John Chisholm looks deeper into the unrest spreading across the continent, and asks to what extent Western policies are sowing the seeds for long-term instability

INSTABILITY

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While the world focuses on the headline-grabbing issues in Ukraine and the increasingly brutal behaviour of ISIS, Africa is still bedevilled with internal dissent that challenges governments whose authority is often patchy, communications ramshackle and internal divisions that are religious, tribal and economic – capped off by high degrees of internal corruption. This is instability Africa.

When organisations embark on a terror campaign, they may have widely differing aims in mind. Africa is crawling with such loosely affiliated groups whose desires are, essentially, to cause damage. It is important not to adopt what the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office calls the "Wykehamist Fallacy" – to believe these organisations are led by rational and intelligent people who have rational intelligent aims as if they were educated at Winchester. Instead, we must remember that they are often brutal strongmen who are prisoners of their own rhetoric and religious/tribal motivations who want to cause harm.

Although the mantra repeated around the world is that terror does not win, sometimes it is hard to call. The effects of a successful terror campaign during 2014 in Kenya are a case in point, and one which demonstrates how easy it is to fall into thinking this way. After the 2014 attacks, many Western governments instituted a travel ban, or at the very least issued guidance warning people not to travel to Kenya. The result has been severe damage to the once lucrative Kenyan tourist sector. But does scaring away tourists increase the chance of terror actually growing?

The logic goes like this. A major reason for the travel advisories is the string of terrorist attacks that Kenya has suffered over the past three years, including some on the coast. But, by contributing to the collapse of the coastal tourism industry, the travel warnings may simply be increasing the joblessness, idleness, poverty, drug use and overall desperation – all well known kindling for terrorist activity – in an already depressed slice of Kenya.

There is nothing wrong with this analysis; indeed, it is probably remarkably accurate. But it is important not to assume this is the aim of the terrorists in Kenya. Indeed, no attacks whatsoever have taken place in Kenya's coastal strip. The big terror attack of 2014 – at the Westgate shopping mall – took place in Nairobi. Kidnappings and muggings are pretty much concentrated there too, while coastal towns like Nyali or Diani are pretty peaceful enclaves and there has been no sign of any threat to tourists. Instead, the terrorists' motivation may be to make it appear the government is unable to prevent them killing people. Alternatively, they may simply wish to kill Kenyans in revenge for Kenya's involvement in Somalia; in the circumstances, that may be motive enough. If groups in Kenya had wanted to kill Westerners, something akin to the Bali bombings in the peaceful coastal strip would have
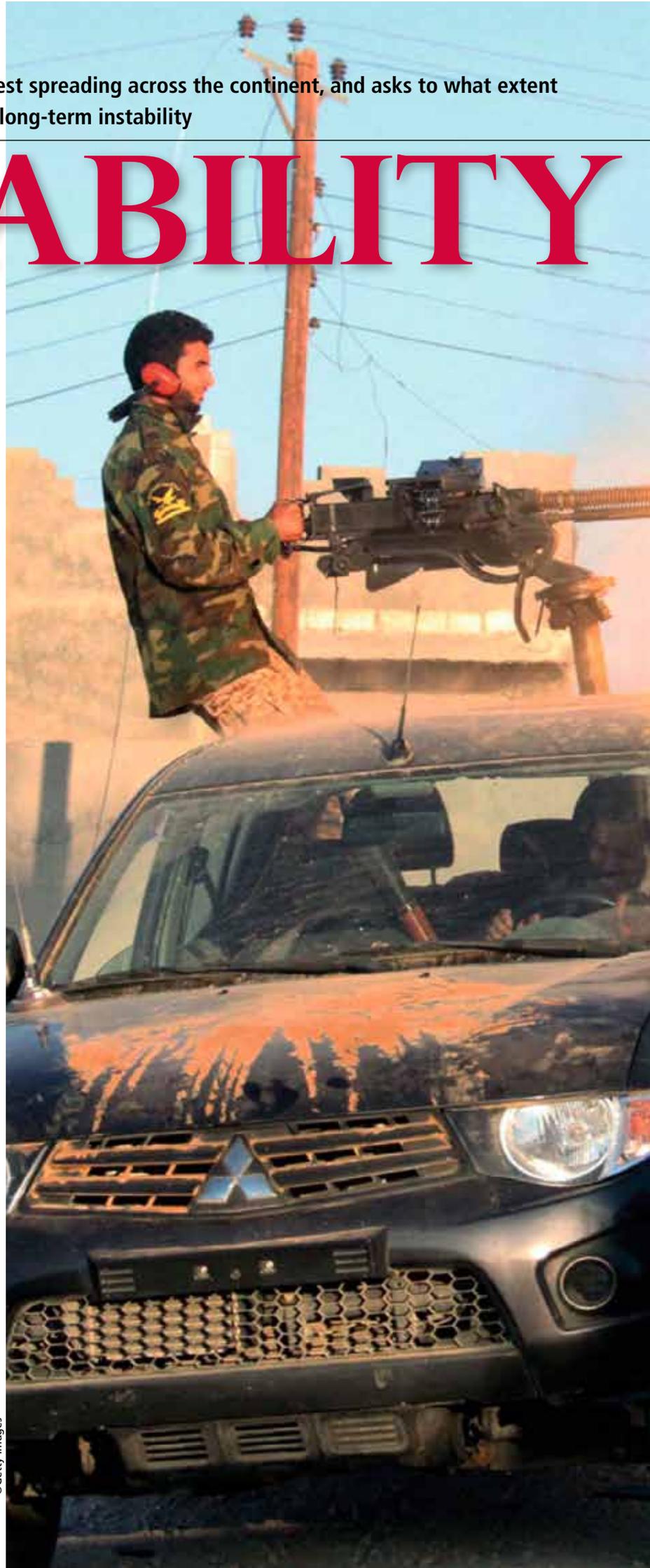
AFRICA

