African terror networks

African terror networks: An evolving threat

by [Claudine Fry](#).

In many parts of Africa, the terrorism threat is evolving. Major groups such as Nigeria-based Boko Haram and al-Shabab in East Africa have lost territory and suffered splits, but military operations have not comprehensively weakened them. The emergence of new tactics and targeting patterns confirms the continued threat they pose.

Meanwhile, Africa is set to be a greater focus for Islamic State (IS) in 2017 in its search for continued relevance as it sustains losses in the Middle East. And al-Qaida-linked militants are likely to strike again in West Africa, where they seized the limelight with several brazen attacks on sites linked to foreigners in 2016. For businesses in southern Africa, the terrorism threat will remain low. For those in West and East Africa, the threat is more tangible, but will remain largely indirect.
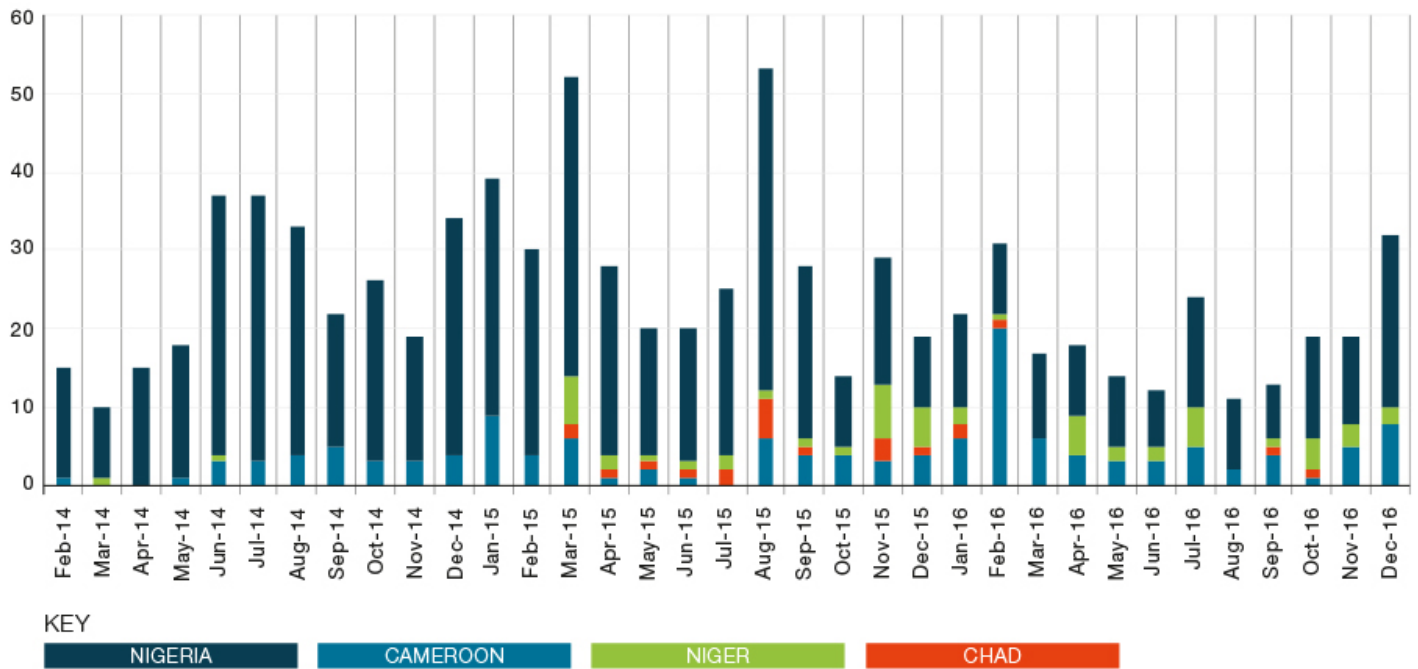
Boko Haram: Splintered, but not broken

Weakening Boko Haram in Nigeria has arguably been the sole major success of President Muhammad Buhari's government so far. Yet although dispersed, the group has not – as the army has proclaimed – been defeated. Instead, the emergence in late 2016 of an IS-aligned faction known as Islamic State West African Province (ISWAP) under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Barnawi, reportedly a son of Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf, is likely to see the terrorism threat in Nigeria become more complex in 2017.

