

Marginalisation, insurgency and civilian insecurity: Boko Haram and the Lord's Resistance Army

Caitriona Dowd & Adam Drury

To cite this article: Caitriona Dowd & Adam Drury (2017): Marginalisation, insurgency and civilian insecurity: Boko Haram and the Lord's Resistance Army, *Peacebuilding*, DOI: [10.1080/21647259.2016.1277011](https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2016.1277011)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2016.1277011>



© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 28 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 216



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Marginalisation, insurgency and civilian insecurity: Boko Haram and the Lord's Resistance Army

Caitriona Dowd^a and Adam Drury^b

^aInstitute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK; ^bDepartment for International Development, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen a dramatic escalation in the levels and intensity of violence associated with the northern Nigerian Islamist group, commonly referred to as 'Boko Haram'. The deliberate and brutal targeting of civilians has been an increasingly pronounced feature of this conflict, contributing to acute civilian vulnerability. Often ascribed to the specific ideological and ethno-religious configuration of Boko Haram, we argue that this violence is similar to that of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), tactically and in the evolution of both groups over time. In addition, violence inflicted on civilians by both groups has necessitated complex strategies of civilian navigation of insecurity risks, including the establishment of informal local security providers. Drawing on both quantitative conflict event data, and qualitative sources, we present a comparative analysis of Boko Haram and the LRA to demonstrate the importance of common strategies of group mobilisation, evolution in rhetoric and tactics, and armed state and non-state responses to insurgency, in driving violence against civilians in particular. The findings reflect the importance of shared local and historical conditions in producing violence; and placing civilian protection, and the multifaceted ways in which it is undermined, including by state responses, at the centre of peacebuilding theory and practice.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 13 December 2016
Accepted 13 February 2017

KEYWORDS

Conflict; civil war; Nigeria; Uganda; religious violence; extremism

The escalation of violence in Northern Nigeria since 2013 has focused international attention on the troubled West African country. The conflict has witnessed intense violence and territorial seizure by the militant Islamist group *Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad*, commonly and hereafter referred to as 'Boko Haram'. The deliberate targeting of civilians has been increasingly pronounced in this conflict, contributing to acute civilian insecurity, large-scale displacement, and regionalised humanitarian crisis.

Boko Haram's brutal, and seemingly exceptional, degree of anti-civilian violence has fed narratives portraying the group as uniquely, irrationally, violent.¹ This is often attributed to the group's ideological and ethno-religious configuration, with explanations rooted in the exceptionalism of the group, and of Islamic militancy. We argue, however, that Boko

CONTACT Caitriona Dowd  c.dowd@ids.ac.uk

¹See Hakeem Onapajo and Okeke Uzodike, 'Boko Haram Terrorism in Nigeria', *African Security Review* 21, no. 3 (2012): 24–39; and Daniel Egiegba Agbiboa, 'The Nigerian Burden: Religious Identity, Conflict, and the Current Terrorism of Boko Haram', *Conflict, Security and Development* 13, no. 1 (2013): 1–29.

© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Haram's strategies are in many ways similar to those employed in other conflicts in Africa with drastically different ideological features. In particular, we identify similarities to violence by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a Ugandan militant group active in the Great Lakes region since the 1990s.

We use a mixed methods approach drawing on quantitative conflict event data and qualitative review of both groups to delineate similarities in patterns of violence; the evolution of group tactics over time; and the complex ways in which conflict-affected communities have navigated insecurity. These similarities point to shared features and drivers of violence in otherwise very different contexts, include a comparable mobilisation base rooted in communities' perceived marginalisation; a similar temporal evolution in violent tactics; and parallel, complex interactions with both state and other non-state armed groups.

The paper makes a number of contributions to existing debates concerning Boko Haram and the LRA, civilian targeting, and violent conflict more widely in Africa. We use innovative methodologies to empirically demonstrate similarities between the violence of Boko Haram and the LRA and challenge explanations of Boko Haram violence rooted in the uniqueness of Islamist militancy. By illustrating parallels between armed groups in two divergent contexts, we re-orient attention on the dynamics of violence in marginal spaces, its evolution over time, and conflict's complex nexus of non-state and state armed forces.

Our findings have particular relevance to debates surrounding peacebuilding and civilian targeting in conflict, indicating generalisable political, social and security dynamics contributing to intensified anti-civilian violence and impeding peacebuilding. The analysis illustrates that state security strategies have consequences and costs for civilian protection, as does support for, or reliance on, non-state paramilitaries. This illustrates the central importance of civilian protection in peacebuilding theory and practice, and the need to balance hard security approaches with accountability, reconciliation, and initiatives to address structural drivers of conflict as part of a strategy for building sustainable peace.

The first section introduces both groups, including empirical similarities in their patterns of violence, and common theoretical approaches to explaining these; the second section argues that similarities instead arise from parallels in both groups' bases of mobilisation, and shifting logics of recruitment and evolving tactical considerations over time; there follows an analysis of state and non-state responses to both groups; before concluding with a discussion of implications for future research and peacebuilding.

Overview and common explanations for Boko Haram and LRA violence

Boko Haram emerged in its current form in the late-2000s, but evolved significantly following clashes with Nigerian security forces in 2009, during which the group's leader, Mohammed Yusuf, died in police custody. Boko Haram regrouped under the leadership of Abubakar Shekau, and by 2014, Boko Haram had escalated attacks dramatically, and seized sizeable territory.² The group has since suffered considerable territorial losses, as a regional military effort has shifted the balance.³ At the time of writing, Boko Haram nevertheless

²Abiodun Alao, 'Islamic Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Nigeria', *Conflict, Security and Development* 13, no. 2 (2013): 127–147.

³Nigeria Security Network (NSN). *NSN Special Report: The end of Boko Haram?* (2015), <https://nigeriasecuritynetwork.org/2015/03/19/special-report-the-end-of-boko-haram/> (accessed September 14, 2016).

retains the ability to inflict serious harm, particularly on civilians, including through suicide bombings and mass-casualty attacks.

The LRA emerged in the late-1980s, at a time when multiple armed groups were waging war against the Ugandan government. It relied on guerrilla tactics, and engaged in extensive civilian targeting, often abducting and forcibly recruiting children. More extensive attempts at political negotiation were carried out in Uganda than in Nigeria to date, although multiple peace negotiations failed. The Ugandan military made strategic advances in the mid- to late-2000s, ultimately pushing the LRA out of Uganda and into South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Today, the group's strength is greatly reduced, although it retains operational capacity, continues to disproportionately target civilians, and is active as far afield as Central African Republic, attesting to a truly regionalised geography of insecurity.