Spiralling conflict: a fighter of the Libyan Dawn group during clashes in late 2014

been easier. Walking into a nightclub with an automatic weapon would have been a straightforward, effective and headline-grabbing event around the world, and the reaction by armed government forces would have been far slower.

But the effect has probably been beyond the attackers' wildest dreams. Although the results were probably far from their minds in 2014, Kenya's tourist trade has collapsed, people are being laid off, drug use and organised crime are increasing and an important source of hard currency has dried up. The coast is predominantly Muslim, so the unemployment and economic depression has created a fertile ground for radicalisation. These are, to all intents and purposes, unintended consequences of an act that took place in the capital, aimed at ordinary Kenyans frequenting a very soft target. But it does underline the point that terror works, and works at a far broader and deeper level than the perpetrators probably imagine.

The big story in Africa, however, has been Boko Haram, in the country which has in theory Africa's highest potential for leadership: Nigeria. For the past few years it has appeared that Boko Haram has had the Nigerian government on the back foot, able to operate in northeastern Nigeria almost with impunity, attempting to carve out a state whose underpinnings are similar to ISIS. And the success of ISIS has given Boko Haram new hope that it is possible to achieve their objective and carve out an Islamic Caliphate in sub-saharan Africa. But this apparent hope has coincided with a series of very successful offensives against Boko Haram by the Nigerian security forces. Alongside their counterparts from neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and Niger, they have liberated some territory from Boko Haram and appear to have not just blunted the organisation's territorial expansion but have started rolling it back. President Goodluck Jonathan candidly admitted to underestimating the strength and ferocity of Boko Haram, but now claims the Nigerian government has their measure and is successfully striking back.

This may be due to what was clearly an overplaying of their hand on the part of Boko Haram in 2014 with the Chibok schoolgirl kidnapping, which became an international cause celebre. More importantly, local civilians formed themselves into armed militias determined to resist Boko Haram, claiming the government was not capable of doing so. This act, plus demonstrations in Abuja and international pressure, forced the government to raise its game. The result has been a quadrapartite offensive with the aim of rolling back Boko Haram.

The capture of Baga and Monguno in late February by Nigerian forces provided much-needed evidence that the Nigerian military could conduct a successful offensive in the area. In total, Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad and Benin have created a joint force of 8,700 troops to fight Boko Haram, backed up by air power. But Boko Haram have been undertaking an offensive of their own: an intensification of violence near Lake Chad, which straddles Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger, has sent tens of thousands of Nigerians fleeing across the border. This once again shows the why the Wykehamist Fallacy should be guarded against. No rational organisation would draw more enemies upon itself, but Boko Haram has done just that. Attacks on Diffa in Niger and the killing of five people at a local fishing village in Chad have virtually guaranteed these governments' commitment to a joint offensive. It was particularly unwise to provoke Chad, which is reported to have one of the most effective militaries in the region. The government already claims to have killed hundreds of Boko Haram fighters in the counter-offensive with its West African allies.