ISWAP has spoken out against attacks on Muslims and mosques. Instead, it will seek to target the Nigerian state, and could also adopt a greater focus on targets associated with the West. Given its clear links to IS, ISWAP could perpetrate sophisticated, well-funded and -planned attacks, while its numbers may be swelled by IS sympathisers moving south from Libya. Any perceived 'successes' by ISWAP would be widely publicised on IS-linked media, which increasingly reports the activities of IS-linked groups in Africa. The frequency and quality of propaganda videos and media releases on behalf of ISWAP will increase in 2017.

Meanwhile, Boko Haram, under the command of longstanding leader Abubakar Shekau, also retains significant capabilities, though its ability to strike beyond north-east Nigeria and surrounding areas of the Lake Chad basin has yet to be proven. A continued focus by Shekau loyalists on local and civilian targets poses little threat to business, but over the longer term could have significant implications for stability in parts of Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. Elements of Boko Haram could also increasingly engage in opportunistic crime or banditry.

BOKO HARAM ATTACKS IN LAKE CHAD REGION, 2014-16
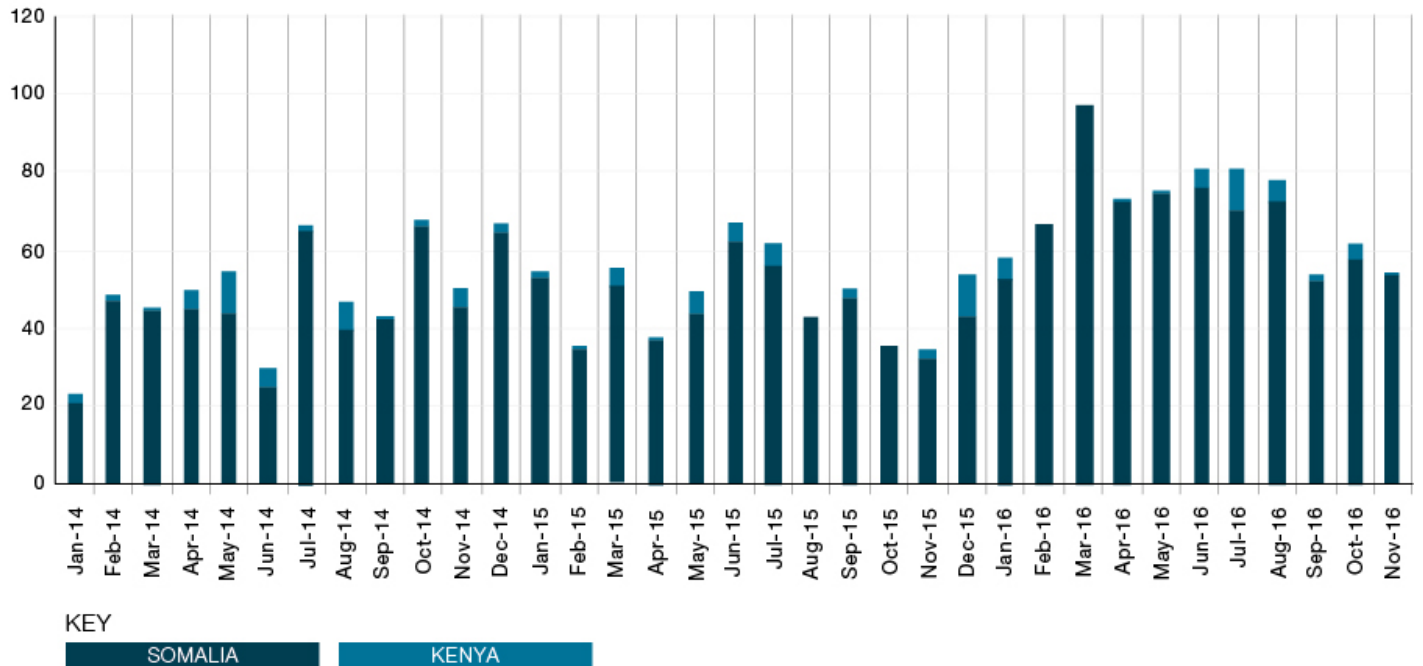

KEY

NIGERIA | CAMEROON | NIGER | CHAD

Source: AIM

A vast humanitarian crisis in north-eastern Nigeria will further complicate efforts by the Nigerian state to strengthen its presence, and demonstrate its competence and authority in 2017. Such power vacuums offer precisely the space militant groups often exploit so effectively to expand their influence.

