



**WPR**<sup>®</sup>

WORLD POLITICS REVIEW<sup>®</sup>

# **AFRICAN INSURGENCIES**

**IN NIGERIA, CAMEROON,  
BURKINA FASO, MALI, CHAD,  
MOZAMBIQUE AND SOMALIA**

# AFRICAN INSURGENCIES

IN NIGERIA, CAMEROON, BURKINA FASO, MALI, CHAD,  
MOZAMBIQUE AND SOMALIA

**A WPR REPORT | FEBRUARY 2020**

By the time insurgencies become front-page news, the social and economic factors that drive them have often gone unaddressed for years. Across Africa, governments are struggling to contain militant groups that have capitalized on widespread anger over problems like corruption, inequality and abusive state security forces. In some countries, like Nigeria, these groups have already created large-scale humanitarian emergencies, killing thousands and displacing even more. In others, like Mozambique, the worst may still be yet to come. This survey provides a survey of these crises and explains why official responses are falling short.



COVER: Fighters from the Ambazonia Defense Forces at a camp in South West region, Cameroon, June 2018 (Photo by Emmanuel Freudenthal).

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**4**

## **‘Year of the Debacle’: How Nigeria Lost Its Way in the War Against Boko Haram**

Obi Anyadike

**17**

## **Why Nigeria’s Shiite Movement Will Not Become a ‘Second Boko Haram’**

Alex Thurston

**22**

## **Emboldened by His Reelection, Cameroon’s Biya Tunes Out Foreign Critics**

Robbie Corey-Boulet

**27**

## **Escalating Violence in Burkina Faso Is Outpacing the Government’s Response**

Alex Thurston

**32**

## **How Mali Is Pursuing Justice for a War That Never Really Ended**

Anna Pujol-Mazzini

**45**

## **Rebel Attacks in Northern Chad Add a New Layer to Deby’s ‘Gathering Storm’**

Robbie Corey-Boulet

**49**

## **Will Mozambique’s Peace Deal Survive Contested Elections?**

Carrie Manning

**54**

## **Despite Reforms Across the Horn of Africa, al-Shabab Continues a Deadly Campaign**

Ilya Gridneff

**Editor’s Note** All time references are relative to each article’s publication date, indicated at the top of the article.

# ‘YEAR OF THE DEBACLE’: HOW NIGERIA LOST ITS WAY IN THE WAR AGAINST BOKO HARAM

OBI ANYADIKE | OCTOBER 2018

MAIDUGURI, Nigeria—Lirfa Dashe, a lieutenant in the Nigerian army, was due to get married this month. Instead he is buried in the cemetery of Mai Malari barracks, alongside other soldiers killed in the seemingly endless conflict against the jihadist insurgency of Boko Haram.

At the entrance to the cemetery, located in this city in northeastern Nigeria, is a cenotaph with the names of the fallen inscribed on plaques. There are 1,307 names etched so far, stretching back to 2013. Mai Malari, the home of the army’s Seventh Division, is just one of several sites where soldiers killed in the northeastern theater are buried.

Boko Haram’s official name is Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad, which in Arabic means “People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet’s Teachings and Jihad.” It originated in 2002 as a local Salafist group led by Mohammed Yusuf, a charismatic young cleric who preached openly in Maiduguri against “Western” values and the Nigerian government. The group launched an insurrection in 2009 that failed, and Yusuf was killed while in police custody.

Taking advantage of links it had established [with al-Qaida](#), Boko Haram rebounded, led by Yusuf’s more war-like successor, Abubakar Shekau—the ranting, gun-toting figure seen in its [video statements](#). In 2015, the group swore allegiance to the so-called Islamic State. A year later, though, Boko Haram fractured when the Islamic State transferred its support to Yusuf’s son, Abu-Musab al-Barnawi, who opposed Shekau’s indiscriminate killing of Muslims.



ABOVE Nigerian soldiers man a checkpoint in Gwoza, Nigeria, April 8, 2018 (AP photo by Lekan Oyekanmi).

The split weakened the group, but now al-Barnawi's Islamic State West African Province, or ISWAP, is on the offensive.

All told, Boko Haram's fight to establish a self-declared caliphate governed by Islamic law has claimed more than 25,000 civilian lives. In the past few years, the conflict has spilled into neighboring Cameroon, Chad and Niger. The government of Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, in power since 2015, has long boasted that Boko Haram has been "technically defeated." But a string of losses since the start of the rainy season in July has underlined the hollowness of this claim. In fact, the insurgency has entered a new, deadlier phase, and there is concern that the military reversals will accelerate, deepening the [humanitarian crisis](#) triggered by the nine-year-long war.

An estimated 600 Nigerian soldiers have been killed over the past six months alone, many in battles resembling the one that claimed the life of Lt. Dashe. In that incident, which took place July 14, ISWAP overran the army's forward operating base in

Jilli, in the Geidam area of Yobe State, in the northeast corner of Nigeria. The militants overpowered 700 men from the Lagos-based 81st Division, 22nd Task Force Brigade.

Jilli is a strategic area for ISWAP. It's close to the border regions of Niger and Chad where the group is based and recuperates, and its market is a useful trading center where its fighters can buy and sell goods, easing their lives in the bush. And yet the base's defenses were minimal. The soldiers had no armor, heavy support weapons or mines. They also hadn't built bunkers or obstacles, which **should be standard** at a forward operating base. Moreover, many of the men in the task force had never seen combat, having only recently finished training in the region.

Victor, a sergeant who spoke to WPR on the condition that his name be changed for security reasons, survived the attack. He says ISWAP approached the base in **Toyota Hilux** gun trucks, some equipped with anti-aircraft cannons, and blew open the main gate. The vehicles, some in Nigerian army camouflage, could have been among those captured by Boko Haram in **an ambush** a few days earlier around the Boboshe area, 170 kilometers southeast of Jilli.

As they sought to counter the gun trucks, all the soldiers had at their disposal were general-purpose machine guns that repeatedly jammed, and old mortars whose shells failed to explode, Victor says. The soldiers had been issued just three magazines—if that—for their AK-47s, and it appeared there was no system of resupply from the base's storage dump. When ammunition ran low and ISWAP got into the camp, panic set in.

"The volume of fire was so high our boys were pinned down," Victor says, noting that no air support came to help them. "They became confused and started running." Victor entered the base the next day, after ISWAP had looted and torched it. Among the dead, he recognized Lt. Dashe, one of the best shots in the brigade, who had apparently been

**FOR THE  
NIGERIAN  
MILITARY, THE  
INSURGENCY IN  
THE NORTH HAS  
ENTERED A NEW,  
DEADLIER PHASE.**

rallying the defense of the main gate. He and 34 other soldiers were buried in Mai Malari on Aug. 13.

Though the dead received full military honors, this has not satisfied the Dashe family. They say his death reflects much of what is currently wrong with the Nigerian army and its prosecution of the war, specifically its tactical failures; the lack of care shown by commanders toward their men; and the inadequate equipment given to soldiers. On that basis, they are considering legal action against the army.

“Soldiers are dying and the senior officers in the Nigerian army have become irresponsible and unprofessional,” says Zakariya Dashe, the young lieutenant’s father.

### **‘Morale Had Never Been That Low’**

Zakariya Dashe doesn’t understand why his son was in Jilli in the first place. He had already served three years in the northeast, having been deployed as part of the five-country [Multinational Joint Task Force](#), or MNJTF, battling Boko Haram in the Lake Chad basin.

He returned to Lagos from that initial deployment in March, yet two months later he was sent back to the conflict zone. His commanding officer ignored all appeals to let him stay in Lagos and go through with his impending marriage. “He shouldn’t have been made to go back,” Zakariya Dashe says. “There’s normally a break of two years before you’re redeployed.”

Analysts say extended and repeat deployments are all too common, despite their drawbacks. “You are supposed to be rotated every six to nine months, but in most cases soldiers serve in the theater for years,” explains Cheta Nwanze, head of research at [SBM Intelligence](#), a Lagos-based political analysis firm. “It doesn’t help at all when it comes to morale.”

Nigeria’s army is notoriously tight-lipped over battlefield losses. In the days following July 14, [military officials denied](#) that Jilli had fallen and insisted no soldiers had been killed in the attack. The only formal notification Dashe’s relatives received of

his death was when they were told to proceed from their home in Jos to Maiduguri three days before the burial, a journey of more than 500 kilometers whose costs they had to cover themselves.

Three months later, the exact number of soldiers who died in the two-hour firefight is still unclear. The Nigerian army has acknowledged 31 fatalities, but media reports suggest that an additional 200 soldiers are “missing.”

Zakariya Dashe says the lack of clarity is unacceptable. “First, they sent him on a suicide mission without support weapons against Boko Haram using anti-air guns,” he notes. “Then the army [initially] denied the incident, meaning his sacrifice was in vain. All we want is recognition [for his service].”

There were additional insults. Ahead of the burial, his family discovered that the embalming process had been so slapdash that maggots were crawling out of Lt. Dashe’s face. Then, in recognition of their loss, the family received a token one-time payment from the 22nd Brigade equivalent to \$140 and a Nigerian flag.

Dashe’s relatives are hardly the only ones frustrated with the military’s top brass; so are active soldiers. To outsiders, the Nigerian army is a tight-knit group. Yet [on Facebook](#) soldiers complain about overbearing senior officers who have no regard for their welfare; systematic corruption that robs them of allowances; and the poor standard of equipment and medical care.

The malaise has even affected elite units. In August, special forces rioted at the airport in Maiduguri, [firing their weapons](#) into the air when they were ordered to deploy to Marte, a Boko Haram stronghold. The soldiers protested that they had been deployed for years without rotation. They are currently [facing a court martial](#) for mutiny.

Victor, the sergeant in Dashe’s unit, says the soldiers in Jilli were suffering [food and water shortages](#) before they came under attack in July. They were supposed to receive an operations allowance of \$125 per month, but they were regularly shortchanged through a bogus deduction for their food rations.

He says there was an overall “lack of management” by the base commander, and “morale had never been that low.”

Worse was yet to come. After the attack, Dashe’s unit was ordered to move to Garunda in northern Borno state, another strategic ISWAP area. On Aug. 8, the insurgents rolled up to the forward operating base there, again in military vehicles. Some of them were dressed in army uniforms, and this time they were allowed through the main gate before launching their attack. ISWAP took Garunda with even less of a fight, [killing 17 soldiers](#).