But Boko Haram may shift operations from the capture of territory to more traditional terrorist attacks. On 22 February, at the market town of Potiskum, a seven-year-old girl was used as a suicide bomber and killed herself along with five other people. Nineteen others were injured and hospitalised. A few days earlier, near Chibok the scene of the mass kidnapping, Boko Haram militants effectively eradicated two villages and killed at least 30 people. This

attack highlighted the continuing mistrust between local people and the military, who residents claim were asked to help but did not come out of their base at Chibok to drive off the attackers. On 15 February, a teenage girl killed herself and 16 others at a bus station in Damaturu in the nort east of the country – most of the victims were children selling snacks to passengers. In other words, Boko Haram still has the ability to cause carnage. Even if they are squeezed from their territorial gains, it seems likely that Nigeria and her neighbours will face continued terrorist attacks.

And there is the election. Nigeria has postponed the Presidential election to 28 March in order to prosecute the offensive. This may be pure politics on Goodluck Jonathan's part, as a hard-hitting and successful offensive would pretty much guarantee a return to office. The election is likely to be close, so having a khaki election would make perfect sense to the president, who is struggling against corruption accusations, economic stagnation and low international oil prices. On 2 February, a car bomb exploded at Gombe just after he had left a rally there, killing one person and injuring a further 18, while in other provinces the presidential motorcade was pelted with stones and bottles in near riot-like circumstances. He desperately needs military victory. But every successful terrorist strike by Boko Haram dents his image as a strong leader determined to bring security. His opponent is Muhammedu Buhari, a former military dictator with a very clear "strong man" image. Jonathan is clearly trying to prove he can be strong too, in the hope of undermining his opponent.

A major coup, helped by Boko Haram's haphazard attacks, has been to create a coalition of neighbours, although it was essentially midwifed by the French. Chad is the base for the French regional counter-insurgency operation called "Barkhane", which provides intelligence and logistical support to the Chadian army, and is thus a well-respected and effective force. France drew together Chad, Niger, Cameroon and others as part of their regional operations and focussed them on the threat posed by Boko Haram. On 21 February, the French foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, began a tour of west African countries involved in the fighting. The French, although declining to commit ground troops, have offered to provide support similar to that they provide to Chad to Niger and Cameroon. Inadvertently, Boko Haram has provided a driver to west African unity, and given France a more internationally acceptable role than her traditional one of propping up friendly regional dictators.

Of course terror is good news for that other African group – the dictators. Many African countries are still led by unelected presidents who are cashing in on terror. They can portray themselves as the guardians of order and safety, and can use terror threats to hollow out democratic institutions. By way of example, the president of Djibouti, Ismail Omar Guelleh, has capitalised on his country's strategic location in the war on terror to attract the establishment of foreign military bases and foreign aid. Guelleh, who has been in power since 1999 after being handpicked by his uncle, has gained the favours of Western powers that have repeatedly turned a blind eye

to his many human rights abuses and increasing autocratic tendencies. Guelleh has even used terrorism charges to push potential political rivals out of the country.

Two members of the coalition against Boko Haram are in a similar position: Cameroon's President Biya has been in office since 1982. Similarly, Chad's President Deby has been in office since 1990 and has faced several attempts to topple him, the bloodiest being in 2008 when bodies of rebels were displayed on the steps of the national parliament like a scene from ancient Rome. For individuals such as these, terror provides an excuse to crack down on liberties, use force against opposition groups which may be legitimate and non-violent, and pour money and resources into personally loyal security forces. They are often backed up by the West – in Deby's case quite openly by the French.

But dictators are not necessarily good news for Africa or the West. By suppressing opposition, they allow pressure to build up, leading eventually to spasms of extreme violence, radicalisation and corruption. These are breeding grounds for terrorism, as there is no other way to express opposition other than the use of force against the state. Offering an "Islamic Alternative", such as a caliphate, is often the bait that extremists use. As in Iran under the Shah, the Mosque or Church can easily become the focus of political opposition, giving any political movement a theocratic tinge. And by supporting such characters, the West places itself firmly on the side of torture and political repression. Lessons have not been learned that this is a short-term form of stability that simply breeds instability in the longer term. If Africa is a continent riven with instability, the West shares considerable responsibility for that. This is not post-colonial guilt, but rather understanding that support for blood-stained dictators will sow the dragon's teeth of terror that will, in turn, almost certainly come back to haunt us.

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Boko Haram blast: the group's growing boldness has begun to de-stabilise Nigeria and draw in its neighbours

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