Superficially, these two groups are very different, operating in different regions and at different times; and frame their violence with reference to discrete narratives. However, there are notable similarities in their violence. The most immediate is the use of violence against unarmed civilians – a common feature of lower intensity conflicts and insurgencies in Africa, but particularly acute in these cases. The LRA became notorious in the mid-2000s for its violent campaign in Northern Uganda, with widespread mutilation, and child abduction making international headlines. Boko Haram has likewise escalated its indiscriminate targeting of civilians over time including through wholesale assaults on settlements, a campaign of bombings⁴ and tactics of forced conscription and 'marriage'.⁵ According to data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data-set (ACLED), approximately half the violence attributed to Boko Haram and the LRA (49% and 54%, respectively) involves civilian targeting; a further 44–47% involves engagement with state and external forces; while 2–4% involves conflicts with other non-state armed groups.⁶

The similarities, however, go beyond shared tactics: there is also a distinct temporal pattern to the evolution of both groups' violence. Both the LRA and Boko Haram initially primarily engaged with state security forces, with levels of civilian targeting largely correlated (both directionally and in absolute levels) with clashes with the state (Phase 1). Both groups subsequently witnessed a spike in activity corresponding to an intensified military campaign against them, and an escalation in anti-civilian violence, often outstripping rates of battles (Phase 2). For the LRA, this intensified campaign resulted in an overall drop in activity levels, followed by a sharp and disproportionate increase in levels of violence against civilians (Phase 3). In the case of Boko Haram, the dynamics of the third phase begin to become apparent from late-2014 onwards, fuelled in part by recent suicide bombings attributed to the group. Contrary to previous periods when anti-civilian violence was perpetrated at levels roughly comparable to, if not lower than, battles, civilian targeting subsequently became the primary activity of both groups (Figure 1).

⁴Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'Spiralling Violence: Boko Haram Attacks and Security Force Abuses in Nigeria', October 11, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/10/11/spiraling-violence/boko-haram-attacks-and-security-force-abuses-nigeria> (accessed July 28, 2016).

⁵IRIN, 'Updated Timeline of Boko Haram Attacks and Related Violence', December 12, 2013, <http://www.irinnews.org/report/99319/updated-timeline-of-boko-haram-attacks-and-related-violence> (accessed July 25, 2015); and Amnesty International, 'Our Job is to Shoot, Slaughter and Kill': Boko Haram's Reign of Terror in North-east Nigeria, April 14, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/1360/2015/en/> (accessed July 28, 2016).

⁶Data: ACLED, V6, <http://www.acleddata.com/data/version-6-data-1997-2015/> (accessed July 28, 2016).

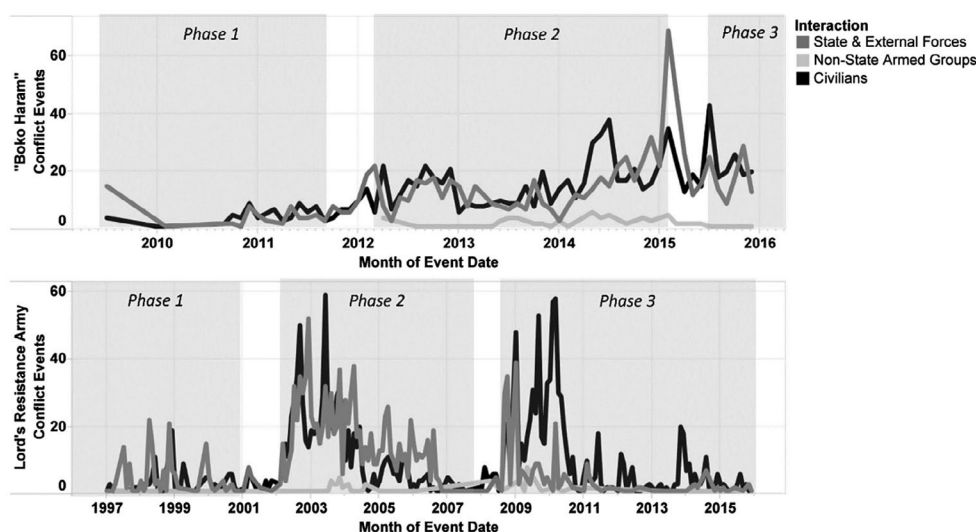


Figure 1. Violence involving the LRA and Boko Haram, 1997–2015. Data source: ACLED.

Much existing research explains these features of Boko Haram violence in relation to ideological characteristics of Islamist conflicts.⁷ Approaches typically emphasise the group's religious agenda, framing its violence as irrational and divorced from legitimate grievances.⁸ Analyses of the LRA also portray 'Kony as madman',⁹ or 'the myth of madness',¹⁰ illustrating the extent to which 'the LRA war is held up as an example of barbarism and irrationality in contemporary Africa, with little attempt to contextualize, historicize, or even explain the conflict'.¹¹ Such approaches sit in a longer history of explanations of African conflict as 'irrational', a narrative robustly challenged by several studies.¹² Other approaches that seek to generate a deeper understanding of the conflict, have nevertheless emphasised the specificity of the LRA, stating that it 'is not just another rebellious movement in sub-Saharan Africa'.¹³

In addition to approaches emphasising the uniqueness of ethno-religiously mobilised violence, both groups have also been subject to analyses informed by prevalent perceptions of sub-national cleavages in each country, among southern Ugandans, for example, 'of an allegedly barbaric north',¹⁴ and the association of Islamist militancy with 'the presumed backwardness and conservatism' of groups in Nigeria's north.¹⁵ Though divisive, these

⁷See Olawale Ismail, 'Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in West Africa: Implications for African and International Security', *Conflict, Security and Development* 13, no. 2 (2013): 209–230.

⁸See Onapajo and Uzodike, 'Boko Haram Terrorism in Nigeria'.

⁹Kevin Dunn, 'Uganda: The Lord's Resistance Army', in *African Guerrillas: Raging against the Machine*, ed. Morten Bøås and Kevin Dunn (London: Lynne Rienner, 2007), 131–150.

¹⁰James Bevan, 'The Myth of Madness: Cold Rationality and 'resource' Plunder by the Lord's Resistance Army', *Civil Wars* 9, no. 4 (2007): 343–358.

¹¹Dunn, 'Uganda: The Lord's Resistance Army', 131; and Bevan, 'The Myth of Madness'.

¹²See Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest* (Oxford: James Currey, 1996); and David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey, 2006).

¹³Ruddy Doom and Koen Vlassenroot, 'Kony's Message: A New Koine? The Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda', *African Affairs* 98, no. 390 (1999): 5–36, 5.

¹⁴Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot, *The Lord's Resistance Army: Myth and Reality* (New York: Zed Books, 2010).

