



Buhari's Nigeria: more (in)security?

by Luca Nuzzo

It is hard to imagine a more complex set of issues than the one currently facing Nigerian President Buhari: slow economic growth, low oil production, corruption scandals, high unemployment, uprisings in the Niger Delta and Boko Haram in the north are all interlinked problems which are jeopardising the stability of one of the most strategically important countries in West Africa.

President Buhari came to power just over one year ago partly thanks to his pledge to reform Nigeria's oil industry, which has long suffered from corruption and mismanagement. Despite proven reserves of 37 billion barrels of crude (11th largest in the world), Nigeria recently lost its position as Africa's top oil producer to Angola. While the oil price collapse that began in mid-2014 forced companies to cut investment worldwide, there was even less incentive to back Nigerian projects because of the country's political uncertainties.

And although the global drop in oil prices and the rise of the international interest rates are not the fault of the Nigerian government, oil production has nevertheless fallen to its lowest-ever levels mainly due to the state's inability to protect its pipelines in the Niger Delta region from sabotage.

Instability to the north and south

Although the security situation in the country's northeast has started to improve slightly, a new

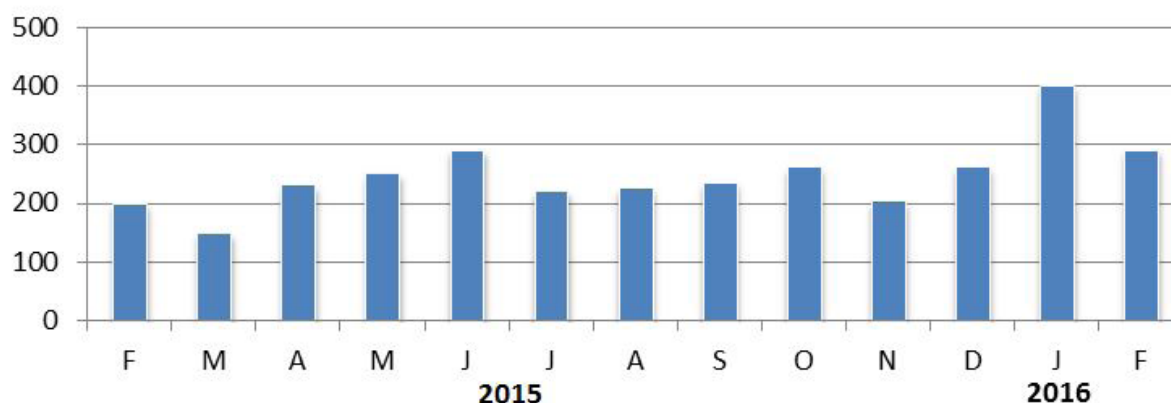
generation of militants in the Niger Delta is beginning to pose a serious threat. This is largely because attacks on oil and gas installations have a greater and more direct impact on the country's economy than jihadist activities in the less densely populated north.

The militant group the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) has been carrying out such attacks since January this year. The members of this shadowy organisation are hard to identify, but locals are said to believe that the group is comprised primarily of elements of previous militant groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) or the Niger Delta People's Salvation Front which were excluded from the government's amnesty programme launched by former President Yar'Adua seven years ago.

However, the MEND has issued a statement dissociating itself from the NDA and accused the group of attempting to destabilise Buhari's government. This potentially means that a three-sided conflict is a possibility: a triangular fight between new and old militant groups, and the Nigerian armed forces.

The NDA has issued some bold political demands: international oil companies must leave the Delta immediately; the government's amnesty programme for ex-militants should be expanded; and greater economic and political devolution, if not outright independence is to be

Pipeline breaks in Nigeria



Data source: CEEMarketwatch

granted to the Niger Delta. If these demands are not met, the NDA has threatened to cripple the entire oil and gas industry, the mainstay of the Nigerian economy. Bluster or not, their attacks to date have, however, led to a decline in oil exports and the shutdown of several gas-fuelled power stations.

A regional problem

While some progress has been made in the fight against Boko Haram, the terrorist group is still far from being defeated: although domestically it now seems largely confined to rural parts of Nigeria's northeast (principally in Borno), it has also crossed borders and expanded its activities to include the area around Lake Chad. The region in which Boko Haram is active is also conducive to an insurgency: its long external borders have allowed the group to seek refuge, develop support networks and procure weapons in an area of porous frontiers and in provinces which are marginal peripheries in neighbouring states.

Yet despite the establishment of several permanent bases along the borders with Cameroon and Niger from where it can launch raids, Boko Haram's spread into neighbours appears to have peaked in 2014-2015. Although a series of suicide bombings have struck Cameroonian towns and garrisons recently, these attacks seem to have less to do with military strategy and more to do with acquiring resources and sending a political message that the group is still a force to be reckoned with.

That said, any further destabilisation of the Lake Chad region and the subsequent movement of population could severely increase the flow of migrants taking the so-called central Mediterranean route towards Europe. As it currently stands, the route is already under intense migratory pressure: according to Frontex, the

EU border agency, more than 27,000 migrants took this route between January-April 2016 – almost 8,000 of whom were from Nigeria and Chad.

Boko Haram shares certain characteristics with the Uganda-born Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a force also originally driven by a radical, religion-based rejection of society which increasingly resembles a mainstream (if ultraviolet) criminal outfit.

But because of Boko Haram's connections to the global jihadist movement (it pledged allegiance to Daesh in March last year, for example), it has, unlike the LRA, developed a thorough understanding of the devastating effects of terrorist attacks. Like other jihadist outfits, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), it may therefore become less of an insurgent force attached to a specific territory and more of a cell-based terror group striking at individual targets near and far.

It is uncertain if Nigeria will be able to capitalise on Boko Haram's current weakness, particularly in light of the delicate situation in the Niger Delta, low oil prices and a falling currency. Moreover, even if it is on the back foot, Boko Haram will be difficult to eradicate entirely because its origins can be traced back to Nigeria's deep (and yet to be resolved) structural problems. Large-scale oil-fueled corruption, the chronic mismanagement of public funds, widespread poverty, low levels of education, the instrumentalisation of sharia law by northern elites, and dysfunctional federalism all contributed to creating fertile conditions for extremists to exploit.

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