ISWAP militants are not the disorganized rabble so often depicted in accounts of the conflict. A colonel at the Seventh Division headquarters in Mai Malari, speaking to WPR on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media, says they are “a skilled opponent, they learn and adapt,” adding that professional soldiers are unnerved by the fact that “they don’t take cover, they keep advancing, they’re not afraid to die.”

Indeed, since the incidents in Jilli and Garunda, additional defeats have occurred in quick succession for the army in the northeast. On Aug. 30, ISWAP [stormed the base](#) at Zari,

northwest of Garunda. They killed 48 soldiers and looted the weapons depot before the base was recaptured with air support. On Sept. 7, ISWAP [took Gudumbali](#), to the southeast, after soldiers abandoned their positions. The most recent defeat was the fall of the base [in Metele](#) on Oct. 8, which 18 soldiers died defending.

These are just the incidents that have been documented. “Every day there are little firefights that are not reported,” notes Chidi Nwaonu, a consultant with the U.K.-based security firm Peccavi Consulting, which publishes the [Vox Peccavi blog](#). He believes ISWAP is gathering

**TO OUTSIDERS,  
THE NIGERIAN  
MILITARY IS A  
TIGHT-KNIT  
GROUP. YET ON  
FACEBOOK  
SOLDIERS  
COMPLAIN ABOUT  
HOW THE WAR IS  
BEING  
PROSECUTED.**

equipment from the army to foil its expected dry season offensive, likely to begin in November or December.

For an exhausted military, “2018 is likely to go down as the year of the debacle,” SBM Intelligence said in a [recent report](#). Things are so bad, the firm warned, that Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state and the largest city in the northeast, could become an ISWAP target by next year—perhaps in time for the presidential election due in February.

### **Soldiers, or Cowards?**

Military leaders’ response to the army’s recent poor performance has not inspired confidence. Lt. Gen. Tukur Buratai, the army chief of staff, has been quick to blame his men and warn of “[grave consequences](#)” for cowardice and incompetence. In July, he appointed his fourth commander in 14 months to lead the fight against Boko Haram. But the continuing defeats point to deeper problems.

For one thing, the Nigerian army is overstretched. It is deployed in 30 out of 36 states in a policing role due to the [high level of insecurity](#) in much of Nigeria. Because of manpower limitations, it is unable to effectively secure the northeast beyond the main towns in each district, a reality that hinders the return of the roughly 2 million people who have been displaced by the conflict, as well as the provision of basic services by the government.

The lack of heavy equipment is a regular complaint among soldiers on the front lines. “This war is winnable if the generals give us what we need. Instead they buy soft-skinned Hilux,” says one Nigerian officer serving with the MNJTF. “That is not a weapon—the enemy is not afraid of that. Give us MRAPs”—mine-resistant armored vehicles—“that RPGs cannot penetrate.”

There is also a gnawing friction over who is doing the fighting and dying, which reflects wider societal and religious tensions in a country where just over half the population resides in the largely Muslim north. In the Mai Malari cemetery, Christian



ABOVE Lt. Lirfa Dashe, who was killed in a recent attack by Islamist militants in northeastern Nigeria (Photo courtesy of Dashe family).

graves clearly outnumber Muslim ones. “We have enough evidence that more southern soldiers are being sent to the front, so by default, there will be more Christian casualties,” says one analyst, who asked not to be named due to the sensitivity of the issue.

At the back of soldiers’ minds is the knowledge that should they be killed, their families not only stand to be evicted from the barracks, but their wives may suffer an even bigger indignity: To get their husbands’ pension payout, they could be forced to sleep with the finance officers, Victor says.

The military seems perpetually surprised by ISWAP attacks. “We don’t know what they’re planning, we don’t know what they think,” says the MNJTF officer. This despite the fact that the

military has surveillance aircraft. Villagers, who are usually the first to become aware of the presence of the insurgents, say they routinely warn soldiers about ISWAP movements.

The problem partly stems from how the army tackles intelligence. In the garrison towns of Damboa and Bama, the army intelligence officers I met spoke neither Kanuri, the main language of Borno, or Hausa, the lingua franca of the north.

Finally, soldiers are coming up short in a key challenge in any counterinsurgency conflict: distinguishing between the enemy and the general population. This task is central to winning hearts and minds, but the Nigerian army is regularly accused by human rights groups of **going about it all wrong**, detaining and killing civilians fleeing Boko Haram and then claiming the victims are “terrorists.”

### **‘Regime Security, Not National Security’**

Amid all these problems, President Buhari does not seem to be paying much attention to the progress of the war. Instead, he is far too focused on the February election, critics allege. “It’s about regime security, not national security,” says a security analyst based in the capital, Abuja, who asked not to be named. “They’ve taken their eye off the ball.”

The irony is that Buhari’s election victory in 2015 was based partly on the failure of his predecessor, Goodluck Jonathan, to tackle the Boko Haram threat until it was too late. In 2014, as Jonathan was asking voters for a second term, entire towns were falling to the insurgents, who were able to declare a caliphate in territory they had captured. Boko Haram’s successes drew international attention with the kidnapping of more than 200 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok in April 2014. Buhari, a no-nonsense former military head of state, was seen as the man to fix the problem.

In reality, the tide began to turn by the end of 2014, just before the vote that swept Buhari to power. The army even recaptured Gwoza, the seat of Boko Haram’s self-declared caliphate, on the eve of the election, though this was not enough to save Jonathan’s re-election bid.

In this election cycle, the Boko Haram insurgency seems to be less of a campaign issue, likely because the group’s attacks are focused, at least for the moment, on the remote forward operating bases. There is far greater national concern, and potential political trouble for Buhari, related to clashes between **farmers and herders**, a phenomenon that has supplanted the insurgency as the **main cause** of fatalities over the past two years.

The government’s lack of attention to the war has reduced pressure on the military leadership to show results. “The service chiefs are only concerned about who becomes the next chief of defense staff [and the patronage that entails],” says the analyst in Abuja.

“I think the war is essentially their vehicle to make money, that’s the larger objective rather than winning it,” says a former soldier who asked for anonymity to speak frankly.

Defense budgets—not just in Nigeria—are notoriously opaque, which can help hide the scale of graft. But according to a [Transparency International report](#) released last year, Nigeria’s former military chiefs have stolen as much as \$15 billion, equivalent to half of Nigeria’s foreign currency reserves, in “fraudulent arms procurement deals.”

The anti-corruption drive undertaken by Buhari when he first assumed office resulted in a pause in the looting and “a lot of craziness was stopped,” says the former soldier. “But now they’ve got the measure of the government, so the corruption is back.” Corruption deprives front-line soldiers of their allowances, and it also means that equipment that should be available on paper either does not exist or is in such poor condition as to be practically worthless.

Graft can also seep down to the lower ranks of the armed forces. In Maiduguri, it is not uncommon to hear the northeast described as the military’s “ATM.” In addition to payments demanded of vehicles at checkpoints, soldiers are believed to profit from the lucrative fish trade on the shores of Lake Chad and the sale of contraband fuel. Some also own stakes in the transportation companies ferrying the fish throughout the country.

“There’s been a degradation in Nigeria as a whole,” says a colonel based at army headquarters in Abuja, who offered this defense: “You can’t expect the army to be immune from corruption.”

### **Asymmetric Commitment**

Regardless of whether it’s currently up to the task, the Nigerian military is the best hope for protection for war-weary civilians. And soldiers have improved their performance compared to the early stages of the conflict, when indiscriminate arrests and

shootings in cordon-and-search operations in Maiduguri **generated ready recruits** for Boko Haram.

But confidence in its overall ability is limited. Out of 30 displaced people I interviewed in Maiduguri in July, half rated the army's performance as "very bad or bad," while nearly one-third said it was just "average." Because of self-censorship, the civilians' actual assessment of the army's performance is probably even worse.

Former Boko Haram fighters who now work with local vigilante groups are also unimpressed by the army's prowess. They speak of a lack of determination, a distinct unwillingness to engage with insurgents at close quarters, and a readiness to abandon positions and equipment.

In contrast, they describe Boko Haram militants as disciplined, mobile and highly motivated by their stated goal of establishing Sharia law and overthrowing a Nigerian state they view as venal, unjust and Godless. "There is a strong brotherhood, there is unity among them," one man, who fought with the insurgents in 2014, explains. "They are not stupid, they have spies and study all the details before an attack."

The insurgents' conviction, even among those who were captured and coerced to fight, is bolstered by an environment of extreme religiosity, which manifests in, for example, the creation of special units whose job is to pray for victory. And while discipline is fierce, camaraderie is reinforced by the care taken to look after the wounded and carry away the dead.

Evidence from other conflicts, **according to researchers** Hammad Sheikh and Scott Atran, suggests that devotion to a "sacred cause" empowers fighters to willingly sacrifice their lives, allowing "low-power" groups to endure and often prevail "against materially stronger foes." One Boko Haram commander described Boko Haram's strengths this way: "Some people join out of greed, or they want power. But when you look at those

that go on suicide missions, it can't be just about that, it must be about something deeper.”

To be sure, Boko Haram has had its own challenges. The split in 2016 between Shekau and al-Barnawi, who argued that the militants' focus should be on fighting the security forces rather than carrying out attacks that targeted fellow Muslims, turned into bitter factional fighting. That, coupled with food shortages in the countryside due to Boko Haram raids on villages, weakened the group.

Corruption is so rampant in northeastern Nigeria that the region is often described as the military's “ATM.”

Shekau, now isolated in pockets around Borno's Sambisa Forest and the border with Cameroon, is an increasingly marginal figure in the war. ISWAP, on the other hand, has secured a conduit for arms supplies through the Sahel region and entrenched itself in the local economy. Its less exclusivist and bloodthirsty approach has enabled it to **win some support** among the rural population.

As it pursues its offensive against forward operating bases in northern Borno, ISWAP is seeking to sweep the military out of the borderlands around Lake Chad. ISWAP is “playing a long game,” with an eye toward potentially claiming one of the bases

for itself, says Nwaonu of Peccavi Consulting. “Now they are raiding, but if they gain sufficient strength to capture an FOB, and the army can't take it back, that would be a game changer.” For now, the consulting firm does not believe Maiduguri is a likely target for any serious assault, as this would be far too large an undertaking. Instead, the goal seems to be to push the army south, forcing much longer logistics and supply lines when the military's

BELOW Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari arrives for his inauguration ceremony in Abuja, Nigeria, May 29, 2015 (AP photo by Sunday Alamba).



anticipated offensive begins at the end of the year.