¹⁵Hannah Hoehchner, 'Traditional Quranic Students (*Almajirai*) in Nigeria: Fair Game for Unfair Accusations?' in *Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, ed. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014), 63–84.

narrative constructions reflect underlying inequality and socio-economic marginalisation within both countries. For example, the LRA conflict has been explained with reference to long-standing grievances and historical legacies of inequality in northern Uganda.¹⁶ Likewise, Boko Haram's emergence has been explained in relation to underlying drivers including marginalisation, inequality,¹⁷ and historical violence.¹⁸

This research seeks to interrogate and build on these theories in several ways. First, we present a challenge to theories of Boko Haram and LRA exceptionalism by demonstrating empirical similarities between both groups. While both organisations have prompted extensive studies, there is a dearth of systematic comparative research, linking these to wider discussions in the theoretical literature on conflict in Africa.¹⁹ We seek to address this gap, using empirical data to test theories of the drivers of violence and its evolving dynamics, in order to inform a broader understanding of how violence emerges, evolves and relates to contextual factors.

In addition, while analyses of both groups rooted in inequality and marginalisation make important contributions to understanding group motivation and narratives, they primarily explain their emergence and early activity. Structural conditions can shape the formation of violent groups and how early recruits are mobilised, but tell us very little about the dynamic evolution of violence over time. By contrast, we frame our analysis of the emergence of both groups in conditions of marginalisation, before demonstrating the ways in which recruitment and mobilisation changed over time, and finally, exploring how persistent marginalisation and inequality shaped the responses of civilian populations to violence.

An analysis of similarities between these two groups does not seek to obscure important differences between them. Instead, it explores how similarities between two very different groups illustrate shared underlying dynamics, and leverages differences between the two to explain some of the variation in violence. There are several key differences between the groups which should be kept in mind, including that they have been active over different timescales, and are at different stages in their trajectories. They have also used some different tactics – such as suicide bombings – and espoused different ideological narratives. Despite these differences, similarities in tactics and temporal evolution remain. We propose that these can be explained through similarities in the initial mobilisation and evolution of both groups, and the nature of state and non-state responses to insurgency.

Mobilisation and ideological evolution over time

Boko Haram and the LRA share several common features in their bases of mobilisation, as well as the evolution and erosion of these narrative claims over time.

¹⁶Paul Jackson, 'The March of the Lord's Resistance Army: Greed or Grievance in Northern Uganda?' *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 13, no. 3 (2002): 29–52; and Dunn, 'Uganda: The Lord's Resistance Army'.

¹⁷Agbiboa, 'The Nigerian Burden'.

¹⁸Caitriona Dowd, 'Grievances, Governance and Islamist Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 53, no. 4 (2015): 505–531.

¹⁹Exceptions include a comparison of the LRA and Al Shabaab, and analyses which have highlighted ideological similarities in the use of religious philosophies and tactics of violence which include civilian kidnapping. See Emmanuel Kisangani, *Comparing Somalia's Al-Shabaab and Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2011); Daniel Solomon, 'A Tale of Two hashtags', *Securing Rights*, May 5, 2014, <https://securingrights.wordpress.com/2014/05/05/a-tale-of-two-hashtags/> (accessed July 25, 2015); and David Tolbert, 'Lessons of the Lord's Resistance Army', *Project Syndicate*, January 31, 2015, <https://securingrights.wordpress.com/2014/05/05/a-tale-of-two-hashtags/> (accessed July 25, 2015).

Bases of mobilisation

In both cases, economic, social and political inequalities concentrated in the state's margins fostered grievances among the wider population, which were leveraged to mobilise violence. Northern Uganda and Northern Nigeria share common experiences of regional under-development and higher levels of poverty than southern counterparts.²⁰ A geographic analysis of violence by both groups attests to a concentration of conflict in areas characterised by acute poverty and inequality. In Uganda, 89.5% of the LRA's violence was concentrated in the northern region, where the poverty head count and poverty gap index were most acute both preceding, and during, the conflict.²¹ In Nigeria, 76% of Boko Haram violence is concentrated in the North-East, which has long had some of the worst poverty and human development outcomes in the country.²²

These areas also share longer term patterns of historical conflict. Both the LRA and Boko Haram have roots in colonial experiences, and modern antecedents in the 1980s and 1990s. Indirect linkages can be traced from the LRA to the Holy Spirit Movement of Alice Lakwena and the insurgency of the Ugandan People's Democratic Army,²³ while Boko Haram operates in a context shaped by the legacy of Maitatsine violence,²⁴ violence surrounding the introduction of Shari'a,²⁵ and Boko Haram's immediate fore-runner, the so-called 'Nigerian Taliban' (*Al-Sunna wal Jama'a*).²⁶ These predecessors shaped the context in which collective mobilisation could be carried out on ethno-religious and regional lines, delineating and reifying identities which would be called upon in contemporary violent campaigns.

The longer term view of access to and control over central state power is not reducible to a simple correlation between inequality and conflict. In both cases, historical episodes of rotation of control over central power between northern and southern elites have further shaped access to power and perceptions of marginalisation and exclusion.²⁷

In Uganda, studies trace the historical role of Acholi elites in the country's bureaucracy and military which reinforced a north-south cleavage in national politics, reifying a southern political identity against, and in contrast to which, successive northern rebellions have been mobilised. Idi Amin's government in the 1970s attempted to 'eradicate [Langi and Acholi] hold on state power,' something that was not wholly reversed by the Obote II regime. Subsequently, the impetus for (current) President Museveni's National Resistance Army's victory has been located in the perceived need of southern elites to 'remove northerners from national power in order to establish a new national equalization and end northern military dictatorship'.²⁸

²⁰David Rogers, Thomas Emwanu, and Timothy Robinson. (n.d.). *Poverty Mapping in Uganda*, Pro-poor Livestock Policy Initiative Working Paper, No. 36, <http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/pdf/outputs/livestock/pplpiwp36.pdf>, 7.

²¹ACLED, V6; poverty data, see note 20 above.

²²See note 21 above.

²³Allen and Vlassenroot, *The Lord's Resistance Army*.

²⁴Abimbola Adesoji, 'Between Maitatsine and Boko Haram: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Response to the Nigerian State', *Africa Today* 57, no. 4 (2011): 98–119.

²⁵Sakah Saidu Mahmud, 'Islamism in West Africa: Nigeria', *African Studies Review* 47, no. 2 (2004): 83–95.

²⁶Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism*, ISS Monograph Series, No. 144, <https://www.issafrica.org/uploads/MONO144FULL.PDF> (accessed July 25, 2015).

²⁷Bolaji Omitola, 'Terrorism and the Nigerian federation', *African Security Review* 21, no. 4, (2012): 4–16.

²⁸Adam Branch, 'Exploring the Roots of LRA Violence: Political Crisis and Ethnic Politics in Acholiland', in *The Lord's Resistance Army*, ed. Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot (New York: Zed Books, 2010), 25–44, 29, 30 (summarising Gingyera-Pinyawa, 1989).

