

# NIGERIA: ESCALATION OF BOKO HARAM THREAT

Nigerian militant Islamist group Boko Haram has stepped up its insurgency since the start of 2014, killing hundreds of civilians in three northeastern states, infiltrating central states and neighbouring countries, and waging a new improvised explosive device (IED) campaign in Jos and the federal capital Abuja. The 15 April abduction of 276 schoolgirls from their school in Chibok drew international attention and triggered pledges of assistance from the United States and other Western countries. However, the onus to quell the insurgency remains on Nigeria's ineffective military, which currently seems powerless to achieve this. Martin Roberts examines the threat posed by Boko Haram and its probable impact ahead of the general election scheduled for February 2015. The group is now likely to commit mass casualty attacks across the Middle Belt and northern areas outside its stronghold, reprisal attacks in neighbouring countries providing assistance to Nigeria, and to target foreign nationals to kidnap for ransom.

## FORMATION OF BOKO HARAM AND ITS ADOPTION OF VIOLENCE

Boko Haram emerged from a radical group of Islamist youths who worshipped at the same mosque in Maiduguri, capital of Borno State, in the 1990s. The group's name is often translated as "Western education is forbidden", but its preferred title of Jama'atu Ahlu-Sunnah Lidda'Awati wal Jihad (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad) more accurately reflects its primary objective of creating an Islamic state adhering to its fundamentalist Salafist interpretation.

Former leader Muhammad Yusuf's charismatic preaching and criticism of government failures and corruption won him a following across the majority Muslim north. Confrontations between his supporters and the police intensified in 2009. In July that year, troops killed approximately 800 Boko Haram followers, destroyed its mosque, and arrested Yusuf, who was then extra-judicially executed. A year later, upon release from custody, Yusuf's deputy, Abubakar Shekau, announced that he had taken control, and began to launch major attacks – marking the adoption of a strategy of violence. The group not only targeted security forces, government officials, politicians, and Christians, but also critical Muslim clerics, traditional leaders, and civilians in a mainly indiscriminate bombing campaign.



**Martin Roberts**  
Senior Analyst, Sub-Saharan Africa,  
IHS Country Risk

### Contributors:

Hugo Foster, Analyst, Risk Indicators and Analytics, IHS Country Risk  
Matthew Henman, Manager, Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, IHS Country Risk

**In 2014, 1,356 fatalities from Boko Haram attacks were recorded to 26 May, compared to a total of 1,852 between 2010 and 2013**



## BOKO HARAM'S TACTICAL TARGETING TRENDS

Since mid-2010, Boko Haram's armed campaign has developed in terms of its geographical expansion, the frequency and intensity of its operations, and its tactical and targeting preferences.

In 2010 and 2011 the insurgency was characterised by relatively high-tempo, low-intensity operations, typified by small-arms attacks on security forces and local officials, mainly around Maiduguri. However, the group began to extend its operations geographically, with IED attacks in central Plateau State in December 2010, and two significant suicide attacks in Abuja in June (targeting the police headquarters) and August 2011 (targeting the United Nations building).

The frequency of attacks escalated towards the end of 2011 and into 2012. Indeed, more than 40% of all Boko Haram attacks between 2010 and May 2014 were recorded in a nine-month period between October 2011 and June 2012. This period also marked a qualitative improvement in the group's capabilities. On two particular occasions – in Yobe State in November 2011 and Kano State in January 2012 – Boko Haram militants launched co-ordinated attacks, killing almost 350 people in total.

During the second half of 2012, probably as a consequence of increased security force activity and informal discussions regarding government

talks, Boko Haram operations decreased in intensity and frequency. Nevertheless, mass-casualty operations continued periodically, and in May 2013 the government announced a state of emergency in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe states, deploying a substantial military force. Thereafter, Boko Haram's insurgency took on several key characteristics.

First, its geographical bounds contracted significantly, with the majority of attacks tightly concentrated in and around Maiduguri, maybe as a consequence of being penned in by security forces. However continuing attacks outside the northeast – particularly in Abuja in April 2014 and Jos in Plateau state in May – illustrate that the group still retains the capacity to operate beyond these confines.