### **How to Win**

For all its setbacks, the Nigerian military has had success against Boko Haram before, and there's no reason to believe this success can't be replicated if the right strategies are implemented. One factor in the military's improved performance in early 2015 was the hiring of the South African private security firm **STTEP** to train a **mobile strike force**. The South African team brought highly skilled air support and imparted a doctrine of "relentless pursuit" among the commandos of Nigeria's elite 72 Strike Force, which proved effective over the course of its three-month contract.

Part of the challenge in building on past gains, though, rests with the military culture. "It's a very top-down, rigid system. There is a refusal to delegate. In a firefight, when they run out of ammo, it has to be the 'oga' [the senior officer] that releases it, not the platoon sergeant," says Nwaonu. "A junior officer or NCO [a non-commissioned officer] can't call in an air or artillery strike. In NATO or other armies these responsibilities are delegated down to sergeants and 2nd lieutenants."

He adds that there are times when troops who are outgunned or outnumbered need to withdraw in order to counterattack, but the army doesn't train its soldiers to do that tactically—the premise being they should never retreat. As a result, when soldiers do fall back, it turns into a rout. "They just run and are shot."

Nwaonu does not see ISWAP as an existential threat if properly managed. They are far from major population centers and can be contained. The current Nigerian strategy of placing bases in key movement corridors is operationally sound, "but they need to harden their FOBs, provide better fire support and sort out the logistics," he notes.

Destroying Shekau's already degraded forces, stuck in the Sambisa Forest area and along the border with Cameroon, could be done "with constant small, well-sustained, heavily armed fighting patrols, moving by foot, vehicle, motorcycle and helicopter, continuously harassing the enemy and forcing them into battle and degrading them further."

In short, "everything needed to win the war is there," says Nwaonu. "It's just not properly used."

Sgt. Victor is not so sure. He bristles at the accusation by the army chief of staff, Buratai, that the men who fled Jilli and Garunda earlier this year are cowards. "It's a lie. He's not in the picture. How can we run if we have tanks and armaments?"

But he admits that, since those two battles, he has thought of quitting the military. "If it wasn't for my children who are in school, and being labeled a deserter, I would leave," he says. "My family would suffer, but it would be better to go back to my village and farm."

*Obi Anyadike is a journalist and Open Society Fellow. He is researching Boko Haram recruitment in Nigeria. Follow him on Twitter @Enugu62.*

# WHY NIGERIA'S SHIITE MOVEMENT WILL NOT BECOME A 'SECOND BOKO HARAM'

ALEX THURSTON | JULY 2019

On July 26, the Federal High Court in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, [banned the Islamic Movement in Nigeria](#), or IMN, saying that its activities constitute "terrorism and illegality." The court order, which the IMN can appeal, came at the attorney general's request amid repeated clashes in recent weeks between the IMN and security forces.

Although observers have speculated about the possibility of the IMN, Nigeria's largest Shiite organization, [becoming "a second Boko Haram,"](#) it appears unlikely to turn into an underground insurgency. There are still opportunities for the federal government to deescalate the situation, and even if it fails to do so, the IMN's leadership has incentives to refrain from all-out war against the state.

The present conflict between the IMN and the federal government is embedded within larger cycles of conflict dating to the 1980s, when the IMN's leader, Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, began to mobilize followers, call for an "Islamic state" in Nigeria and cultivate relations with Iran. He also spent several years in prison during that decade. Over time, al-Zakzaky and his followers became more explicitly Shiite, adopting practices such as the celebration of the Ashoura holiday. That meant shedding some Sunni followers even as they attracted other Muslims who were drawn to the alternative, anti-system identity al-Zakzaky offered.

In 1991, in an incident referenced in the High Court's ruling, followers of al-Zakzaky rioted in the northern city of Katsina,

cementing the group's image as a collection of troublemakers and dissidents. More recently, the IMN clashed with the Nigerian army in the northern city of Zaria, in Kaduna state, in December 2015, an episode that left 350 members of the IMN dead and led to the imprisonment of al-Zakzaky and his wife, Zeenah Ibraheem, which continues to this day. Since that time, the IMN has continuously demanded his release.

On July 9, as part of a protest seeking his release on bail, IMN demonstrators attempted to enter the National Assembly, leading police to violently disperse them. **Further violence occurred on July 22 in the capital**, with police opening fire on IMN crowds, killing 11 demonstrators as well as a journalist; a police officer also died, reportedly at the hands of the IMN. As mutual recrimination accumulates, the conflict is becoming harder to resolve.

President Muhammadu Buhari has attempted to distance himself from the conflict, with **spokesmen insisting that al-Zakzaky's fate is in the hands of the courts**—specifically, a high court in Kaduna, the cleric's home state, which has scheduled **a bail hearing for Aug. 5**. The IMN, however, accuses Buhari of using the courts selectively as a weapon against al-Zakzaky and the movement. In December 2016, the Abuja High Court ordered the release of al-Zakzaky and his wife, an order the administration ignored in **what Amnesty International called** “a flagrant—and dangerous—contempt for the rule of law.”

Predictably, the Iranian government has repeatedly called for al-Zakzaky's release, and recently proposed that he be sent to Iran for medical care. Yet they are not the only critics of the Buhari administration's handling of the situation. In addition to al-Zakzaky's own lawyers, other lawyers as well as civil society organizations have argued that banning the IMN and restricting its ability to protest would violate key provisions of **the Nigerian Constitution** relating to freedom of religion and freedom of assembly. Interestingly, some of the IMN's most prominent



ABOVE Nigerian Shiite Muslims protest and demand the release of Ibraheem al-Zakzaky, the leader of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, in Cikatsere, Nigeria, April 1, 2016 (AP photo by Sunday Alamba).

lawyers and sympathizers are from southern Nigeria and are non-Muslims. Prominent politicians are now warning that banning the group is a mistake. Shehu Sani, a senator from Kaduna and human rights activist, **rhetorically asked**, “Which one do we prefer—the Islamic Movement that has a leader we can arrest, that has members we can see, that has an identity that we can prosecute or a group that can be forced

to go underground and pose a serious security danger on the country?” Sani favors releasing al-Zakzaky under the supervision of Nigeria’s foremost hereditary Muslim leaders, who are Sunni.

The warnings from Sani and others evoked the specter of Boko Haram, the Sunni jihadist group that operated relatively freely in northeastern Nigeria from approximately 2002 until 2009, when it launched a mass uprising followed by a period of underground insurgency. There are profound differences between Boko Haram and the IMN, however. The IMN has existed for far longer, and in that time has experienced multiple crisis points and opportunities to go completely underground—opportunities it has consistently declined to fully pursue. For example, the Kaduna state government banned the IMN in 2016, and the group did not respond with a full-blown insurgency there.

The IMN is also far larger than Boko Haram, although estimates for both groups vary considerably. Boko Haram may have reached upward of 10,000 people during its initial phase of public preaching, and **credible estimates of its post-2009 fighting strength**—including now, when it is divided into two main factions—have never exceeded 10,000. The IMN, in contrast, counts supporters **in the hundreds of thousands, if not the millions**. Those numbers might suggest that the IMN is far more threatening than Boko Haram, but the mass support for

## **THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT IN NIGERIA IN ITS CURRENT INCARNATION IS MUCH MORE ACCOMMODATIONIST THAN BOKO HARAM EVER WAS.**

the group could also militate against its transformation into an insurgency, as it is far more woven into the social fabric of Nigeria, particularly in northern Nigeria, than Boko Haram ever was.

Additionally, while Boko Haram counted some university students and even adult elites among its early members, the IMN's leadership includes more university professors, engineers, clerics and other professionals with established careers and livelihoods at stake. Such leaders would likely

think twice before going underground. With al-Zakzaky in detention, the IMN's leaders have sought to pressure and intimidate the federal and state governments, but they have also consistently invoked notions of the rule of law, citizenship and due process— notions that Boko Haram fundamentally rejected. If both movements have at times called for an Islamic state, the IMN in its current incarnation is much more accommodationist than Boko Haram ever was.

The demise of al-Zakzaky would change some, but perhaps not all, of the IMN's calculus. The 66-year-old cleric is reportedly ill, and his death would undoubtedly galvanize massive protests by the IMN and its supporters. But he is personally identified with the movement to a profound degree, and there is no clear successor. As the situation drags out and as tensions escalate, more and more prominent northerners are suggesting that al-Zakzaky be released, exiled or otherwise treated in a way that would reduce the possibility of him succumbing to his illness while in prison. Even if he died in his cell, however, the IMN's leaders might conclude that the costs of insurgency were too high, both for the leadership and the rank-and-file.

The Buhari administration, however, has consistently pursued a path that escalates, rather than deescalates, the situation. One risk is that rather than isolating the IMN, his government's actions will generate more sympathy and support for the group,

with a coalition of lawyers, politicians and religious activists denouncing his government as authoritarian and capricious. For Buhari, who just won reelection earlier this year **despite a disappointing first four years in office**, that would mark an inauspicious start to his second term.

*Alex Thurston is a visiting assistant professor of political science and comparative religion at Miami University in Ohio. He is the author of two books, "Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement" and "Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching, and Politics." He holds a doctorate in Religious Studies from Northwestern University and a master's in Arab Studies from Georgetown. Follow him on Twitter [@sahelblog](#).*

# EMBOLDENED BY HIS REELECTION, CAMEROON'S BIYA TUNES OUT FOREIGN CRITICS

ROBBIE COREY-BOULET | APRIL 2019

Authorities in Cameroon are jailing opposition politicians and barring their supporters from holding rallies. Security forces and separatist groups continue to carry out atrocities in the country's restive Anglophone regions. More and more civilians are being forced from their homes, adding to a tally of displaced people that already exceeds half a million.

These problems and more were cited in a [speech](#) delivered last week to the European Parliament by Federica Mogherini, the European Union's top foreign policy official. Her words painted a picture of an increasingly volatile country, just six months after 86-year-old President Paul Biya coasted to reelection following a campaign in which he pitched himself as the only conceivable [guarantor of stability](#).

Brussels isn't alone in sounding the alarm. African and Western diplomats and human rights groups, to say nothing of observers within Cameroon, have become more vocal in denouncing conditions under Biya, who appears to have interpreted his reelection as an invitation to become even more aggressive in targeting his opponents.