Nigeria has a similar history of divergence between North and South, rooted in differing colonial experiences and subsequent military and political dominance of the post-colonial state by the North.²⁹ This was compounded by Southern economic dominance, and Northern elites' failure to use political power to generate broad-based economic development, creating significant regional disparities. The introduction of civilian democracy in 1999 was accompanied by an informal system of regional Presidency rotation. The untimely death of President Yar'Adua left many in the North resenting the loss of 'their turn', as well as the Jonathan administration's failure to address regional development gaps.³⁰ Even within the North, the North-Eastern heartland of the Boko Haram insurgency has been perceived as especially marginalised, both because of its different ethnic composition and history, and the more prosaic fact that until 2015, it always had an opposition-party Governor.³¹

Regionalised pockets of inequality and marginalisation can be dangerous. As Raleigh documents, political regimes position ethno-regional communities within a 'hierarchy' of power.³² Marginalised groups are more likely to engage in civil war over other forms of violent conflict because they lack alternative avenues to accessing power, and the risk is particularly pronounced where groups have recently held, and subsequently lost, state power.³³

The collective nature of this exclusion also provides a basis for collective mobilisation, when it can be aligned with a clearly delineated identity. In both Nigeria and Uganda, members of a marginalised North leveraged a regional concentration of inequality and associated grievances, to mobilise around a sharply delineated identity. In Nigeria, although ethnicity has been important, in the absence of a nationally relevant ethnic narrative, mobilisation took place instead through religiously articulated claims to power, centred on an increasingly reified religious identity.³⁴ Evidence from biographies of Boko Haram recruits who joined the organisation before 2009 suggests that religious identities were an important motivating factor.³⁵ As with antecedent organisations, Mohammed Yusuf preached a 'purifying' movement in Islam, intended to roll back the secularism and corruption of the Nigerian state and northern (Muslim) political elite, a narrative that drew on a wider sense of popular disenfranchisement.³⁶

In Uganda, ethnicity has played a larger role in LRA mobilisation, although the incorporation of a powerful, religious narrative also reflects a similar process through which divisions were rendered even more sharply. Behrend explicitly discusses instrumentalized

²⁹Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³⁰A. Carl LeVan, 'Sectarian Rebellions in Post-transition Nigeria Compared', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 7, no. 3 (2013): 335–352.

³¹Chatham House, *Nigeria's Interminable Insurgency*.

³²Clionadh Raleigh, 'Political Hierarchies and Landscapes of Conflict', *Political Geography* 42: 92–103.

³³Lars-Erik Cederman, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min, 'Why do Ethnic Groups Rebel? New Data and Analysis', *World Politics* 62, no. 1 (2010): 87–119.

³⁴Dowd, 'Grievances, Governance and Islamist Violence'.

³⁵Abdul Raufu Mustapha and David Ehrhardt (eds.), *Creed and Grievance: Muslims, Christians and Society in Northern Nigeria* (Oxford: James Currey, forthcoming 2017; Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP) and Office of the National Security Adviser, *Policy Brief: Religious and ideological dimensions of radicalisation* 2015, <http://www.nsrp-nigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/PB-2-Religious-and-Ideological-Dimensions.pdf> (accessed September 14, 2016); and Mercy Corps, *Motivations and Empty Promises: Voices of former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth* (Edinburgh: Mercy Corps, 2016).

³⁶Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine, *Boko Haram, Islamism, Politics and Security and the State in Nigeria* (Ibadan: French Institute for Research in Africa, 2014); and International Crisis Group (ICG), 'Curbing Violence in Nigeria: The Boko Haram insurgency', 216 (2014).

religious identity in the LRA's formative years, observing that, 'It seems that, in contemporary Africa, political issues are increasingly expressed in religious discourses. To gain or conquer central power, i.e. the state, religious discourses are invented'.³⁷ In both cases, these collective experiences of inequality, corresponding to sharply delineated identities, were exploited to both justify, and enable, violence.

Evolution of tactics and rhetoric over time

Another shared feature of Boko Haram and LRA violence is how these underlying bases of mobilisation evolved over time as a result of tactical considerations, feeding into weakened ideological narratives, and greater civilian targeting. Both Boko Haram and the LRA initially articulated a legitimating religious/ideological narrative to win over populations within which they worked, with some success winning recruits and support.³⁸ However, through an iterative process of tactical, strategic and ideological transformation, both gradually came to see the civilian population as an enemy and legitimate target for violence that ultimately undermined any popular support they may have had. This was reflected in a shift towards increasingly violent and indiscriminate articulations of their original narrative, and the gradual mutation of both into dislocated groups for whom violence itself is the central theme, necessary to survive through predation, for forced recruitment in the absence of ideological converts, and to retain internal legitimacy and control through a struggle with an external enemy.³⁹

Early Boko Haram recruitment relied heavily on a clear ideological narrative. Although always extreme, Boko Haram initially advocated withdrawal from society, but became increasingly violent as they clashed with police and were drawn into state-level politics.⁴⁰ The limited available data on individual motivations in joining Boko Haram show a marked decrease in the salience of religious ideology over time. After 2009, fewer recruits joined for primarily ideological reasons, and more for economic motives, survival in an increasingly violent context, or the opportunity to avenge the deaths of family and community members at the hands of state security.⁴¹ This shift parallels an increasingly violent context, and illuminates an iterative process whereby Boko Haram's tactics and ideology shifted from an attempt to be perceived as a legitimate representative of local grievances, to a group focused on violence for its own self-perpetuation.

Initially, Boko Haram's violence was primarily directed against the state and its representatives – particularly police and military – with targeted assassinations of specific civilian 'enemies' including moderate Islamic preachers. But it evolved over time to encompass a broader definition of the 'enemy' and 'legitimate' targets. In 2009, over three-quarters of all recorded Boko Haram violence involved interactions with security forces, and just over one-in-five attacks targeted civilians. This can be compared to 2015, when Boko Haram violence was almost evenly split between engagement with state forces and civilians, representing a

³⁷Heike Behrend, 'The Holy Spirit Movement's New World: Discourse and Development in the North of Uganda', in *Developing Uganda*, ed. Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle (Oxford: James Currey, 1998), 245–255, 245–246; Dunn 'Uganda: The Lord's Resistance Army', 138.

³⁸Michael Olufemi Sodipo, 'Mitigating Radicalism in Northern Nigeria', *Africa Security Brief* 26 (2013).

³⁹See note 31 above.

⁴⁰Agbiboa, 'Peace at Daggers Drawn?'

