



“The Continuing Threat of Boko Haram”
Testimony before the
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International
Organizations and Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
November 13, 2013

Members of Congress, Ladies and Gentlemen:

My name is Jacob Zenn. I am a Research Analyst of African and Eurasian Affairs for The Jamestown Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own.

Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today on the topic of "The Continuing Threat of Boko Haram."

In this testimony, I will answer the following questions:

- How can the U.S. support Nigeria counter terrorist groups?
- Who is Boko Haram and who is Ansaru?
- Where do Boko Haram and Ansaru get their funding?
- Are Boko Haram and Ansaru connected to al-Qaeda?
- Do Boko Haram and Ansaru present a threat beyond Nigeria?

1. How can the U.S. support Nigeria counter terrorist groups?

Below are 10 measures the U.S. can take to support Nigerian counter-terrorism efforts:

- Develop a ‘Marshall Plan’ for northeastern Nigeria and use those funds to build schools, hospitals, infrastructure, water sources and recreational facilities, especially after army offensives clear out Boko Haram insurgents. The program would need to be transparent and have strong leadership to ensure projects are implemented.
- Label Boko Haram as a “foreign terrorist organization (FTO),” which could bring the power of international financial and anti-money laundering institutions to bear on Boko Haram’s financial sponsors. Otherwise, this label is meaningless and should be abandoned; if Boko Haram is not an FTO, then who is?
- Mentor Nigerian troops in counter-insurgency based on best practices learned from years of dealing with IEDs, urban warfare and ambushes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Currently, the Leahy Act effectively bans U.S. support to Nigeria’s Joint Task Force (JTF) that is fighting Boko Haram. Even JTF units with positive human rights records are blacklisted because of Leahy’s wide-reaching ban on entire units— rather than specific abusers. Leahy should be reexamined, or else Nigeria will continue to look to countries like Pakistan for mentorship, which is no recipe for success.



- Formalize a sub-regional partnership between Nigeria and its French-speaking neighbors (Cameroon, Chad and Niger), where Boko Haram retreats after launching attacks in Nigeria. The U.S.-funded pan-Sahelian counter-terrorism initiatives are not tailored to deal with the unique drivers of the insurgency in Nigeria's borderlands, where Boko Haram and other criminal gangs have been left unchecked for too long. The U.S. should also seek French support in this initiative.
- Assist Nigeria to draft emergency laws with fast-track courts and specialist judges, prosecutors, defenders and investigators who can swiftly try cases of captured Boko Haram members. Wavering Boko Haram members who were forcibly conscripted may prefer prison to death at the hands of JTF, anti-Boko Haram civilian militias, or their own commanders, who kill and torture militants who disobey orders. U.S. lawyers who have experience in conflict resolution should partake in this initiative.
- Fund U.S. universities to teach Hausa, Fulani and other indigenous African languages. Only through sharper local source analysis can the U.S. enhance intelligence gathering on Boko Haram and other African militant groups and engage effectively with the civil society organizations to implement grassroots-driven programs to counter Boko Haram propaganda and recruitment.
- Recognize the distinct Borno-Yobe and ethnic Kanuri dimension of Boko Haram and incorporate local narratives to effectively counter Boko Haram's messaging and recruiting.
- Work with religious leaders and professionals to build skills and acquisition centers in northeastern Nigerian communities. This can be supported by community development funds, which provide support for small-medium business start-ups.
- Create strategies to combat one of the biggest problems the Nigerian government faces in containing Boko Haram and other Nigerian militant groups, which is that they have sympathizers in government that help them carry out "inside jobs."
- Partner with the Nigerian diaspora in the U.S. and UK and other countries to develop innovative and locally driven solutions to combat insurgent movements and corruption in Nigeria and promote accountability and transparency.