The external scrutiny is the latest indication of Cameroon's deteriorating international image, which is perhaps inevitable for a country that's had the same autocratic leader for [more than three decades](#) and is battling multiple insurgencies. Yet it's unclear, at this stage, whether diplomats are interested merely in signaling concern or if they'll push for real change.

## IT'S UNCLEAR, AT THIS STAGE, WHETHER DIPLOMATS ARE INTERESTED MERELY IN SIGNALING CONCERN OR IF THEY'LL PUSH FOR REAL CHANGE.

Moreover, there's no guarantee that, with a leader as entrenched as Biya, the latter is even possible. Hans De Marie Heungoup, a senior analyst with the International Crisis Group, notes in an interview that while Biya once put more effort into guarding Cameroon's reputation, these days he is playing a kind of political "survival game," making it more difficult for outsiders to influence his behavior. If critical statements aren't accompanied by steps that could undermine his security apparatus and patronage networks, Biya might be willing

to simply ignore them.

"Nowadays he has prepared himself psychologically to withstand this kind of pressure," Heungoup says. "If that pressure moves from simple, powerful statements to meaningful concrete action, then I suspect that Biya could step back and try to show a more democratic face."

Cameroon's security woes, which fuel many of the human rights violations taking place there, are complex. It's been more than five years since fighters from Boko Haram, the Nigeria-based extremist group, first infiltrated northern Cameroon, drawing the country into a regional counterterrorism campaign. These days, however, instability stems primarily from the

"**Anglophone crisis**," which has been on the world's radar for more than two years now. What began in late 2016 with anti-government protests in regions of western Cameroon dominated by the country's English-speaking minority has turned into an all-out insurgency, with rebel fighters working toward the establishment of an independent nation called Ambazonia.

The separatist violence has triggered a

BELOW Cameroon's president, Paul Biya, casts his vote during the presidential elections in Yaounde, Cameroon, Oct. 7, 2018 (AP photo by Sunday Alamba).



brutal state crackdown. Human Rights Watch **reported** in late March that security forces, including the elite Rapid Intervention Battalion, have engaged in a spate of violent activity in the months since Biya's reelection, shooting and killing civilians, sexually assaulting women and burning and looting homes. Human Rights Watch said security forces had "killed scores of civilians," while warning that "the number of civilian deaths is most likely higher."

Separatists, for their part, have continued their campaign of kidnappings and assault. One witness told Human Rights Watch that two people were beaten to death by separatists on suspicion of having voted in the presidential election, which the separatists considered an illegitimate exercise.

Given the difficulty of reporting in the Anglophone regions, it's unclear whether the overall level of violence there has increased since the vote. But Heungoup, with the International Crisis Group, says the conflict is expanding into areas that had previously been relatively untouched. And Human Rights Watch noted that violence on the part of the government risked making the situation even worse. "Cameroon's authorities have an obligation to respond lawfully and to protect people's rights during periods of violence," Lewis Mudge, the organization's Central Africa director, **said** last month. "The government's heavy-handed response targeting civilians is counterproductive and risks igniting more violence."

The political space is similarly troubling. Those looking to mount any kind of challenge to Biya are operating under mounting restrictions. Official results from the October election showed Biya winning reelection with **71 percent** of the vote; his closest challenger, Maurice Kamto, officially earned 14 percent. Yet elections in Cameroon are neither free nor fair, and Kamto has insisted that he was the real winner.

In late January, supporters of Kamto's political party, the Cameroon Renaissance Movement, participated in protests in multiple regions of the country, including its two main cities, Yaounde and Douala. In response, security forces used live

ammunition to disperse crowds and arrested hundreds of protesters, [according to Amnesty International](#). The following week, Kamto himself was arrested, and he has remained in custody ever since. His request for provisional release was rejected, a decision that was [upheld](#) on appeal earlier this month.

Kamto's fate seems to be of particular interest to Western officials. In addition to Mogherini, Tibor Nagy, the top U.S. diplomat for African affairs, has raised it publicly, including on a visit last month to Cameroon. This prompted a quick rebuke from a government spokesman. "The Cameroonian government deeply regrets these words which denote a lack of knowledge of the issues, realities and facts," the spokesman wrote in a [press release](#) that accused Nagy of interfering in the government's internal affairs.

As Emmanuel Freudenthal pointed out in an in-depth [report for WPR](#) last year, Washington has recently been more inclined to criticize Cameroon than has France, a former colonial power with deep ties to Biya. Yet Heungoup says that, across the board, there are signs diplomats are recalibrating their approach to Biya's government.

"They have started to realize the true nature of the regime," he says. "When I discuss with some diplomats, they are less defensive of Biya. We now see statements at the highest level—statements that we used to not see."

But will these same diplomats do anything to back up their words? Perhaps Biya's greatest vulnerability is the security forces. In February, the U.S. announced that it was reducing military aid to the country, citing human rights concerns related to the fight against Boko Haram and Anglophone separatists. "The bottom line is right now in Cameroon, they have been a good partner with us counterterrorism-wise, but you can't neglect the fact that they have—there are alleged atrocities in what's gone on there," Gen. Thomas D. Waldhauser, the head of U.S. Africa Command, [said](#) at the time.

Similar measures from the U.S., France and Israel, all of which have been involved in military training and security

assistance, could ramp up pressure on Biya. Targeted sanctions could also get the Biya government's attention, though Washington might want to avoid the kind of standoff they would produce.

In the absence of such steps, it will likely fall to Cameroonians to spur change, perhaps via large-scale protests like those that have threatened the government in the past, most recently in 2008. This would be the messiest kind of upheaval, further giving the lie to the notion that Biya, and only Biya, can keep the country stable.

*Robbie Corey-Boulet is a journalist and former senior editor of World Politics Review. He is currently the Ethiopia/African Union correspondent for Agence France-Presse.*

# ESCALATING VIOLENCE IN BURKINA FASO IS OUTPACING THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

ALEX THURSTON | MAY 2019

On May 12, unknown attackers killed a Catholic priest and five worshippers in northern Burkina Faso, before burning the church. Two days later, four Catholics were killed in a separate attack in the region. It was the third attack on Christians in Burkina Faso in just three weeks. Then, two weeks later, [gunmen raided another church in the region](#) and shot four people dead.

The targeting of both Catholics and Protestants in the country comes amid a wider unraveling of security that has killed and displaced Muslims and Christians alike. In this rising crisis, the escalation is outpacing the government's response, and jihadis are pursuing new forms of social control and intimidation against civilians.

Burkina Faso's current unrest can be dated back to 2016, a year bracketed by terrorist attacks in the capital, Ouagadougou, in January and the formation of a local jihadi outfit, Ansar al-Islam, or the "Defenders of Islam," later that year. The intervening years brought increasingly frequent smaller attacks in the north and then in the east of the country, not just by jihadis but also by bandits and ethnic-based "self-defense" militias. Further terrorist attacks struck Ouagadougou in March 2018.

As in the nearby and related conflict in central Mali, multiple factors have collided to drive the spike in violence in Burkina Faso: tensions at a very local level over land use, the declining credibility and power of local chiefs and other authorities, and the arrival of jihadi forces from elsewhere in the region. There is also the "ethnicization" of the conflict as jihadi recruitment

among the Peul ethnic group leads to other actors inflicting collective punishment on the Peul, which can then drive more recruitment to jihadi outfits.

Burkina Faso's security forces, state authorities and elected politicians have all struggled to respond effectively to the crisis. It is not just ethnic militias, but also the security forces themselves, that have engaged in ethnic profiling and collective punishment of the Peul, with **grave human rights abuses** reported in the north of the country. Personnel changes have also not slowed the unraveling of security. **President Roch Kabore sacked his prime minister** in January and soon after reshuffled some of the **senior military personnel**, but the new team has confronted the same problems the old one faced. Of the country's 13 regions, parts of seven out are under a state of emergency, but it is the security forces themselves that are often targets of violence as well as architects of counterproductive collective punishment against rural

BELOW Troops ride in a vehicle near central Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, March 2, 2018 (AP photo by Ludivine Laniepce).



communities. **Rivalries between different components of the security forces** are also a key problem in mounting a response.

It is tempting to draw a connection between Burkina Faso's insecurity and the political aftermath of the October 2014 revolution that overthrew **authoritarian ruler Blaise Compaore**. Sickened by Compaore's efforts to rewrite the constitution and prolong his 27-year hold on power, civil society movements, youth organizations, opposition politicians and ordinary people staged mass protests that prompted a fracture in the military and a transition to democracy. The opening of political space, however, came at the price of dismantling some of the security and intelligence networks that Compaore had used to keep control. Part of the current turmoil may reflect the diminished capacity of the security and intelligence forces compared with five years ago.

There are also more sinister possibilities. No less a figure than Kabore has suggested that **Compaore's regime colluded with regional jihadi groups**, perhaps to strike deals that would exempt Burkina Faso from their violence. Moreover, some observers have pointed a finger at Compaore loyalists in the powerful Presidential Security Regiment, known by its French acronym RSP. The RSP's Gilbert Diendere, a close ally of Compaore, led a 2015 coup attempt against the then-transitional government, before Kabore was elected. Diendere remains in a legal battle over his role in the attempted coup. There are allegations that elements of the RSP are involved in jihadism and terrorism as **part of an effort to undermine the post-Compaore government**.

Such allegations are difficult to assess. Certainly there were figures around Compaore, notably his adviser **Moustapha Ould Limam Chafi**, a Mauritanian national, who negotiated directly with al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb over ransom payments for kidnapped Westerners. Chafi himself was accused by the Mauritanian government of

**UNTIL RECENTLY,  
BURKINA FASO WAS  
FAMOUS FOR ITS  
PEACEFUL MUSLIM-  
CHRISTIAN  
RELATIONS.**

financing and supporting terrorism. In 2012, Compaore's government attempted to broker peace in northern Mali, including by directly engaging jihadi-leaning elements there.

Yet it is a leap to say that beyond negotiations, there was also direct collusion with jihadi groups. Indeed, well before the Islamist takeover in northern Mali in 2012, Compaore and his senior officials had privately expressed concerns about [jihadi infiltration of northern Burkina Faso](#). And even if some arrangement was in place up to 2012, the events of 2013 would have disrupted it. After France intervened in northern Mali to halt a jihadi advance southward, Burkina Faso contributed 500 soldiers to the African-led International Support Mission in Mali. Even before Compaore's fall, Burkina Faso was emerging as a jihadi target.