⁴¹Mustapha and Ehrhardt, *Creed and Grievance*; (NSRP) and Office of the National Security Adviser, *Religious and ideological dimensions of radicalisation*; and Mercy Corps, *Motivations and Empty Promises*.

marked increase in the targeting of non-combatants. Violence against civilians increased in absolute terms more than 10-fold between 2010 and 2015; while reported civilian casualties attributed to the group rose even more dramatically, from 55 in 2010, to over 6,000 in 2015. The intensity of anti-civilian attacks also escalated, from an average of 2.6 reported civilian fatalities per attack in 2010; to over 22 per attack five years later.⁴²

This entailed a shift from focused attacks on 'external' enemies like the Nigerian state, to attacks on the general – mostly northern Muslim – population.⁴³ Any attempt to win wide support from this population was thus gradually abandoned in favour of anti-civilian tactics that enabled control, but alienated populations.⁴⁴ This cycle of increasing violence against civilians and eroding ideological legitimacy was paralleled by the shift towards recruitment through force, as well as through economic incentives.⁴⁵

In Uganda, the LRA built on the legacy of the Holy Spirit Movement, and initially articulated an ethno-religious narrative that lacked the international linkages available to Boko Haram, but nevertheless provided a compelling organising language rooted in local religious beliefs and political grievances. Early recruitment and mobilisation built on this narrative to develop and sustain a movement that had some degree of popular legitimacy, and which targeted its violence predominantly against the state and its immediate supporters. However, the targeting of civilians from among the northern (Acholi) population also became a prominent feature of the group's violence over time. There are parallels between Boko Haram's narrative of 'purification' as an attempt to rout internal enemies, and ways in which LRA violence was framed as an attempt to cleanse Acholi society of internal enemies working against the movement's divine goals.⁴⁶

While such explanations can help explain the narrative and framing of this violence in socio-cultural terms, this explanation alone cannot account for variation and volatility in the targeting of civilians. Furthermore, as the LRA spread into neighbouring states, explanations of the conflict rooted in the targeting of internal enemies and the relationship between the LRA and local populations are inadequate means of understanding this spiralling violence.⁴⁷

Violence against civilians by the LRA peaked in 2002–2003; and again, in a second wave, in 2009–2010. Although, over the course of the available data, absolute levels of violence against civilians attributed to the group declined in overall numbers, the proportional share of violence the LRA carries out which targets civilians, has continued to escalate. In other words, while the LRA has experienced a dramatic reduction in operational capacity, the share of energy and resources which it dedicates to attacks on civilians has increased. For example, in 2013, violence against civilians constituted over 90% of all violence attributed to the LRA. In 2015, anti-civilian violence had fallen slightly, but remained over two-thirds of all recorded incidents, compared to an average of 40% in the period 1997–2006.

This process parallels the evolving tactics of Boko Haram, and the ways in which an original mobilising narrative initially sought to 'liberate' marginalised communities, but ultimately proved insufficient to generate lasting support. Thereafter, this powerful mobilising

⁴²Data: ACLED, V6.

⁴³Jacob Zenn, 'Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria', *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 2 (2014): 23–29.

⁴⁴Chatham House, *Nigeria's Interminable Insurgency*; and Weeraratne, 'Theorizing the Expansion of Boko Haram'.

⁴⁵Agbibo, 'Peace at Daggers Drawn?'; and ICG, 'Curbing violence in Nigeria'.

⁴⁶Rosa Ehrenreich, 'The Stories We Must Tell: Ugandan Children and the Atrocities of the Lord's Resistance Army', *Africa Today* 45, no. 1 (1998): 79–102, 84–86.

⁴⁷Dunn, 'Uganda: The Lord's Resistance Army', 141.

rhetoric became secondary to the group's survival, and paradoxically, the same communities it originally claimed to represent, became its greatest victims. With fewer willing recruits, forced recruitment became a hallmark of the LRA's strategy.

Moreover, each of these dynamics was heightened as the group lost ground in northern Uganda – its traditional homeland – and had to adapt to operating more extensively (ultimately exclusively) in neighbouring countries, where it lacked links and a locally embedded mobilising narrative. The LRA became dislocated from the geographical region where its ethno-political narrative had relevance. As a result, it evolved to become almost purely predatory, with little attempt to justify or explain its violence through a political or ideological narrative. The LRA is now entirely reliant on violence to recruit and meet basic needs, but also has little function beyond this self-sustaining violence. Boko Haram has not yet reached this extreme, but the trajectory is clearly comparable.

In both cases, increasingly predatory attacks on civilians are part of a cycle of the erosion of an initial political and religious position that had some degree of local legitimacy. Both groups have increasingly relied on force and fear to recruit and survive, and have adapted or abandoned ideological positions to justify this. This tactical evolution is fundamentally driven by the groups' perceived, short-term necessity to punish enemies and project power: they may realise that it produces a longer term cycle of violence, predation and declining legitimacy that is counter-productive to their objectives and survival, but act nevertheless in response to immediate priorities and pressures. In the process, they have become even more feared and resented. Over time, both groups have thus been driven from using violence primarily as a tool to advance a political or ideological agenda, towards using violence to perpetuate their existence and influence.

Responses to Boko Haram and LRA violence

There are also important similarities and differences between the military and political contexts in which both groups operate. These relate to both official state responses to violence, as well as the emergence of highly localised, non-state armed group adaptations to insecurity. In both cases, we trace interactive effects between responses, and subsequent violence.

State and international responses

The Ugandan and Nigerian states both responded to insurgency primarily with force. In Nigeria in particular, the national government has been unwilling to seriously engage in political dialogue or reconciliation. In Uganda, this balance gradually shifted, but the first recourse was also a security response. There is a clear interaction between military campaigns and subsequent violence by both groups. Even where national governments had military successes, the result was often increased violence against civilians, both as direct victims of state forces, and as Boko Haram and the LRA shifted to softer targets and punitive reprisals. Several key features of state response illustrate parallels between Boko Haram and the LRA, and the iterative relationship between state responses and subsequent insurgent violence.

In both contexts, state responses had a highly dualistic character. Both governments were criticised for failing to respond effectively and promptly to mounting violence with high civilian casualties. At the same time, however, those actions governments did take were

often heavy-handed, failing to discriminate between militants and civilians, and involving punitive strategies against large portions of the population. This dualistic approach is particularly significant, and destructive, in cases where perceptions of grievance and inequality underpinned the powerful mobilisation strategies of insurgent groups in the first place. State responses to violence that failed, in various ways, to foreground civilian security therefore served to further entrench and underscore the marginal status of affected communities.