Secondly, there was a drastic shift in the intensity of the group's operations. Although the number of attacks remained comparatively low, the number of casualties increased radically following the declaration and subsequent renewal of the state of emergency. From January 2010 to March 2013, on average 2.9 people were killed per Boko Haram attack. Between April 2013 and May 2014 this increased to 17.7 fatalities per attack, and in 2014 alone this average rose further to 27.9. The scale of Boko Haram violence in 2014 is underlined by the fact that 1,356 fatalities were recorded between 1 January and 26 May 2014, compared to a total of 1,852 between 2010 and 2013.

Such operations have also been notable for the seemingly punitive targeting of civilians, with attacks characterised by the destruction of villages and the slaughter of inhabitants. Although attacks targeting security forces have continued in tandem, a significant shift in targeting preference has occurred since mid-2013, with the targeted yet indiscriminate use of violence against the local civilian population a defining characteristic of Boko Haram's current insurgency.

## THREAT TO COMMERCIAL ASSETS

In addition to operations against its primary target groups, Boko Haram has targeted commercial assets in the northeast. Such periodic operations are typically carried out for tactical reasons, and are not assessed to be indicative of a wider agenda.

Throughout 2011 and 2012, Boko Haram militants attacked a series of banks in Borno and neighbouring states, largely as a means of generating funds. More specific attacks on commercial assets came in September 2012 when militants destroyed at least 24 mobile phone masts belonging to nine different companies, including MTN Group and Emirates Telecommunications Corporation (Etisalat), in a series of operations across urban centres in the northeast. In claiming the attacks, Boko Haram accused the companies of providing assistance to security forces in tracking the group. Since May 2013 the government has periodically shut down the mobile network in the northeast in order to disrupt militant communications; attacks on telecoms assets are now rare as a consequence. However, in April and May 2014 there was a further spate of attacks on commercial assets, targeting telecoms masts owned by MTN, Etisalat, and Globacom, as well as a branch of First Bank.

## There are clear signs that elements of Ansaru have rebuilt relations with Boko Haram

### ANSARU BREAKAWAY AND ITS JIHADIST LINKS

In January 2012, a new group was formed, claiming to be a "humane" alternative to Boko Haram, which would only target the Nigerian government and Christians in "self-defence". Jamaatu Ansarul Muslimina fi Biladis Sudan, known as Ansaru, has had close links with transnational jihadist groups espousing a more broadly anti-Western outlook than Boko Haram's primarily domestic focus, and its operatives have received training from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and related groups in Mali, and possibly even from Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen in Somalia. Ansaru has specialised in kidnappings for ransom, demonstrated in the abduction of a French engineer in Katsina in December 2012, and seven foreign engineers – who were later killed – in Bauchi in February 2013.