Al-Shabab: Resilient threat

Looking east, al-Shabab is also evolving amid military pressures and external influences. Kenya has not witnessed a major terrorist attack since an assault on a university in Garissa in April 2015, but al-Shabab remains intent on staging attacks inside the country. It continues to exercise influence either indirectly or directly over individuals and groups across the region, with many Kenyan sympathisers motivated by opposition to state counter-terrorism efforts that are perceived as discriminating against ethnic Somalis and wider parts of the Muslim population. Improved intelligence has disrupted al-Shabab's ability to operate in major urban centres in Kenya, but militant cells crossing over from Somalia pose a threat to the police and security forces, as well as public institutions and civil servants such as teachers in areas close to the Somalia border.

![Control Risks logo]

ISLAMIST MILITANT ATTACKS IN EAST AFRICA, 2014-16

KEY

SOMALIA   KENYA

Source: AIM

Under pressure from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), al-Shabab has lost territory, though AMISOM's territorial advances have become increasingly limited and in some cases even reversed in 2016. Al-Shabab remains nimble and ready to exploit AMISOM's growing weakness as the coalition faces funding shortfalls, internal conflict and a growing preference by contributing countries to focus more on domestic challenges. Although weakened, al-Shabab can still stage cross-border raids, and will continue to attack AMISOM troops and troop-contributing states, further adding to AMISOM's woes.

In late 2015 and early 2016, the rise of IS appeared to pose a serious threat to al-Shabab unity and sparked a number of defections among al-Shabab fighters. Al-Shabab has since fought back. It has relentlessly purged suspected IS sympathisers, though attempts to end IS's growing presence in Puntland failed. Competition and fighting between the groups are likely to continue in 2017, a development that will be welcomed by the Somali government, which hopes the rivalry will weaken both groups. In addition to attacks by al-Shabab, local clan structures will continue to pose a major obstacle to growing IS influence in Somalia.

Al-Shabab faces challenges retaining local support, though it benefits from perceptions of widespread government corruption. Moreover, the group continues to improve its propaganda offering, probably influenced by IS, which runs a much more sophisticated media campaign. Al-Shabab is also producing videos in increasing numbers of languages, including English, Arabic and Swahili, suggesting a greater focus on attracting foreign support.

There is little threat of al-Shabab altering its targeting priorities to directly focus on or prioritise business interests in East Africa. That said, the evolution of al-Shabab and IS in the region merits close attention, given the potential for internal rivalries and external influences to shape recruitment and targeting patterns.

Drivers remain local

External factors play a clear role in fuelling radicalisation and terrorism. The appearance of the first IS branch in the Sahel in October 2016 – through a pledge of allegiance by local militant leader Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, acknowledged by the group's central leadership – is highly likely to trigger a response from al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which will be keen to stage further attacks designed to capture maximum attention.

But many of the root causes of militancy are local, and drivers of support for extremist groups are highly complex. The absence of competent state institutions or authority, or their misuse, remains a common driver of militancy. Economic factors such as unemployment or a perceived need to protect livelihoods can motivate individuals to support militant groups.

At the same time, social and cultural factors will continue to limit the influence of Islamist extremist groups and their ability or willingness to stage attacks in some parts of East and West Africa. For example, in many communities religion is not a key or important determinant of identity, and inter-marriage between religious communities is often widespread. In Burkina Faso and Senegal, for example, the popularity of and respect for Sufi cults, the productive relationships between religious and political authorities, and limits to the pervasiveness of corruption within the political elite all mitigate the threat of radicalisation by Islamist extremists.

By contrast, in Mali and Niger, where there have been comparatively high numbers of attacks and levels of radicalisation, Sufi orders are largely discredited, and Gulf-backed Wahhabi cults are on the rise. There are few constructive interactions between state and religious authorities, and the political classes are widely seen as corrupt, self-serving and overly influenced by the West. These exacerbate the impact of other factors such as proximity to Libya, porous borders and ineffective governance to fuel terrorism.

Changes to the tactics, leadership and structures of militant groups underscore that there is no room for complacency in business security planning in the year ahead.