Several key junctures in the Nigerian context illustrate this dynamic. First, the 2009 crackdown against Boko Haram was a direct driver of subsequent violence. The rise in intensity of Boko Haram attacks over subsequent years – average fatalities per incident rose from 2.02 in 2010 to 4.6 in 2011 – suggests that Boko Haram violence would have followed a different course were it not for this event. Subsequent years saw a diffusion of Boko Haram facilitated by the lack of a coherent Nigerian military or political strategy to tackle the group.⁴⁸ In 2010, the group was recorded as active in just five Nigerian states; by 2012, this had increased to 18.⁴⁹

2013–2015 also saw repeated cycles of escalation, with Boko Haram assaults on major towns such as Maiduguri and mass kidnappings in Chibok and elsewhere, and Nigerian military action in response that included alleged human rights abuses such as the destruction of 2,000 homes in Baga town in 2013.⁵⁰ 2015 saw a step-change with a joint Nigerian, Chadian and Cameroonian military response to the declaration of Boko Haram's 'caliphate'. Consequently, Boko Haram was pushed back to bases in Sambisa Forest, but was not entirely defeated. Throughout this time, repeated attempts to open negotiations with Boko Haram faltered due to distrust on both sides, and a reported lack of political will on the part of the Government.⁵¹

Throughout 2012–2015, Boko Haram's targeting of civilians appears closely tied to intensified military pressure. As the military increased pressure on Boko Haram, the group responded with increasing violence against civilians – as a function of its reduced capacity to engage meaningfully with security forces, a form of retribution against populations, and a means of demonstrating the group's power. In Borno state, the highest rates of Boko Haram violence against civilians occurred in July 2015, shortly following the major military push of February and March that year. In Cameroon, higher levels of violence against civilians also show a temporal lag – following, rather than preceding, intensive engagement with security forces. Clashes between Boko Haram and the security forces peaked in December 2014, up to which point, violence against civilians by the group had been relatively limited in the region. In the period January – December 2014, Boko Haram was responsible for an average of 1.5 attacks against civilians per month; this more than doubled in the following

⁴⁸ICG, 'Curbing Violence in Nigeria'.

⁴⁹ACLED, V6.

⁵⁰HRW, 'Nigeria: Massive Destruction, Deaths from Military Raid', May 1, 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/01/nigeria-massive-destruction-deaths-military-raid> (accessed July 25, 2015); and Amnesty International, 'Nigeria: War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity as Violence Escalates in North East', March 31, 2014, <http://www.amnesty.ca/news/news-releases/nigeria-war-crimes-and-crimes-against-humanity-as-violence-escalates-in-north> (accessed July 25, 2015).

⁵¹Mustapha, *Synthesis Paper on Lessons Learned from Responses to Violent Conflicts in Nigeria since 2009 with special reference to Northern Nigeria* (NSRP: Abuja, n.d.) <http://www.nsrp-nigeria.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Synthesis-Paper-on-Lessons-Learned-in-Responses-to-Conflict-in-Northern-Nigeria.pdf> (accessed September 14, 2016); Agbibo, 'Peace at Daggers Drawn?'; *Vanguard*, 'Nigeria: My Boko Haram Saga, by Negotiator Stephen Davis', September 7, 2014, accessed via Nexis; and *Daily Post*, 'FG is Not Ready to End Boko Haram Insurgency – Shehu Sani', May 31, 2014, <http://dailypost.ng/2014/05/31/fg-ready-end-boko-haram-insurgency-shehu-sani/> (accessed September 14, 2016).

12 months, to 3.8.⁵² This indicates that Boko Haram has now begun to move into phase 3 (Figure 1), in which violence against civilians outstrips engagement with security forces, as they are unable to defeat the military in the field, and also lack alternative options.

Similar patterns are apparent in the violence of the LRA, where state security responses were characterised by a similar duality; and military campaigns were followed by further such spikes in anti-civilian violence. Allegations abounded that the government had abandoned northern populations to their fate at the hands of the LRA, that it could have brought the insurgency to a halt much earlier, and that it leveraged the situation in the north to consolidate central power.⁵³ These accusations were accompanied by the experience of abuse at the hands of the military, including instances of widespread forced displacement,⁵⁴ state violence against civilians in camps, and pervasive sexual and gender-based violence against displaced populations.⁵⁵ Ultimately, this led to the perception among Ugandan IDPs that they were 'trapped between the two warring groups and trust neither'.⁵⁶

There are also parallels in the way that state military campaigns pre-empted intensified anti-civilian violence by the LRA. For example, in Orientale province in the DRC, following the campaign, Operation Lightning Thunder, which sought to flush the group out of Garamba National Park, violence against civilians spiked in two waves: first, in late-December 2008, following the launch of the offensive; and second, and more markedly, in December 2009.

In considering the regional dimension, it is important to acknowledge that Boko Haram's activity outside Nigeria is considerably lower, just 13% of the group's violent activity, compared to 43% of the LRA's activity outside Uganda (see Figure 2).

The difference in group dynamics primarily results from differing responses from regional states. Whilst both groups have been motivated by the logistical needs for space to establish bases and operate, the LRA received documented support from the Sudanese government, as a counter to the SPLA in then-southern Sudan.⁵⁷ By contrast, although Cameroon for some time ignored Boko Haram and allowed them to establish safe havens, it was never an active supporter.⁵⁸ When the Ugandan military succeeded in pushing the LRA out of Uganda, they had existing regional bases to retreat to. Boko Haram, by contrast, has faced a relatively robust regional and international military response in recent years, putting the group under significant pressure and limiting their scope for regional spread.⁵⁹

⁵²Data: ACLED, V6.

⁵³Andrew Mwenda, 'Uganda's Politics of Foreign Aid and Violent Conflict: The Political Uses of the LRA Rebellion,' in *The Lord's Resistance Army*, ed. Tim Allen and Koen Vlassenroot (New York: Zed Books, 2010), 45–58; Dunn, 'Uganda: The Lord's Resistance Army'; and Ehrenreich, 'The Stories We Must Tell'.

⁵⁴Human Rights Focus, *Between Two Fires: The Plight of IDPs in Northern Uganda*, 2002, <http://www.humiliationstudies.org/documents/OnenBetweenTwoFires.pdf> (accessed July 25, 2015); Acholi Religious Leaders' Peace Initiative and Justice & Peace Commission of the Gulu Archdiocese, *Let My People Go: The Forgotten Plight of the People in the Displaced Camps in Acholi*, (2001), http://www.archdioceseofgulu.org/jpc/let_my_people_go.pdf (accessed July 25, 2015).

⁵⁵BBC 'Uganda Army in 'rights abuses'', July 16, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3071421.stm> (accessed July 25, 2015); HRW, 'Uganda: Army and Rebels Commit Atrocities in the North', September 20, 2005, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2005/09/20/uganda-army-and-rebels-commit-atrocities-north> (accessed July 25, 2015); and Maria Burnett and Elizabeth Evenson, 'Other Half of the Kony equation', *The Washington Times*, April 4, 2012, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/apr/4/other-half-of-the-kony-equation/> (accessed July 25, 2015).