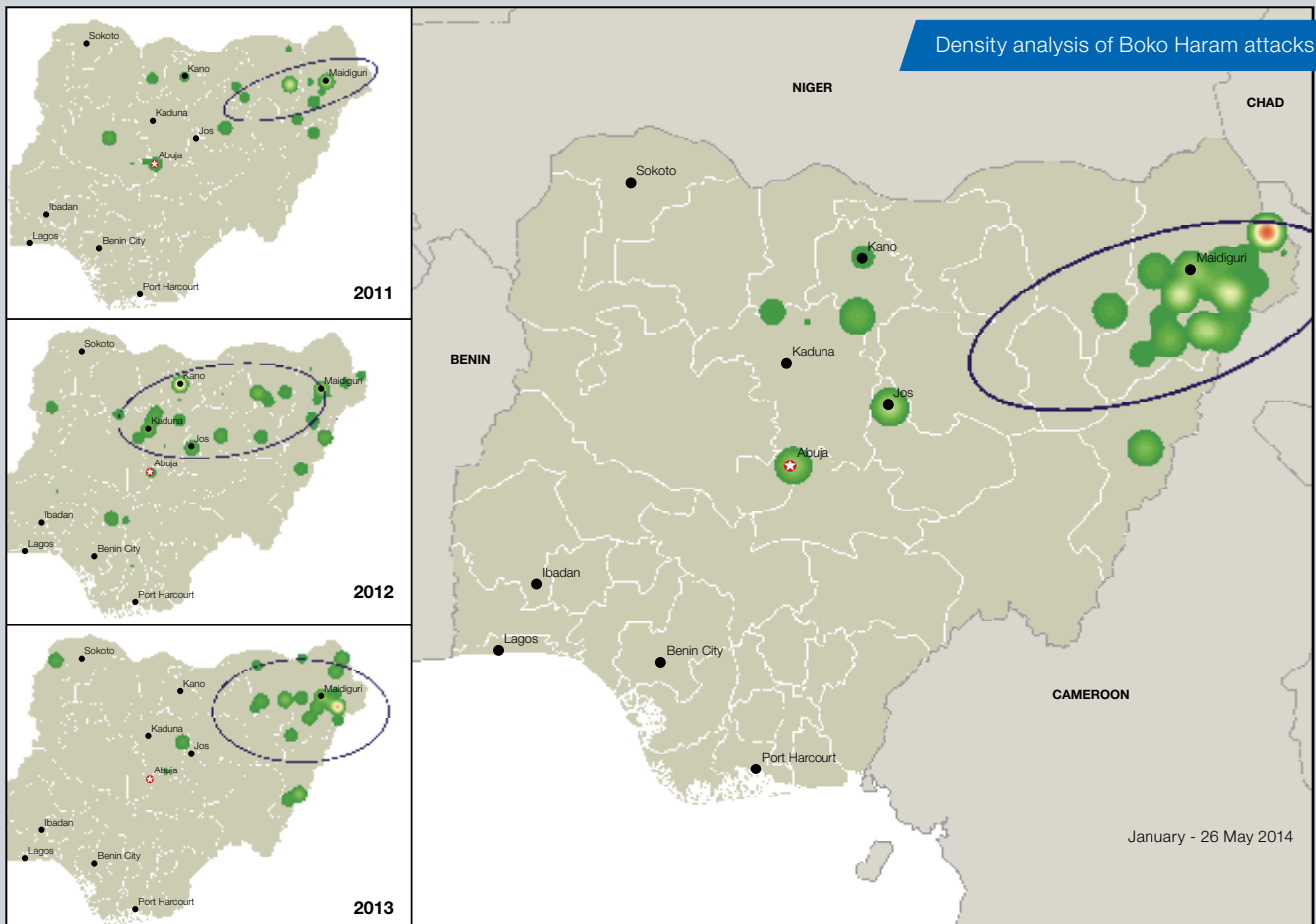
Although French intervention in northern Mali in early 2013 virtually severed Ansaru's Sahelian networks, there are clear signs that elements of the group have rebuilt relations with Boko Haram. The kidnapping of a French family in northern Cameroon in February bore all the hallmarks of Ansaru, but the Cameroonian government agreed to release 19 Boko Haram prisoners (in addition to a ransom being paid in exchange for the release of the French hostages). Additionally, following the kidnapping of a French priest in November 2013, again in Cameroon, Boko Haram's intermediary told Agence France-Presse that the operation was "co-ordinated with Ansaru".

Ansaru and Boko Haram have probably been drawing even closer together following the designation of both groups as Foreign Terrorist Organisations by the United States in November 2013. Boko Haram stands to benefit from Ansaru's regionally diverse membership and experienced militants, who could both train new recruits and smuggle heavy weapons into Borno State from Cameroon and Chad.





## BOKO HARAM ATTACKS TREND



### Boko Haram attacks and fatalities trend



Source: Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre

These maps use density analysis to show the evolving distribution of Boko Haram attacks from one year to the next. This method factors in both the frequency and scale (measured in number of fatalities) of attacks in a given area. All areas represented in green experienced attacks, but the primary statistical “hotspots” are those locations that show up in yellow and especially red. The density heat-map for each year is complemented by a standard deviational ellipse, shown in blue. This ellipse shows the evolving dispersion and directional trend of the attacks from year to year, with the weight of attack data for 2013 and 2014 evidently falling further to the east than was the case in 2012.

## OUTLOOK FOR FUTURE GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD OF MILITANT ATTACKS

Boko Haram has proved it can not only continue to terrorise communities in northeast Nigeria, but also stage mass casualty attacks outside its stronghold. Two vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs) were detonated at the Nyanya bus park in Abuja's suburbs on 14 April and 1 May 2014, and a VBIED attack at a market in Jos, the main city in the Middle Belt region, on 20 May killed at least 130 people. A defence ministry spokesman stated on 23 April that soldiers had also arrested a "group of terrorists" masquerading as Fulani herdsmen in the eastern state of Taraba.