The political aspects of the crisis, then, have to do with both pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary dynamics in Burkina Faso. For example, at the very local level, [assassinations of municipal officials](#) may reflect both recent dynamics, such as jihadis' desire to punish those whom they view as collaborators of the armed forces, and older ones, such as [longstanding resentment against local authorities](#).

The recent attacks on Christians have raised the specter of inter-religious violence in Burkina Faso, a country that until recently was famous for its [peaceful Muslim-Christian relations](#). It is worth keeping in mind that many victims of the violence so far have been Muslims.

There are some reasons, however, why Christians in particular might be targeted. Burkina Faso's population is over 60 percent Muslim and roughly a third Christian, yet Christians, and particularly Catholics, are disproportionately represented among the political elite, from the time of the country's first civilian president, Maurice Yameogo, up through the current president, Kabore. Attackers may be targeting Christians partly on a religious basis, but partly also as symbols of the ruling class.

But in Burkina Faso as in Mali, a good deal of confusion and ambiguity has set in regarding the perpetrators of violence. Jihadis, wittingly or unwittingly, provide cover for violence

motivated by concerns more prosaic than ideology. Analysts have written about the “[jihadization of banditry](#)” in the country, and there are also ample opportunities to settle private scores amid this wider conflict. Meanwhile, jihadis can benefit from some of this score-settling and banditry, especially when the jihadi project aligns with more private motives.

How far will this violence spread geographically, and can Burkina Faso’s authorities avoid falling into the trap of perpetuating resentment as they try to halt it? How will jihadis try to reshape communities in the areas where they operate? The latest church attacks suggest a willingness by jihadis to broaden their targets even further, a dynamic that may push tensions, displacements and panic in Burkina Faso to a new level.

*Alex Thurston is a visiting assistant professor of political science and comparative religion at Miami University in Ohio. He is the author of two books, “Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement” and “Salafism in Nigeria: Islam, Preaching, and Politics.” He holds a doctorate in Religious Studies from Northwestern University and a master’s in Arab Studies from Georgetown. Follow him on Twitter [@sahelblog](#).*

# HOW MALI IS PURSUING JUSTICE FOR A WAR THAT NEVER REALLY ENDED

ANNA PUJOL-MAZZINI | JANUARY 2019

BAMAKO—On a Monday morning last June, toward the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, Amadou Barry, a 55-year-old cattle herder and member of the Fulani ethnic group, noticed smoke coming out of a nearby village. It wasn't long before he registered the sound of gunshots—a telltale sign that a militia attack was underway. In a matter of hours, the village, Gueourou, had been turned to ashes, like so many others in the region of Mopti, in central Mali.

After the bloodshed ended, Amadou and other residents of his village went to bury the bodies; there were 16 of them, he remembers. It wasn't the first time he had buried his neighbors. Just a few days before, he had performed the same service when a different village a few kilometers north had been attacked, leaving three people dead.

Fearing that his own village would be next and that his family was no longer safe, Amadou decided to leave. A few days after the attack on Gueourou, he traveled with his wife and children in a shared taxi to Bankass, a town about an hour's drive to the southwest.

Though the family was forced to rely on help from aid organizations to get by, for several months Amadou took comfort in the feeling that they were safe from harm. Toward the end of last year, however, the violence found them again. On a bustling market day, assailants targeted the chief of a nearby village, striking his head with a machete and then carrying his lifeless body away on a motorbike.

Amadou fled yet again, heading farther south. By the time I met him in November, he had just arrived at a makeshift camp in Dialakorobougou, on the outskirts of Mali's capital, Bamako, where around 200 people were sleeping under tarpaulin tents. Most of them were, like Amadou, members of the Fulani ethnic group, who make up around 15 percent of Mali's population and are

concentrated in the Mopti region. All of them had been displaced by the spiraling violence in the center of the country.

Since the beginning of 2017, more than 1,200 civilians, mostly Fulanis, have been killed in clashes in central Mali, according to the Malian Association for Human Rights, an independent rights group.

Much of the violence has resembled the attack on Gueourou: lethal raids by armed men who burn down villages and steal whatever cattle they can. The

perpetrators in many cases are believed to be members of so-called self-defense militias created by the Dogon and Bambara ethnic groups, though jihadists and soldiers with the Malian army have also carried out killings. In response, the Fulanis have created their own self-defense groups, which have been implicated in the deaths of dozens of Dogon villagers.

There have long been tensions between different communities in central Mali over access to land and water—tensions that are being exacerbated by climate change. But the ethnic self-defense militias are a relatively new phenomenon. Many of them have formed in the context of the conflict that began in northern Mali in 2012, the year jihadist groups took over half the country. The ranks of the self-defense militias have continued to swell in response to extrajudicial killings by Malian security forces and the relative absence of the state in the region. A December [report](#) by Human Rights Watch



ABOVE Malian troops stand with former rebels before a joint patrol in Gao, Mali, Feb. 23, 2017 (AP photo by Baba Ahmed)

documented 26 attacks predominantly targeting the Fulani community, all of them occurring in 2018.

In the case of the June attack on Gueourou, Human Rights Watch determined that the Dogon self-defense militia known as Dan Na Ambassagou had opened fire on dozens of villagers as they gathered for a baptism at the village chief's house. Among the dead were a newborn baby boy—so young he hadn't been given a name—and his grandfather, who was shot in the chest. While the precise motive for the attack is unclear, Human Rights Watch noted in its report that Gueourou was “known for its abundance of livestock, and that after the attack, the militiamen pillaged several thousand animals, as well as food stocks and jewelry.”

This type of violence represents the latest manifestation of the chronic insecurity that has afflicted parts of Mali for the better part of a decade. And it is not the only security challenge facing the government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, who came to power in 2013 and was re-elected last year. In addition to the ethnic violence in central Mali, Keita's administration is grappling with a long-running Tuareg rebellion in the north and a growing web of jihadist groups that can stage attacks anywhere in the country.

In this delicate security environment, officials are attempting to strike a balance between reconciliation and justice. Even as bullets continue to fly and armed groups and self-defense militias multiply, the government, backed by the United Nations and international donors, has initiated a range of initiatives to move on from the conflict. These include disarmament, a truth commission and efforts to bring perpetrators to court to break the cycle of impunity that is widely blamed for bouts of instability that have plagued Mali since its independence from France in 1960.

**EVEN AS BULLETS  
CONTINUE TO FLY,  
MALIAN OFFICIALS  
HAVE BACKED A  
RANGE OF  
INITIATIVES  
INTENDED TO HELP  
THE COUNTRY MOVE  
ON FROM THE  
CONFLICT.**

Yet justice is a remote concern for those who, like Amadou, are merely hoping for security to be restored. Rather than pushing for the perpetrators of violence to be prosecuted, Amadou wants only for relations between the various groups in central Mali to revert to the habits of a more harmonious, pre-conflict era. “Dogons and Fulanis, we should go back to the way we used to be,” he says. “We can’t live without one another. We want all this to stop so we can go home.”

Others, though, fully support the pursuit of justice; their main concern is that it won’t go far enough. In recent years, they have made their wishes clear by testifying before the country’s truth commission, which was set up in 2015, and forming their own grassroots advocacy organizations. At the same time, they have watched warily as officials have granted concessions to their one-time enemies—for example, **by freeing from prison** rebel leaders suspected of committing war crimes. Such moves make it increasingly doubtful that victims will ever get their day in court.

“Justice has not done anything for now. The perpetrators carry on killing people,” says Hamadou Dicko, the youth delegate of Mali’s biggest Fulani association, Tabital Pulaaku, who works with displaced people like Amadou. “We don’t trust Mali’s justice system.”

### **Bringing Armed Groups Under Control**

The Malian conflict, which for many people has never really ended, began in the early months of 2012, when ethnic Tuaregs in the north, who have long felt marginalized, launched an uprising and declared their own independent state of Azawad, which covered all of northern Mali. The rebels advanced quickly, driving out a poorly equipped and disorganized Malian army. Angry about then-President Amadou Toumani Toure’s handling of the crisis, a group of soldiers in Bamako staged what some have described as an **“accidental coup,”** marching on the presidential palace and prompting Toure to flee.

During the ensuing confusion, the conflict escalated further, with the Tuaregs taking over nearly two-thirds of the country, only to have their rebellion hijacked by armed Islamist groups. As the Islamists took control of the cities of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu, Sharia law was imposed in much of the north. Music and football were banned. Women in Timbuktu had to sit down to browse goods at the market rather than lean over and risk exposing their backs. If they failed to comply, they faced prison time.

When the militants threatened to advance on Bamako in early 2013, France sent in troops who, with the help of African allies, quickly reclaimed control over the northern cities. But jihadist groups merely retreated to rural areas, where they still have a presence, and they have since migrated to parts of central Mali.

In 2015, peace talks in Algiers yielded an agreement between the three main parties: the Malian government; Arab and Tuareg pro-independence armed groups falling under the umbrella of the Coordination of Azawad Movements, or CMA; and pro-government armed groups that operate independently of the Malian armed forces. The agreement envisioned the use of two main tools to bring the conflict to an end: disarmament and transitional justice.

The disarmament component involved allowing members of armed groups to surrender their weapons and be integrated into the Malian army or return to civilian life. One goal of this integration effort has been to create a national army that is more representative of Malian society, meaning less dominated by southerners.

A total of 36,000 fighters from various armed groups registered for disarmament in the north. Of these, only 15,000 were deemed eligible to be part of the process because they registered with a weapon; the others had shown up with only ammunition.

The process was to begin with the creation of a special unit called the Operational Mechanism of Cooperation, known by its French acronym MOC, which was to be composed of three battalions: one in Timbuktu, one in Gao and one in Kidal.



ABOVE An Islamic Police officer walks through the square where members of the group Ansar Dine were preparing to publicly lash a person found guilty of adultery, Timbuktu, Mali, Aug. 31, 2012 (AP photo).

## ONE OF THE BIGGEST THREATS TO THE PEACE DEAL IS THE FACT THAT JIHADIST GROUPS, RESPONSIBLE FOR SO MUCH OF THE VIOLENCE IN MALI, ARE NOT PARTY TO IT.

According to the original plan, these battalions would help secure the re-establishment of the state's presence in the north as well as the rest of the disarmament process, in which other combatants would be integrated into the regular army.