⁵⁶Quoted in Dunn, 'Uganda: The Lord's Resistance Army', 139.

⁵⁷See note 23 above.

⁵⁸See note 48 above.

⁵⁹NSN, *The End of Boko Haram?*

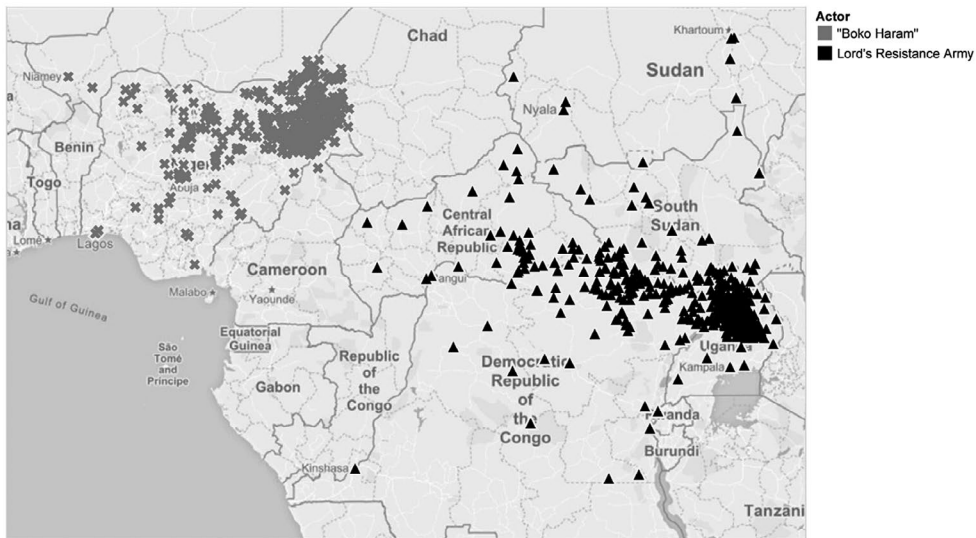


Figure 2. Violence involving the LRA and Boko Haram, by Location, 1997–2015.

Together, these cases suggest that analyses which explore violence by Boko Haram or the LRA in isolation and divorced from the wider conflict system in which they operate, cannot fully explain the dynamics of their violence. Specifically, state responses to insurgency themselves form part of the context that shapes armed group behaviour. In particular, heavy-handed military responses that are not accompanied by any viable path for political resolution can drive both civilian grievances and direct attacks on civilians by armed groups seeking a more vulnerable target.

Non-state responses

In addition to state responses, violence by both the LRA and Boko Haram has also been shaped by non-state armed groups. The LRA and Boko Haram have both engaged with other non-state armed groups, including highly localised paramilitary or ‘defence’ units drawn from among the population. These groups included specific anti-insurgency paramilitaries including the Civilian-JTF (CJTF, named after the official joint military-police taskforce) in Nigeria, and Local Defence Units (LDUs) in Uganda, as well as communal and political militias. The significance of these groups lies first in their direct interaction with Boko Haram and the LRA, and the ways in which these encounters fed into a cycle of violence in these regions. Second, they are also significant in that they attest to the complex ways communities in conflict-affected areas navigate insecurity. In both cases, this requires navigating not only a hostile insurgency force, but also negotiating the sometimes predatory, often ineffective, response of state security forces. Caught between these opposing forces, civilian populations set out to establish their own informal security provision.

In Nigeria, the declaration of the state of emergency was accompanied by the formation of the CJTF – a localised network of informal, paramilitary vigilante forces with loose ties to the Nigerian military⁶⁰ – to oppose Boko Haram. Alongside an increased military presence,

⁶⁰Super Odomovo Afeno, ‘Insurgency, Counter-insurgency and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria’, *The Age of Human Rights Journal* 3, (2014): 46–62.

the CJTF had some success in pushing Boko Haram out of previous urban strongholds and into rural areas.⁶¹

In Uganda, LDUs served as a force of semi-formal, irregular paramilitary security to defend communities from the LRA, which were criticised for reports of forced and child recruitment,⁶² and for inefficacy and unprofessionalism.⁶³ The Ugandan military reportedly 'took a back seat' in the campaign against the LRA, leaving LDUs to engage in much of the fighting, in spite of their limited training and resources.⁶⁴ More informal still, Uganda's 'Arrow Boys' and *Amuka* (Rhino) militias were loose units of networked but highly localised self-defence forces, both mobilised along ethnic lines.⁶⁵ As LRA violence diffused into neighbouring states, groups such as the SPLA and communal militias in South Sudan also engaged with LRA forces, and highly fragmented armed groups in the DRC sought to establish civilian security as LRA units moved westward from 2006 onwards.

Analysis of ACLED data suggests that these complex attempts to navigate insecurity may have further exacerbated civilian vulnerability to conflict. In Nigeria, in the states where CJTF forces have been active, Boko Haram violence against civilians typically intensifies in the period following clashes with the CJTF. For example, CJTF forces engaged in clashes with Boko Haram in Yobe state in June 2013; the following month, records of anti-civilian violence by Boko Haram in Yobe state doubled. A similar pattern holds for subsequent months of recorded clashes, with Boko Haram violence against civilians *tripling* in July 2015, following clashes with the CJTF the previous month. The average number of anti-civilian violence events per month in Borno also increased dramatically in the period following the emergence of the CJTF there, compared to the period preceding its formation.

In Uganda, similar patterns are evident: of the sub-national regions in which anti-civilian violence was recorded, those which also recorded non-state armed actors such as the LDUs or Arrow Boys militias fighting the LRA had an average of 73 recorded attacks against civilians over the duration of the conflict; compared to an average of 25 attacks per region in areas with no recorded non-state actors. Tragic examples of this destructive cycle include the February 2004 LRA attack on Barlonyo IDP Camp, where the group clashed with and defeated a local militia, and went on to kill over 200 people. In these areas, the LRA interpreted militia participation as evidence of the populations' support for the government, and set out to punish communities and vigilantes.⁶⁶

The data illustrate that the areas in which local defence militias are active, are at greater risk of redoubled anti-civilian violence. This has implications for conceptions of peace and conflict, the iterative way in which cycles of violence perpetuate themselves, shared

⁶¹Vesselin Popovski and Benjamin Maiangwa, 'Boko Haram's Attacks and the People's Response: A Fourth Pillar of the Responsibility to Protect?' *African Security Review* 25, no. 2 (2016): 159–175.

⁶²Anna Borzello, 'The Challenge of DDR in Northern Uganda', in *Reintegrating Armed Groups after Conflict*, ed. Mats Berdal and David Ucko (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 144–171.