The sophistication of the IED attacks also supports reports from the Nigerian security services that, like Ansaru, Boko Haram operatives have received training from Islamist groups in Mali and possibly Somalia. It further suggests that the group is activating sleeper cells and support networks in a show of strength following the announcement of Western assistance to the Nigerian government. However, the Abuja bombings also suggest that it is currently unable to pierce high security guarding government buildings and installations, with security considerably stepped up in the federal capital since the two 2011 suicide bombings.

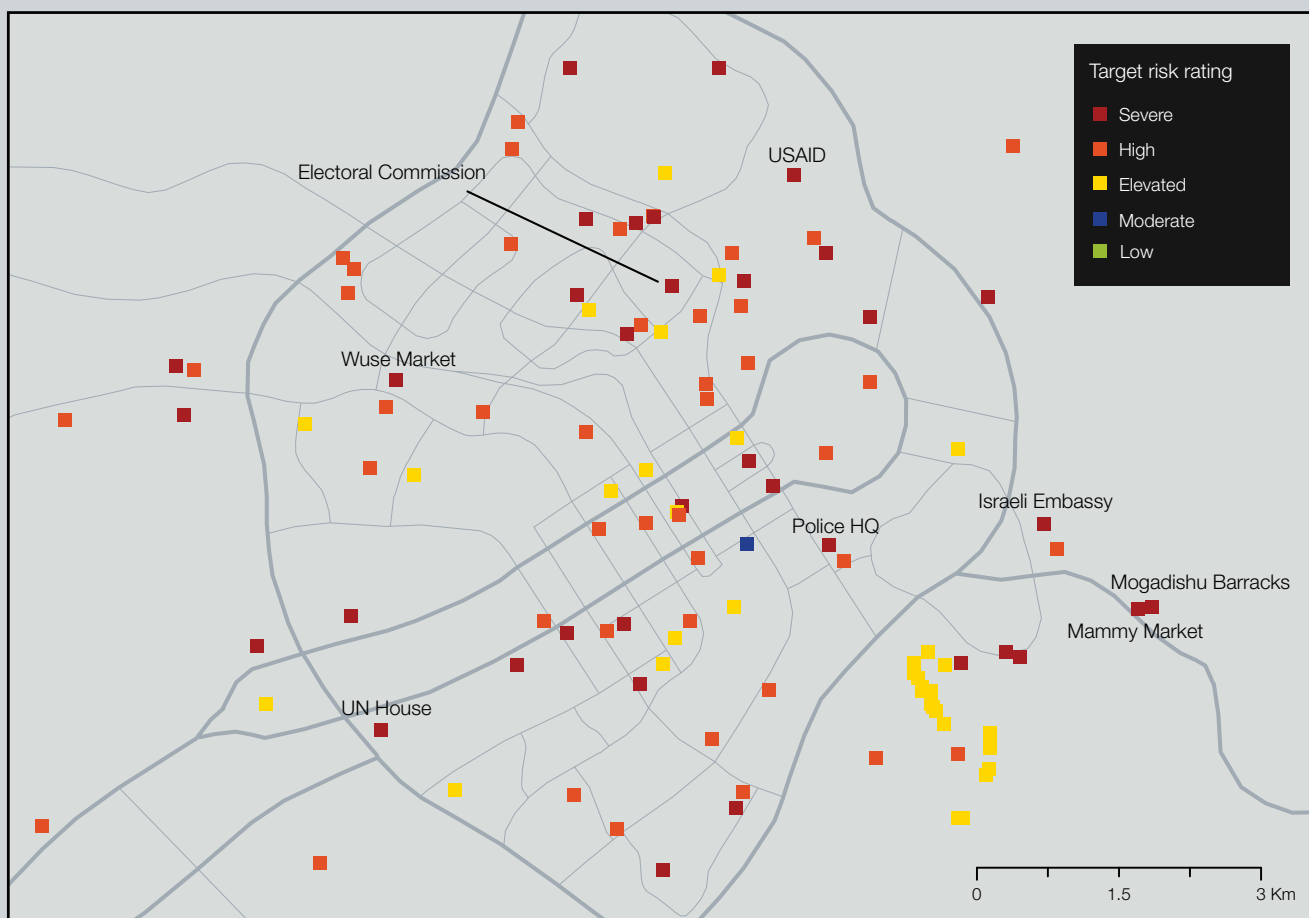
However, there is certainly a high risk of further VBIED attacks in cities across the north, such as Bauchi, Kaduna, Kano, and Sokoto, where Boko Haram established strong networks before its initial launch in 2009.

