location, January 2009 - April 2014.

the legitimacy of the government, and the prospect of peaceful elections.

Implications and Conclusions:

This brief survey has attempted to draw out some of the tactical, geographic and contextual parallels between two of the most violent rebel groups which have been active in Sub-Saharan Africa in the past decade. While such a brief overview necessarily obscures fundamental differences in the two organisations and the contexts in which they operate, several implications can be drawn.

The first is that any treatment of the undisputed brutality of Boko Haram's violence as a function of its anti-western, Islamist or even Islamic agenda should be carefully interrogated. While active over a much longer period of time, the LRA has shown not only comparable levels of brutality (see Figure 8), but comparable tactical, temporal and geo-

graphic dynamics, suggesting that the nature of violence employed by groups, is much more closely linked to their tactical goals, the environment within which they're operating, and their organisational capacity. This is particularly important to note in the context of violence by Islamist groups, which are often conflated with ideologically – but not operationally – aligned groups.

A second implication is that if the shared pattern in violence holds, we should expect to see a further escalation in attacks on civilians as Boko Haram's ability to engage with military forces in the North is restricted. A reduced operating capacity can result in the increased targeting of soft targets – both around regional strongholds such as rural areas of Borno, and in capital cities. This reflects a necessary evolution on the part of a group which may no longer be able to engage security personnel directly at the scale it once did, but can continue to make an enormous

impact on security and stability through targeting civilians.

Finally, there are implications of ongoing forced recruitment and abduction for forced marriage, which interact with conditions of inter-regional hostility and low north-south trust in Nigeria. In Uganda, one obstacle to conclusively defeating the LRA has been the sometimes ambivalent relationship of northern communities to the rebel group. While there is no doubt that the LRA brutalised and victimised large portions of the northern population, forced recruitment and abduction created a scenario in which communities identified their children, family members and friends among the organisation's ranks, and sometimes rejected the narrowly legalistic pursuit of justice by trial advocated by members of the international community, in favour of processes of amnesty, reintegration and restorative justice. This latter approach was by no

means universal, but it interacted to a significant degree with communities' experiences of brutalisation and abuses at the hands of the Ugandan military during their campaigns against the LRA.

As we have shown, some of these features are also found in the Nigerian context: there are numerous reports of Boko Haram historically enjoying variable and in some cases, considerable, support among local communities in northern Nigeria ([New York Times](#), 25 February 2012). Together, this suggests that if forced conscription, abductions and forced marriages continue, alongside ongoing reports of human rights abuses by the government, the options available to resolve the conflict may well evolve in complexity while reducing in number.



Figure 8: Conflict Events and Reported Fatalities by Boko Haram and LRA, 1997 - April 2014.

Support

This material is based upon work supported by, or in part by, the U.S. Army Research Office grant number W911NF-09-1-0077 under the Minerva Initiative of the U.S. Department of Defense.

Sources

Conflict Trends reports are compiled from ACLED data and draw on news sources, civil society reports, and academic and policy analyses. Full details of sources and coding processes are available online at acleddata.com.