⁶³Lucy Hovil, *Refugees and the Security Situation in Adjumani District*, Refugee Law Project Working Paper No. 2, http://refugeelawproject.org/files/working_papers/RLP.WP02.pdf (accessed August 8, 2016).

⁶⁴Paul Omach, 'Political Violence in Uganda: The Role of Vigilantes and Militias', *Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies* 35, no. 4 (2010): 426–449.

⁶⁵Laura Heaton and Maggie Fick, 'The Arrow Boys of Southern Sudan: An army of the willing', March 11, 2010, <http://www.enoughproject.org/publications/arrow-boys-sudan> (accessed August 8, 2016); 'In Come the Vigilantes', *Africa Confidential* 44, no. 19 (2003): 3–4; and Omach, 'Political Violence in Uganda'.

⁶⁶Jeevan Vasagar, 'Lord's Resistance Army Kills 200 in Uganda Refugee Camp', *Guardian Weekly* 170, no. 10: 4; and Omach, 'Political Violence in Uganda'.

understandings of how civilians in complex conflict environments seek to negotiate insecurity, and ultimately, for the policy choices made by regimes and international actors to tacitly or actively support informal, vigilante forces, when these may increase, rather than reduce, civilian vulnerability to violence.

In both conflicts, military intervention was reasonably successful in limiting the effectiveness of groups and their operating space, but also drove the LRA and Boko Haram towards violence against ‘softer’ targets, namely civilians, often in the form of mass-casualty attacks. The militaries of both countries failed to ensure civilian security. When civilians mobilised themselves in order to provide that security, one consequence was an increase in anti-civilian violence, driven by reprisal attacks on opposition communities. Civil society voices at the time decried these paramilitary initiatives as ‘suicidal,’ and likely to produce brutal civilian reprisals⁶⁷: our analysis presents empirical evidence to support these fears. Finally, opportunities to reach a political solution were often missed, facilitating ongoing violence.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn out contextual and tactical similarities between two of the most violent groups active in Sub-Saharan Africa in the past decade. While a brief overview necessarily obscures fundamental differences in the two organisations, several implications for peacebuilding theory and practice can be drawn from their commonalities.

The first is that any treatment of the undisputed brutality of Boko Haram’s violence solely as a function of its anti-western, Islamist agenda should be carefully interrogated. While active over a much longer period of time, the LRA has shown not only comparable levels of brutality, but comparable tactical and temporal dynamics in the very different context of East and Central Africa. These similarities-in-difference suggest that the nature of violence employed by groups is more closely linked to their tactical goals, the environment within which they operate, and their organisational capacity, than to their ideological claims or rhetoric. By illustrating parallels between two armed groups operating in the otherwise divergent contexts of Nigeria and Uganda and across a long time period, the paper seeks to re-orient attention on the emergence and dynamics of violence in marginal spaces, its evolution over time, and conflict’s complex nexus of non-state and state armed forces.

The findings parallel other studies in which dominant narratives of exceptionalism, and even *barbarism*, in contemporary African conflicts have been challenged by attempts to understand the internal strategic logics of conflict systems – including group mobilisation, specific violent tactics, and the intensification and diffusion of violence, including in the work of Paul Richards and David Keen, in West Africa.⁶⁸ Related research has also been undertaken in the context of particular modalities of violence, such as suicide bombing, and terrorism.⁶⁹ This research seeks to contribute to this growing agenda, by exploring the dynamics of violence in the marginal sub-national spaces of northern Uganda and Nigeria; and the complex implications for security of civilians that accompanied the escalation and

⁶⁷Quoted in Omach, ‘Political violence in Uganda’, 442.

⁶⁸Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest*; Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone*.

⁶⁹Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2005); and Michael Boyle, ‘Bargaining, Fear, and Denial: Explaining Violence Against Civilians in Iraq 2004–2007’, *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 2 (2009): 261–287.

diffusion of the LRA and Boko Haram. An analysis of conflict as irrational or barbaric can often tend towards policy responses based on coercive force alone. Our analysis underlines the importance of an approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding that balances security measures with political and socio-economic approaches. In the short term, this could include political negotiations with armed groups to provide a route to peaceful disarmament rather than violence-for-survival, but in the longer term political and economic strategies are needed to alter the marginalisation and regional economic disparities that provided a basis for the initial mobilisation of armed groups.

Furthermore, the findings speak to debates concerning civilian targeting in conflict, and point to several generalizable factors that contribute to the intensification of anti-civilian violence. Ultimately, state strategies have consequences and costs for civilian protection, as does support for, or reliance on, non-state paramilitaries. The findings reflect the importance of placing civilian protection, and the multifaceted ways in which it is undermined, at the centre of analysis. This should include ways in which it is endangered by state practices and by the very act of navigating insecurity by communities themselves. Seen from the perspective of both the Ugandan and Nigerian states, military strategies have had some degree of success in defeating insurgencies and reducing the (domestic) operating space of non-state armed groups. However, we argue that this has come at a high cost for civilian security, and that pursuing these means without foregrounding civilian protection has further escalated attacks against non-combatant populations. A strategy aimed at vanquishing insurgent groups may ultimately succeed at defeating armed opponents militarily, but by doing so in a way that further increases civilian insecurity in the short and medium term, there are also long-term implications for the entrenchment of regional inequalities, grievances and marginalisation. These were key factors in the initial mobilisation and growth of the LRA and Boko Haram, and so a purely military response to these insurgencies that deepens these challenges is unlikely to produce lasting stability or peace. As the conflict in Uganda – and hopefully soon Nigeria – moves into a peacebuilding phase, a careful consideration of the dynamics of these groups and their impact on civilian security will be vital to disarmament and reintegration.

Finally, the findings of this analysis suggest several possible developments in the evolution of the Boko Haram crisis, including that, if military engagement with Boko Haram follows the patterns set out in tackling the LRA, we would expect to see an initial decline in all activity levels (a period of ‘re-grouping’) by Boko Haram, followed by a subsequent escalation in anti-civilian violence, which thereafter becomes the mainstay of the group. A reduced operating capacity can result in increased targeting of soft targets – both around regional strongholds such as rural areas of Borno, and in capital cities. This reflects an evolution on the part of a group which may no longer be able to engage security personnel directly at the scale it once did, but can continue to make an enormous impact on security and stability through targeting civilians.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Caitriona Dowd is a research fellow in Conflict and Violence at the Institute of Development Studies, where her research focuses on the dynamics of identity-based mobilisation in violent conflict in sub-Saharan Africa.

Adam Drury is a conflict adviser at the UK Department for International Development. This article was written in a personal capacity and does not represent the official position or analysis of DFID.