The threat level also remains high across the Middle Belt states of Benue, Kogi, Nassarawa, Plateau, and Taraba. Plateau capital Jos is of particular significance because of Boko Haram's interest in fomenting sectarian violence along this "fault line" between the mainly Muslim north and majority Christian south, where there is also long-standing conflict over land use. The principal aim of attacks here would be to cause mass casualties, targeting markets, entertainment venues, and churches rather than better-protected government and security service buildings.

In a video released on 19 February 2014, Shekau made his first direct threat to attack energy assets in the Delta, from which Nigeria derives more than 90% of its foreign exchange earnings. However, even with the backing of Ansaru's network, Boko Haram still lacks local support and would face hostility from host communities in an area at least 800 kilometres from its northeast main operating base. As such, the group is unlikely to be able to sustain the same frequency of attacks in major southern and eastern cities, including Lagos and Port Harcourt, as they are able to in the north. The group is more likely to stage one-off IED attacks in these southern economic hubs, as seen in 2011 during Boko Haram's initial foray into Abuja. Energy assets in the north, mainly downstream infrastructure, are exposed to Boko Haram attacks as part of the group's broader attempt to disrupt government access to finances.



## IDENTIFYING TERRORIST TARGETS IN ABUJA



Source: IHS TerrorRisk

Abuja: major terrorist targets

Although security measures restrict militant access to the centre of the capital, Abuja nonetheless presents Islamist militants with a target-rich environment. Targets range from relatively accessible soft target locations, such as suburban shopping malls and the Mammy and Wuse markets, which offer militants the opportunity to inflict large-scale casualties, through to higher value symbolic targets that are likely to be better secured.

The latter include Nigerian government and security force targets and assets associated with Western governments and companies, particularly those from France, Israel, the UK, and US, which have offered limited technical assistance to Nigerian security forces fighting Boko Haram.

The locations featured in the map above are extracted from IHS TerrorRisk, a geospatial dataset of over 5,300 terrorist targets worldwide. Targets are picked out on the basis of open source intelligence, an assessment of the priorities and capabilities of militant actors operating in a particular context, and analysts' knowledge of the local urban terrain. All targets are supported by a qualitative description of the risk profile to that location, recent intelligence, and a numeric risk rating enabling comparison on a global scale.

**The risk of further attacks in Abuja is high, particularly in the less-protected suburbs**

## THREAT TO NIGERIA'S NEIGHBOURS

The threat to Nigeria's neighbours is very high. Cameroon announced at the end of May 2014 that it was deploying 3,000 extra troops to guard its 2,000 km frontier with Nigeria, a region normally patrolled by just 1,000 soldiers and gendarmes. This followed the 5 April kidnap of two Italian priests and a Canadian nun from Meri – all released on 1 June. Ten Chinese employees of construction firm Sinohydro Corporation were seized by militants on 16 May near the town of Waza in a raid, which left two Cameroonian soldiers dead. Following a summit in Paris the next day, Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan announced a new force to patrol the border area around Lake Chad, with Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria, and Niger providing a battalion each.

This will undoubtedly make these contributor countries targets for retaliatory action by Boko Haram, which is likely to kill large numbers of civilians and kidnap expatriates to raise funds. Areas at highest risk include the Far North and North provinces of Cameroon; the Kousseri border post between Cameroon and Chad; and possibly even the Chadian capital N'Djamena, which is less than 300 km from Maiduguri. Boko Haram is also likely to attempt abduction of expatriates and attacks on vehicles in transit in Diffa in southern Niger and Chinese oil operations a few kilometres to the north in the Lake Chad basin. These attempts are likely to be mitigated in Chad and Cameroon in particular by the greater effectiveness of their security forces compared to Nigeria's.