In late 2016, the first MOC battalion was formed in Gao. This battalion was to be composed of 200 soldiers from the Malian army and nearly 600 fighters from other armed groups. But in early

January 2017, as some 600 members of the battalion were on standby awaiting their first deployment as a joint patrol, jihadists blew up their barracks, killing 77 people in the deadliest terror attack ever to occur on Malian soil. The attack, which was claimed by the al-Qaida-linked group al-Mourabitoun, underscored one of the biggest threats to the peace deal: the fact that jihadist groups, responsible for so much of the violence in Mali, are not party to it. Today, these groups remain the biggest challenge to improved security and disarmament, says Zahabi Ould Sidi Mohamed, the head of the

national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration commission, based in Bamako.

Nevertheless, officials have continued to forge ahead with disarmament, though they have run into additional roadblocks. In November, officials in Gao organized a ceremony to mark the beginning of a new, accelerated phase of the disarmament process. On a sweltering afternoon, Lassine Bouare, Mali's minister of national reconciliation, and leaders of various armed groups gathered at Gao's police headquarters.

Because of the threat that the event could come under attack, the headquarters was

heavily guarded by soldiers from the French and Malian armies and the U.N. peacekeeping mission. White tents were set up for the various steps of the program, including the surrendering of weapons, medical checks and military skills exams.

On the first day, however, one thing was missing: the hundreds of former rebels who were supposed to take part. In a letter written to a committee tasked with ensuring the Algiers peace deal's implementation, the rebels had sought guarantees about the ranks they would receive once they joined the Malian armed forces and the compensation that would be awarded to their families if they were injured or killed in combat. The letter had gone unanswered.

To officials' relief, the boycott did not last long. The following day, the rebels, having demonstrated their discontent, started the process as planned, even though they had received no concessions from the government. As of December, around 1,500 recruits had begun the latest phase of the disarmament process.

Officials are optimistic that establishing the MOC battalions in Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu will go ahead unimpeded. But even if that's the case, the 2015 peace deal only concerns armed groups that have been active in northern Mali, meaning none of these efforts are likely to affect Amadou or otherwise improve security in the increasingly violent center of the country. It was only in December that Prime Minister Soumeylou Maiga, on a state visit to Mopti, announced a disarmament program for that region.

### **A Beleaguered Justice System**

The jihadist takeover prompted many judges to flee northern Mali. Others were attacked before they could leave, and some were kidnapped and assassinated. In their stead, the extremists established a parallel justice system that destroyed the region's already fragile law enforcement infrastructure.

Despite the signing of the Algiers deal, persistent insecurity has had serious consequences for the effort to establish law and order in the north. Judges are scared of conducting investigations, having seen what the jihadists did to their colleagues. As of last

September, one-third of justice officials in the north were not in their posts, according to the U.N. peacekeeping mission, while those who were deployed reported having to miss workdays and relocate often due to security concerns.

“We’re told to go back to working in the north. Who is going to risk going out bare-faced and getting killed over there?” says Moctar Mariko, a lawyer and president of the Malian Association for Human Rights, which has initiated many lawsuits related to crimes committed during the conflict. “Judges can’t protect themselves. Even soldiers can’t protect themselves. And you want victims to come before a judge and say, ‘He’s the one who raped me?’”

Security fears among the judiciary are not limited to the north. In Bamako—where high-end bars and restaurants are often fronted by metal doors, and security guards search guests as they enter—visitors are free to come and go undisturbed at one tribunal where some conflict-related cases are handled.

“There’s no one with a uniform here!” exclaimed a judge at the tribunal during a recent interview, pointing outside his office window. “Look at the wall here: It would take minimal effort to climb over this fence and come attack us.” A few meters away, dozens of people walked by a busy main street separated from the building by a meter-high wall.

The judge, who spoke to WPR on condition of anonymity out of fear for his safety, recalled a day when a man he had helped convict walked into his office shortly after being released from prison. “I just came to say hello,” he remembered the ex-convict saying. “This man could have just stabbed me and left.”

Last August, in an effort to press their demands for better security and higher salaries, civil servants working in the judiciary across the country went on strike, paralyzing the courts for over 100 days. The strike ended after the government agreed to hire more security staff for courtrooms.

Now back at work, those officials who want to prosecute conflict-related crimes report being weighed down by bureaucracy. To keep the justice system functioning during the

conflict, the Supreme Court transferred jurisdiction for certain crimes committed in the north to two tribunals in Bamako—one focused on sexual violence and the other on terrorism-related offenses. In 2015, the Supreme Court restored the northern courts' jurisdiction, but the courts in the region weren't operational. As a result, many case files are still sitting in Bamako courtrooms that don't have the legal authority to pursue them.

Separate from the courts, the Algiers deal called for the creation of a Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission to shed light on human rights abuses committed since 1960, when nearly seven decades of French colonial rule ended. The commission was meant to come up with a reparations policy and explore the root causes of the current conflict.

The commission began taking testimonies in 2016, and it has collected over 10,000 allegations of violations from all over the country. But it has yet to start investigating the claims in order to produce a report advising the authorities on how to move forward.

As it has with the courts, insecurity has bedeviled the commission's operations. The opening of the Kidal office didn't happen until last month, and commission staff members are reluctant to go up north where they might be targeted by jihadists.

Critics of the commission decry the fact that the group of 25 commissioners includes representatives of all the warring factions, who might be reluctant to investigate incidents that could incriminate them and their allies. Victims' groups, which are not part of the commission but have partnered with it, say they were not granted enough say in its organization.

Victims might be excused for thinking they have little to gain from telling their stories. Reparations are a long way off, assuming they are ever administered, and for victims of sexual violence in particular, the shame of coming forward can outweigh the potential benefits. "The absence of justice stops women from coming forward," says Bernadette Sene, head of the gender unit at Mali's U.N. peacekeeping mission.

Recounting violent experiences can also be traumatizing, and Ousmane Oumarou Sidibe, the commission's president, acknowledges that the country does not have the resources to help participants cope. "There are no psychologists outside of the capital. For victims in the regions, it really is basic support," he says. "There is nothing in place for people in serious need."

Domestic institutions like the courts and the commission aren't the only bodies investigating crimes in Mali. An international investigatory commission, mandated by the U.N., is also supposed to probe human rights abuses. Now in the planning stages, it will investigate war crimes, crimes against humanity and sexual violence linked to the most recent conflict in order to produce a report for the U.N. secretary-general by October of this year.

As these various justice initiatives play out, some observers in Mali are worried about a new bill that, for certain crimes, could take justice off the table completely. The bill,

BELOW Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita arrives to cast his ballot during the presidential runoff election, Bamako, Mali, Aug. 12, 2018 (AP photo by Annie Risemberg).



## **PRESIDENT KEITA'S COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE HAS BEEN CALLED INTO QUESTION BY HIS DECISION TO CHAMPION A PARTIAL AMNESTY BILL.**

championed by President Keita, calls for amnesty for those who took part in the 2012 rebellion. This amnesty would apply to all but the most serious crimes: war crimes, crimes against humanity and rape. Under the terms of the bill, former fighters would have six months to admit to their crimes and surrender their weapons to judges, mayors or police commissioners.

As word of the bill spread after it was introduced in early 2018, critics expressed alarm that rebels responsible for crimes like torture and murder might end up walking free. Women's rights groups expressed doubt as to whether, with an amnesty law in place, men responsible for mass rapes and forced marriages would really face prosecution.

Diplomats and human rights activists said the law was coming too soon, and that lawmakers should wait for recommendations from the truth commission and the U.N.'s investigatory commission regarding reparations and prosecutions before proceeding.

A vote on the bill was scheduled for December, and it appeared to have enough support to pass, according to a judicial source and a diplomatic source, both of whom spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue. But debate was delayed until April after Malian and international NGOs staged a protest campaign that included letters to lawmakers and a planned protest, which was banned. "For us victims, there can be no reconciliation or peace without justice," Haidara Aminai Maiga, president of the National Council of Victims, an umbrella group of over 200 associations across the country, told a press conference in November.

### **Steps Toward Accountability**

So far, victims in Mali have only found justice through two routes: a tribunal in Bamako devoted to terrorism cases that was created in January 2015, and the International Criminal Court.

The tribunal, located just south of the Niger river, has brought charges against dozens of people for terror-related offenses such as kidnapping, illegally carrying weapons and breaching national security. But while there has been a push by human rights groups to widen the remit of the tribunal to include severe abuses such as war crimes and sexual violence, it would take a new law or a Supreme Court ruling to make this possible. The fact that President Keita has gone through six justice ministers during his time in power has hindered such reforms, as victims, women's rights groups and international organizations need to start lobbying from scratch each time a new minister is appointed.

Two cases pertaining to the Malian conflict have made it to the ICC. Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi, a member the Islamist extremist group Ansar Dine, which controlled Timbuktu prior to the French-led invasion, was arrested in September 2015 and charged with destroying sacred mausoleums in the city. A year later, judges found him guilty in a **landmark ruling** over the destruction of cultural heritage as a war crime and sentenced him to nine years in prison.

A second case involves Al Hassan Ag Abdoul Aziz Ag Mohamed Ag Mahmoud, who was the de facto Islamic police chief in Timbuktu during the Islamist takeover. An alleged member of Ansar Dine, he has been in custody in The Hague since last April for crimes **including torture and participating** "in the policy of forced marriages which victimized the female inhabitants of Timbuktu and led to repeated rapes and sexual enslavement of women and girls." In May, the court will hold a hearing to determine whether there is enough evidence to go to trial. If it goes ahead, the case would represent the first time victims of sexual violence in the Mali conflict are heard in any court. It would also be the ICC's first successful prosecution for persecution on the grounds of gender.

### **'They Will Grow Up and Want Revenge'**

Every one of these initiatives, from disarmament to the truth commission to criminal trials, is complicated by the fact that the

fighting in Mali is ongoing, with a death toll that continues to climb. “We are one of the only commissions who has started working in the middle of a crisis,” Sidibe, the president of the truth commission, told me. “Violations are happening in the north and center as we speak. Every day there is a new number of victims. Their treatment will be a lot more complicated.”

Those displaced by the fighting, including Amadou and his family, are stuck in limbo. During my visit in November to the camp in Dialakorobougou, older men sat near the gate at the entrance, one of the few spots that offers shade, surrounded by prayer mats and metal chairs. They talked about how they had escaped central Mali, and they asked new arrivals about loved ones who had stayed behind.

