

Has Boko Haram Been “Technically Defeated”?

Controversy Surrounding Nigeria President Muhammadu Buhari’s recent Statement

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Global Research, January 01, 2016

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Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#)

Nigeria President Muhammadu Buhari’s recent comment made during an interview with the BBC that the Islamist terror group Boko Haram had been “technically defeated” has unsurprisingly brought a high level of criticism – not least in the light of the massacre of 80 people shortly after.

Some have been quick to draw analogies with US President George W. Bush’s now infamous *victoriam declarationem* aboard the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln on May 1st, 2003 that brought an end to what he said would be “major combat operations” in Iraq. His televised address, dubbed the “Mission Accomplished” speech was of course followed by a Sunni insurgency which claimed many civilian and military lives. Twelve years later with the rise of several Islamist insurgent groups including al-Qaeda in Iraq and the so-called Islamic State, that country has defied attempts at being militarily pacified.

Buhari was referring to the re-conquest of Nigerian territory acquired by Boko Haram. The distinction is a subtle one and affords little comfort to the relatives of those who have lost their lives in the recent terror outrages.

It is instructive to remember that given the inherent dynamic related to asymmetric warfare, many insurgencies, including those which were successful in destroying the will of a national army or an army of occupation, have not had the goal of territorial conquest. The goal is often to sap the will of the opponent -politically, militarily and morally- in order to extract the relevant concessions among which ultimately would be the ceding of power. Thus Britain withdrew from Palestine in the face of unceasing attacks from the main Zionist terror groups: the Irgun and the Stern Gang.

Buhari may need reminding that the damage capable of being inflicted by a determined guerrilla movement which does not acquire territory is no less of a challenge than one attempting to challenge a national army for territory.

‘Strong ideologies’ such as those which are religiously motivated cannot be defeated without a coherent plan aimed at counter-acting the ideology and merely by the re-conquest of land or the disruption of the activities of the group’s cells.

There needs to be something more tangible in terms of ‘winning the hearts and minds’ of the population in the north east of Nigeria, especially among the disenchanting youth who form the recruiting fodder for Boko Haram.

The Nigerian military may have recaptured land ceded to the insurgents and may have

muted, to use Buhari's words, their ability as an "organised fighting force" in the battlefield, but it is only when there is demonstrable progress in the civic, psychological and economic spheres of counter-insurgency that Buhari should mention the word "defeat" albeit that it is presently qualified by the term "technically."

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