The expansion of Boko Haram's operating range, its target set, and technical capability depends heavily on leveraging support from the wider Al-Qaeda network. Boko Haram will seek to capitalise on negative sentiment generated by Western technical assistance given to help Nigeria track down the still-missing abducted schoolgirls. However, unless Western intervention is scaled up considerably, even a direct appeal by Shekau is unlikely to gain much traction, with Boko Haram's primarily domestic outlook not sufficiently resonating with Al-Qaeda's trans-national outlook.



## MILITARY WEAKNESSES EXPOSED BY BOKO HARAM

Despite Jonathan's declaration of "total war" on Boko Haram in the wake of the Chibok abductions and subsequent international assistance, Nigeria's military appears completely unable to stem the tide of Boko Haram's expansion. Several Nigerian newspapers carried reports on 3 June that 10 generals and five other senior officers had been found guilty at courts martial of supplying arms and information to Boko Haram, although this was flatly denied by the defence ministry. Morale among soldiers deployed to the northeast is at rock bottom. Soldiers in the 7th Division based at Maiduguri mutinied on 14 May and fired at the vehicle of their divisional commander, who they blamed for the death of 12 soldiers returning from Chibok, attacked in a night ambush.

Militants have continued to carry out almost daily slaughters in isolated communities, apparently able to act with virtual impunity. Despite the headline pledges of assistance from France, Israel, the UK, and the US, this has largely been limited to US-run surveillance and reconnaissance flights, and the despatch of counter-terrorism, intelligence-gathering, and hostage negotiation experts. "Game-changing" foreign military assistance is extremely unlikely to materialise, meaning the burden of countering the insurgents rests firmly on the limited capabilities of the Nigerian armed forces.

**Cameroon, Chad, and Niger are targets for retaliatory action by Boko Haram**





### FAILURE TO NEGOTIATE IS LIKELY TO FRACTURE NIGERIA

It is becoming increasingly clear that because the Nigerian government and military do not have the resources or the capability to defeat Boko Haram – at least in the next 12 months – a negotiated settlement is the only viable solution. Reaching such an agreement is complicated by a range of difficulties: the problems of finding a credible Boko Haram negotiator; the lack of faith on both sides; and the demands now likely to be made by Boko Haram from a position of strength, including the implementation of sharia (Islamic law) and the immediate release of all Boko Haram fighters. Meeting these demands would be intolerable for the Nigerian south, Nigeria's international supporters, and the president, who has claimed for so long to be winning the war against Boko Haram.

The general election scheduled for February 2015 is effectively a deadline for significant progress to be made, either militarily or through negotiations. Unless security improves considerably it is impossible to envisage polls in the northeast; it is also doubtful that many other northern states could provide an acceptable level of election security. However, if the election does not go ahead in certain areas, or is postponed, severe outbreaks of civil unrest in Kano, Kaduna, Sokoto, and Zaria, as well as Jos, are likely. This unrest will feature violent confrontations between protesters and security forces, with a high risk of fatalities. Government buildings will be prime targets for arson and vandalism, raising collateral risks of death and injury for bystanders and damage to premises located around likely protest sites in central areas.

An increasingly likely scenario is Boko Haram effectively achieving its aim of making the country ungovernable and subsequently splitting it in two. Relentless Boko Haram attacks focusing increasingly on Christian targets, the Middle Belt, Abuja and even further south would be very likely to trigger reprisal action against Muslims and mosques in the south, turning the original insurgency into an overtly sectarian conflict. This action could be carried out by existing Delta militant groups – particularly the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta – which are strongly in favour of Bayelsa-native Jonathan, reinforced by other ethnically based militia and impromptu self-defence groups along the lines of the Civilian Joint Task Force set up in the northeast to counteract Boko Haram.

This scenario could also be triggered by election-related developments such as attempts to prevent Jonathan's candidacy in favour of a northerner – especially one alleged to have sympathies with Boko Haram – or attacks on ruling party assets and intimidation campaigns in the north ahead of the poll. An already stretched security apparatus could easily be overwhelmed by a spread of violent civil unrest, allowing the military high command to justify taking control of the country and deploying troops in major cities to try to contain violence. Even then, the limitations of the Nigerian military exposed by the Boko Haram insurgency suggest it may not be capable of bringing that violence under control and preventing civil war. Subsequent pressure to split the country along its east-west fault line and form two separate states would almost certainly lead to a northern state more Salafist in outlook, and operating under sharia ■