Children spend their days playing with pots and pans in a sandy courtyard. Hamadou Dicko, the Fulani youth representative, pointed out that a few of the youngest children were born in the camp.

The lives of many of the children, he said, have already been defined by their displacement, and they are surrounded by stories of violence and death. That’s why he is so alarmed that there is no end in sight to the unrest. Without justice, he warned, the violence will keep repeating itself. “These children you see here, they will grow up and want revenge.”

*Anna Pujol-Mazzini is a freelance journalist based in Dakar who focuses on conflict, migration and women’s rights. Her work has been published by The Washington Post, The Times of London, Reuters, AFP and Vice News, among other outlets. Follow her on Twitter [@annapmzn](#).*

# REBEL ATTACKS IN NORTHERN CHAD ADD A NEW LAYER TO DEBY'S 'GATHERING STORM'

ROBBIE COREY-BOULET | SEPTEMBER 2018

About a month ago, a fresh wave of violence kicked off in northern Chad when rebels crossed over from neighboring Libya and staged an attack on a border post in the region of Kouri Bougri. According to one [report](#), the rebels, who arrived on vehicles equipped with machine guns, managed to kill at least three soldiers while possibly kidnapping others.

A security source, speaking to Radio France Internationale, initially [downplayed](#) the significance of the incursion, saying it had been perpetrated by common criminals. But the Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic, or CCMSR, a Chadian rebel group that formed in 2016 and boasts 4,500 fighters from the Goran ethnic group, quickly claimed responsibility. Less than two weeks later, the CCMSR said it had carried out a second attack in the same area, though Chad's government [denied](#) this.

The threat posed by insurgent groups in northern Chad is no secret. Militants opposed to President Idriss Deby have gravitated to southern Libya in recent years, taking advantage of the [lawlessness](#) that has prevailed there since the 2011 uprising that toppled Moammar Gadhafi. During a visit to N'Djamena, Chad's capital, in May, Mohamad Taher Siala, the foreign affairs minister for the United Nations-backed government in Tripoli, warned that rebels had been able to establish [training bases](#) in Libya. This puts them within easy striking distance of northern

## “WHETHER THE SITUATION IN LIBYA IMPROVES OR NOT, THE CHADIAN REBELLION WILL CONTINUE AS LONG AS CHAD’S POLITICAL CRISIS IS NOT ADDRESSED.”

BELOW Chad’s president, Idriss Deby, left, listens to Burkina Faso’s president, Roch Marc Christian Kabore, before a working session of the African Union in Nouakchott, Mauritania, July 3, 2018 (AP photo by Ludovic Marin).



Chad, a region that Chad’s government has struggled to exert control over.

At first glance, the challenge posed by the CCMSR seems like one that Deby would be well-positioned to handle. In power since 1990, when he **overthrew Hissene Habre**, Deby has fended off multiple rebel offensives over the years. In 2006 and again in 2008, rebels managed to reach N’Djamena before being put down by Chad’s armed forces.

Like those earlier rebels, the CCMSR says its goal is to **force Deby from office**, but analysts believe that outcome is unlikely. At the same time, though, they point out that the CCMSR is still potentially dangerous, largely because its offensive is coinciding with mounting public frustration with Deby, who has strained to prevent Chad’s economic crisis—which is now two years old—from spilling over into **social unrest**. Jerome Tubiana, an independent researcher who focuses on Chad, points out that sustained rebel violence in the north could further exacerbate that frustration, contributing to suspicions that Deby’s authority is weakening.

“The CCMSR has a narrow ethnic base and only limited ability to extend it, unite with other rebel groups and find support among key communities within Chad,” Tubiana says in an email. “But the CCMSR is still a threat in the sense that it is part of a wider gathering storm.” There have been early indications that the Chadian government is taking the CCMSR seriously. National Prosecutor Youssouf Tom opened a criminal investigation immediately after the first attack in Kouri Bougri, and within a week the Chadian military was carrying

out **aerial bombardments** in the region.

A military-first response certainly plays to Deby's strengths. Over the past five years, by participating in the fight against Islamist militants in northern Mali and then in the campaign against the Nigeria-based extremist group Boko Haram, Chad's armed forces have burnished their reputation as some of the most effective in the region. Deby has used this to his advantage in his dealings with the international community, recognizing that donors are likely to turn a **blind eye to domestic repression** perpetrated by an effective security partner.

This dynamic looks set to continue, as Chad is a central player in the **G5 Sahel Joint Force**, a five-country initiative that outside powers like France hope will eventually be able to assume responsibility for much of the region's security needs. Daniel Eizenga, a Sahel expert and postdoctoral fellow at Centre Francopaix in Montreal, says high-profile military operations against the CCMSR could be Deby's way of trying to lock in even stronger backing from abroad. "It's a show of force to function as a deterrent, and it's a way of saying to the international community, 'We've got these problems and we need your continued support,'" Eizenga says. "At the same time, Chad's saying, 'We're also effective at what we do, so your support is not being wasted.'"

There are potential drawbacks, though, to this approach. If Deby gets drawn into protracted operations in the north, it could undermine his reputation as a force for stability in the wider Sahel region. "It looks like he has less control, and that kind of diminishes his position vis-a-vis international actors and vis-a-vis other regional governments," Eizenga says.

There are also limits to what a military solution on the part of the Chadians can accomplish. Analysts say a host of factors, including European Union-led efforts to curb illegal migration via the Mediterranean Sea and Deby's efforts to **regulate gold mining**, are undermining the economy of northern Chad, which has previously relied on revenue generated by both activities. With diminishing livelihood opportunities, residents of the north

are increasingly inclined to join up with rebel movements, a problem that will not be solved by bombing the region.

What is more, military operations in northern Chad will do nothing to resolve the intractable security crisis in southern Libya, meaning groups like the CCMSR will be able to continue retreating to their haven on the other side of the border.

But Tubiana stresses that the conflict in southern Libya is only part of the larger story of the CCMSR and related groups. The persistent insurgencies against Deby, he says, are more a function of internal political problems than external security issues. Younger Chadians, in particular, are growing weary of their country's highly repressive political environment, as well as the fact that Deby's complete control over the political process means replacing him via the ballot box seems all but impossible.

"Whether the situation in Libya improves or not," Tubiana says, "the Chadian rebellion will continue as long as Chad's political crisis is not addressed."

*Robbie Corey-Boulet is a journalist and former senior editor of World Politics Review. He is currently the Ethiopia/African Union correspondent for Agence France-Presse.*

# WILL MOZAMBIQUE'S PEACE DEAL SURVIVE CONTESTED ELECTIONS?

CARRIE MANNING | OCTOBER 2019

The stakes were high when Mozambique voted in general elections on Oct. 15, its sixth poll since 1994, when the country's first multiparty elections began what has been a shaky transition from 16 years of civil war. But rather than ease tensions, this month's vote has inflamed new ones amid [charges of voter fraud and electoral violence](#).

When [fighting between the government and Renamo](#), the former rebel group and now main opposition party, flared up in 2013, there were fears of a slide back into open warfare. Although a cease-fire allowed general elections to go forward in 2014, this month's elections were the first since Renamo's new leader, Ossufo Momade, and President Filipe Nyusi signed [a definitive peace agreement on Aug. 6](#).

As part of that agreement, voters would directly elect provincial governors for the first time in Mozambique's history. It was a hard-won provision for Renamo, which had surged at the polls in 2014, winning more than a third of the vote. That performance had raised expectations this year for the party's ability to capture governorships in provinces where it has historically been strong, which also happen to be rich in natural resources, including timber and gemstones. But instead, Frelimo won a landslide victory in all 10 provincial contests as well as the presidency, with the incumbent, Nyusi, winning 73 percent of the vote over Momade's 21 percent. Frelimo also won 184 of 250 seats in the National Assembly, giving the ruling party a nearly three-quarters majority. Renamo holds 60 seats.



ABOVE Women walk beneath an election banner for the ruling Frelimo party in Maputo, Mozambique, Oct. 11, 2019 (AP photo by Ferhat Momade).

The election, as many feared, was marred by violence against opposition candidates, their supporters and even election observers. There have also been credible reports of manipulation, including inflation of the voter rolls in some provinces, ballot stuffing, mishandling of ballots between polling stations and district tabulation centers, and a general lack of transparency. Nevertheless, none of the nine international election observer missions questioned the wins for Frelimo at either the national or provincial level. [A detailed analysis by the Center for Public Integrity](#), a local watchdog group, estimated that incidents of fraud may have added up to nearly 300,000 votes in all—roughly 5 percent of the vote, not enough to change the outcome.

Still, charges of electoral fraud will do little to bolster public confidence in the government, while reinforcing perceptions of impunity and corruption for the ruling party at a time when

high-level Frelimo officials, including the son of former President Armando Guebuza, are under indictment for their alleged roles in a huge graft scandal involving **\$2 billion in secret and mostly misspent government loans**.

Reported voter turnout in this month's elections was higher than in the past few ballots, at more than 50 percent. But the numbers are likely distorted by near-impossible rates of voting in many districts, mainly in the provinces of Gaza and Tete. During the voter registration period, the National Electoral Commission was embroiled in controversy when close to 300,000 extra voters appeared on the rolls in Gaza, which resulted in the province gaining eight additional seats in the National Assembly. The discrepancy between the improbably large increase in the voter rolls and data from a census conducted in 2017 led to the ouster of the director of the National Institute of Statistics, which oversaw the census.

Violence intensified during the campaign more than it had in previous elections. Just days before the vote, **the provincial head of a respected national observer organization** was assassinated in Gaza. The case is under investigation, but his killers are believed to be linked to an elite police unit. Then, on the eve of the election, the district head of the Renamo Women's League in Tete province was **ambushed and killed together with her husband** in the town of Zumbo, as she was on her way to deliver credentials to Renamo party delegates to observe the vote. Opposition candidates were also threatened, intimidated and beaten. The home of Manuel Araujo, the mayor of the port city of Quelimane and the head of Renamo's electoral list in Zambezia, was reportedly set on fire with a petrol bomb.

Many local electoral observers from well-respected and well-known monitoring groups were not given their credentials, while some international observers were unable to obtain theirs. Opposition parties and local election observers reported being ejected from polling stations if they objected to any of the proceedings.

