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A Turning Point for Boko Haram
By Geoff D. Porter

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The kidnapping has three fundamental domestic implications in Nigeria. First, most southern Nigerians have been relatively apathetic about Boko Haram. To be sure, they were opposed to its activities, but they viewed Boko Haram as a northern Nigerian problem. That sentiment had already begun to change with Boko Haram's deadly bombings in Abuja last month, and the girls' kidnapping has only further galvanized national animosity toward the organization.

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CTC Perspective: A Turning Point for Boko Haram

*May 09, 2014**Author: Geoff D. Porter*

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The kidnapping has three fundamental domestic implications in Nigeria. First, most southern Nigerians have been relatively apathetic about Boko Haram. To be sure, they were opposed to its activities, but they viewed Boko Haram as a northern Nigerian problem. That sentiment had already begun to change with Boko Haram's deadly bombings in Abuja last month, and the girls' kidnapping has only further galvanized national animosity toward the organization.

Second, the incident has resulted in unprecedented pressure on President Goodluck Jonathan's administration. Nationwide opposition to Boko Haram has not translated into support for Jonathan's government. There has been no "rally 'round the flag" effect. Nigerians' criticism of the government as a result of the kidnapping has been twofold. On the one hand, Nigerians have been frustrated by the government's confused and contradictory comments regarding how it responded to the kidnappings. In particular, in the immediate wake of the kidnapping, Abuja claimed to have rescued some or all of the girls, but this proved untrue, prompting critics to declare that the government was either disingenuous or incompetent. On the other hand, political instability and the declaration of a state of emergency in multiple Nigerian states means that there is a strong chance that the October 2014 party primaries for the February 2015 presidential elections could be delayed. Such a delay would likely postpone the presidential elections themselves, which would call into question the constitutional legitimacy of Jonathan's tenure and possibly further weaken his government's ability to take meaningful measures to counter Boko Haram.

Third, Boko Haram's brutality, as evinced by the mass kidnapping and underscored by more recent events such as the burning of a village along Nigeria's border with Cameroon and the reported massacre of hundreds of civilians, could lead to an exodus out of northern Nigeria. The Christian and moderate Muslim population may be increasingly inclined to flee south to safer parts of Nigeria. Badly needed investment in the north will cease. The flight of groups that oppose Boko Haram's extremist ideology and the funding for economic development would run the risk of allowing Boko Haram to further entrench itself. Worse, like other insurgent groups, Boko Haram is taking advantage of Nigeria's borderlands, potentially fleeing across the border into Cameroon and Niger, which complicates interdiction efforts and can transform the effort to curtail Boko Haram into a regional problem rather than just a Nigerian one.

The girls' kidnapping also has implications for Boko Haram's international standing. In 2010, upon ascending to the leadership of Boko Haram, Shekau tried to build ties with both al-Qa`ida and to al-Qa`ida affiliates in Africa and the Middle East, including al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and what he called "the Islamic State of Somalia." Although AQIM has generated substantial revenue through kidnap for ransom and al-Shabab has targeted civilian populations, including women and girls, it remains to be seen how these affiliates and al-Qa`ida under the leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri will react to Shekau's kidnapping tactic. Not only are the girls among

the most vulnerable targets, and therefore do little to boost Shekau's valor or prestige in the al-Qa`ida community, they are also Muslim. Shekau himself embraces an interpretation of Islam that he thinks permits him to declare certain Muslims to be insufficiently religious and therefore not truly Muslim, but this interpretation is not uniformly accepted by al-Qa`ida and its affiliates. Because of this, it is distinctly possible that al-Zawahiri and leaders of other al-Qa`ida affiliates will distance themselves from Boko Haram in the wake of this incident. In fact, Boko Haram has already been widely criticized in online jihadi forums. Even so, Boko Haram has not drawn heavily on its relationship with al-Qa`ida or its affiliates. To the contrary, the organization has proven itself to be much more deadly than either AQIM or al-Shabab in recent years. It is quite possible that Shekau will be able to pursue his agenda in Nigeria without the support of al-Qa`ida or the broader jihadi community.

There are numerous means of countering terrorism including use of military force, financial instruments, and conventional law enforcement. In this instance, the criminal component is paramount—namely the kidnapping of minors, the threat of sexual abuse, and the prospect of human trafficking—and the U.S. response is commensurate with that. Although the team of specialists that the United States is sending to assist in the rescue of the girls includes military personnel, the emphasis is on the law enforcement element. Not only is this likely to hasten the girls' return and solve the immediate crisis, it leaves the Nigerian government responsible for the military aspects of combating terrorism and sidesteps the fiscal, diplomatic, and political complications associated with deploying U.S. troops to Nigeria.

The challenge is that the girls have likely been dispersed. Instead of searching for one group of 250 girls, law enforcement and the military are likely looking for 25 groups of 10 girls or 50 groups of five girls. This poses an enormous challenge and diminishes the possibility of a dramatic rescue that will bring this crisis to a quick close. In the course of trying to identify where the girls are being held, however, it is possible that security services will be able to develop further intelligence on Boko Haram's networks, which could eventually lead to better awareness of how Boko Haram's leader operates, where he hides, and how he can be stopped. And as Secretary of State Kerry recently stated on May 8, 2014, the immediate goal may be rescuing the girls, but the longer-term goal is countering Boko Haram and its insidious ideology.

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