While the voting process itself was reportedly peaceful and orderly, international monitors were excluded in some cases from observing votes as they were counted in districts. In a statement, [the U.S. Embassy in Maputo](#) cited “disorganization,” lack of supervision and lack of transparency in the counting. The statement also criticized the National Election Commission for failing to maintain the chain of custody over ballots. That criticism was echoed by the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, which said that problems with voter registration, election security and credentialing of observers compromised the election’s integrity. Yet it also conducted a parallel count that still appears to confirm Frelimo’s victory.

Apart from significant voting irregularities, there are other reasons for a weaker than expected performance from Renamo. [Its longtime leader, Afonso Dhlakama](#), who had presided over a highly personalized and centralized party, died in May 2018, leaving no clear succession plan. Momade was named interim leader, and the party held a national conference in January of this year in which Momade was elected as Renamo’s “permanent leader.” He then went on to complete the negotiations on the peace deal that Nyusi and Dhlakama had started the year before.

But resentment and divisions still lingered within Renamo. Its self-styled military wing grumbled about incomplete integration of Renamo cadres into Mozambique’s security sector, a core failure of the peace agreement. Calling itself the Renamo Military Junta, the military wing ultimately broke off from the party in August. Led by Maj. Gen. Mariano Nhongo, it announced that it rejected Momade’s leadership, opposed the peace deal and would disrupt the elections with violence if necessary. Despite sporadic violence attributed to the group, it did not succeed in disrupting the vote.

These internal divisions, however, likely affected voting for the party, either by dampening turnout or creating doubt regarding the legitimacy of Momade as Renamo’s leader. Dhlakama was never going to be an easy act to follow. Some high-profile

Renamo figures, such as Ivone Soares, the party's parliamentary leader, even opted not to campaign actively for Momade.

Momade announced last week that Renamo's political commission would refuse to accept the election results and called on all Mozambicans to reject them too. But despite those remonstrations, Frelimo appears to have locked down power at every level. Even after the election violence and apparent fraud, it's unlikely that Renamo would threaten the peace deal at this point, given its commitment to the recent agreement and efforts to enter the political mainstream in Mozambique.

*Carrie Manning is professor and chair in the Department of Political Science at Georgia State University.*

# DESPITE REFORMS ACROSS THE HORN OF AFRICA, AL-SHABAB CONTINUES A DEADLY CAMPAIGN

ILYA GRIDNEFF | JANUARY 2019

NAIROBI, Kenya—Last week, a five-man cell from al-Shabab, al-Qaida's Somalia-based affiliate, entered the popular 14 Riverside hotel-office complex in an affluent neighborhood of Kenya's capital, where there were more than 700 workers and hotel guests. One of the men blew himself up with a suicide vest, while the four others threw hand grenades and fired on people having a late lunch and then trying to flee.

Al-Shabab has wreaked havoc in East Africa since 2006, proving to be one of the world's **deadliest jihadist groups**. Its latest attack in Nairobi was an appalling reminder that, despite historic reforms and rapprochement between old foes in the Horn of Africa, terrorism remains a major threat for Kenya and the region.

Amid the chaos in Nairobi last week, the response from Kenya's security forces, which have been credited with improved counterterrorism capabilities, kept the death toll **relatively low** at 21, plus the five attackers who were killed. **Among the dead** were 33-year-old Abdalla Dahir and 31-year-old Feisal Ahmed, both Somali-Kenyans employed by the Somalia Stability Fund, which has worked to help Somalia recover from decades of civil and state collapse that have pushed it to the bottom of most development indicators. An American citizen, **Jason Spindler**, 41, was also among the victims; he was working on Wall Street as an investment analyst on 9/11 and had survived the attack on the World Trade Center.

Al-Qaida released a **statement** claiming that its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had ordered the Nairobi attack as “a response to the witless remarks of the U.S. president, Donald Trump, and his declaration of al-Quds as the capital of Israel,” referring to the Arabic name for Jerusalem. It is still unclear whether al-Qaida provided material support. But that message alone linked terrorism in the Horn of Africa with wider jihadist propaganda and highlighted al-Qaida’s strategy of directing its regional affiliates to hit local soft targets—something U.S. intelligence **identified** long ago. Earlier this week, on Jan. 21, another al-Qaida affiliate, Jamaa Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, **claimed responsibility** for an attack that killed 10 Chadian peacekeepers in northern Mali—a response, it said, to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s recent visit to Chad.

The Nairobi attack could reinvigorate the al-Shabab and al-Qaida brands at a time when the Islamic State has been attempting to make inroads into Somalia. The attack, though, doesn’t necessarily signal new capabilities for al-Shabab. Its strategy remains mostly a “**composite insurgency**,” with different factions that support, tolerate or cooperate with each other to varying degrees, largely for resolving day-to-day issues in Somalia like land disputes, rather than over a shared higher purpose.

Kenya, of course, is no stranger to terrorism. In 1998, al-Qaida orchestrated bombings of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi and in neighboring Tanzania that killed more than 200 people. In 2002, al-Qaida sympathizers hit an Israeli-owned hotel on Kenya’s coast. Attacks inside Kenya rapidly increased after the Kenyan Defense Forces launched operation Linda Nchi —“Protect the Country” in Kiswahili—in October 2011, which saw 2,000 soldiers cross the border into Somalia to create a “buffer zone.” U.S. diplomatic cables from February 2010, released by WikiLeaks, **revealed** that American officials strongly opposed Kenya’s intervention and offered a litany of reasons why it was a bad idea, including that it “would more likely add to Somalia’s instability than to help stabilize the country.”

## AL-SHABAB REMAINS A SYMPTOM OF SOMALIA'S INSTABILITY, SOMETHING THE CURRENT REFORM DRIVE IN THE REGION CANNOT OVERLOOK.

Since then, al-Shabab has launched hundreds of raids into Kenya's border areas and staged major attacks deeper in the country, killing 67 people in Nairobi's Westgate Mall in September 2013, 60 people in the predominantly Christian town of Mpeketoni in June 2014, and 147 faculty, students and staff at Garissa University in April 2015. Meanwhile, inside Somalia, Kenyan troops have suffered significant losses

in numerous al-Shabab attacks, including on two military bases in el-Adde in January 2016 and in Kulbiyow in January 2017. The [massacre at el-Adde](#) has been called Kenya's worst military defeat in the country's history.

Kenya's foreign policy in Somalia remains opaque. Nairobi is considered a stable center in the Horn of Africa, a region riddled with conflicts and humanitarian and environmental crises. Nairobi hosts the third-largest United Nations office in the world, is popular with NGOs and diplomats serving the neighboring fragile states, and has recently seen the arrival of several multinational corporations looking to tap into emerging African markets. Attacks like this latest one hurt Kenya's economy, in particular the tourism sector, which earns roughly

\$1 billion a year in revenue and generates thousands of jobs—many of them in poor, marginalized areas considered vulnerable to radicalization, like the Kenyan coast where al-Shabab has found recruits.

The fact that last week's attack came at a time when historic changes are underway in the Horn of Africa puts a damper on the recent sense of optimism across the region. A year ago, Ethiopia's government declared

BELOW Security forces help civilians flee the scene of the attack at the 14 Riverside hotel-office complex in Nairobi, Kenya, Jan. 15, 2019 (AP photo by Ben Curtis).



**sweeping reforms** in response to anti-government protests. Ethiopia also announced a rapprochement with its erstwhile arch-enemy, Eritrea. The tectonic shifts in Ethiopia and its relations with its neighbors could eventually lead to a more democratic and stable Ethiopia and wider Horn of Africa. But there is still a long way to go, as entrenched Ethiopian interests, from ethnic disputes to military factions, fight to preserve the status quo. These changes affect Somalia, the focal point for every state in the Horn of Africa, which all want to contain al-Shabab but don't often agree on how to do it and have struggled to leverage international support.

Amid mounting geopolitical competition in the Red Sea, there has been **nascent cooperation** between Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti, designed to improve lucrative port access and commercial development. Oil-rich Gulf countries are spending big, pursuing regional interests that are reshaping traditional spheres of influence and also **exacerbating fault lines**.

The 14 Riverside attack was proof of al-Shabab's ability to go undetected and its willingness to strike Kenya, even as it continues its deadly work inside Somalia. The fallout for Kenya and its international security partners, including the United States, could be hefty, eroding the economic and security gains made since the last major attack in Nairobi five years ago. For the rest of the Horn of Africa, al-Shabab remains a symptom of Somalia's instability, something the current reform drive in the region cannot overlook.

*Ilya Gridneff is a Somalia analyst based in Nairobi, Kenya. He was previously an East Africa correspondent for Bloomberg and has also reported for The Associated Press in South Sudan.*

**World Politics Review LLC  
81 Prospect Street  
Brooklyn  
NY 11201-1473**

**+1.917.740.9773  
subscriptions@worldpoliticsreview.com  
www.worldpoliticsreview.com**

World Politics Review provides uncompromising analysis of critical global trends to give policymakers, analysts, academics and readers with a deep interest in international affairs the context they need to have the confidence they want. Written by a network of leading experts and influential observers on the ground, our substantive content gives you access to comprehensive and detailed perspectives that are as valuable as they are rare. Though strictly nonpartisan with regard to political party affiliation or allegiance, WPR can be broadly described as liberal internationalist, combining a reality-based approach that recognizes the need for all the tools and instruments of statecraft with a preference for diplomacy and multilateralism in support of a rules- and norms-based global order. While WPR is a for-profit, privately owned company, it is also a mission-based organization, committed to integrity, quality, and the principles of an intellectually honest press whose exclusive purpose is to inform readers.

Copyright © 2020 World Politics Review LLC. All rights reserved.

**Like this report? Subscribe now to get unlimited access to must-read news, analysis, and opinion from top experts.**

**Try an all-access subscription to World Politics Review.**

Subscribing to WPR is like no other resource—it's like having your own personal researcher and analyst for news and events around the globe. Subscribe now, and you'll get:

- Immediate and instant access to the full searchable library of 10,000+ articles.
- Daily articles with original analysis, written by leading topic experts, delivered to you every weekday.
- Daily links to must-read news, analysis, and opinion from top sources around the globe, curated by our keen-eyed team of editors.
- Weekly in-depth reports and reported features.
- Smartphone- and tablet-friendly website.
- PDF versions of most articles for easy offline reading, at your leisure.

**YES! I WANT TO SUBSCRIBE NOW**