2. Who is "Boko Haram" and who is Ansaru?

"Boko Haram" refers to an Islamist group based in northeastern Nigeria. It was led by imam Mohammed Yusuf from 2002 to 2009. Yusuf's teachings differed from mainstream Islamist fundamentalist groups in Nigeria in two main ways: 1) he prohibited Western education; and 2) he prohibited service in the secular Nigeria government. In addition, he

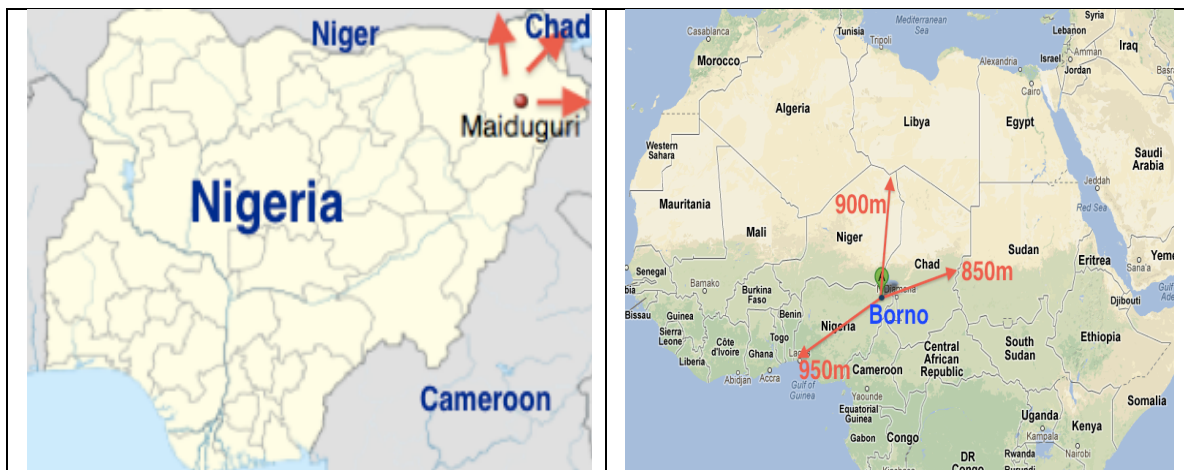


believed the only “legitimate” Sunni Islamic states and scholars in the modern day are the Taliban, Usama bin Laden and al-Qaeda (particularly al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb).

In July 2009, Yusuf’s followers and the Nigerian government engaged in a four-day battle in northeastern Nigeria. The Nigerian security forces captured Yusuf at the house of a relative in Borno State’s capital, Maiduguri, and executed him after interrogation at a police station. They also killed up to 1,000 of his followers during the clashes; about 20-30 security officials were also killed. Yusuf’s execution – perceived as “martyrdom” – was recorded on a cell phone and is now widely available on YouTube and other websites.

In July 2010, Yusuf’s former deputy Abubakar Shekau, who the security forces believed was killed in the July 2009 clashes, emerged as Boko Haram’s new leader. He issued a video message “on behalf of my mujahideen brothers in some African territory called Nigeria... to the soldiers of Allah in the Islamic State of Iraq in particular,” and warned that “Jihad has just begun... O America, die with your fury.” Since Shekau took over the leadership, Boko Haram-related violence in Nigeria has been responsible for about 4,000 deaths in Nigeria.

Note: Shekau gave “Boko Haram” the name *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (Sunni Group for Preaching and Jihad). No group in Nigeria actually calls itself Boko Haram, which means “Western education is sinful;” it is a nickname from locals and the media.



Boko Haram is based in Borno State, Nigeria, whose capital, Maiduguri, is 100 miles from the Cameroon, Chad and Niger borders. Boko Haram has always been able to retreat, regroup and recruit in the border region before launching attacks in Nigeria. Boko Haram’s base in Borno is also closer to Sudan and Libya than Lagos and is a former stopping point for West Africans on the way to hajj (pilgrimage) in Mecca, which is another reason why Boko Haram’s connections to the Sahel and Arab World are closer than its connections within many parts of Nigeria. The Kanuris of Borno had “embassies” in modern-day Tunisia dating back to the 1300s and diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Turks in the 1700s— a time when Lagos and southern Nigeria were still largely unknown to the Kanuris.



Ansaru members are mostly Nigerians with militant origins dating back to their training in the Sahel (Mauritania, Algeria, Mali, Niger) in the late 1990s and early 2000s with militants who later formed al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Ansaru became active in Nigeria first under the name “al-Qaeda in the Lands Beyond the Sahel” in 2011, but in 2012 changed its name to Ansaru (*Jama’atu Ansaril Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan*—the People for Supporting the Muslims in Black Africa). The name change may be attributed to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) leader Abdelmalek Droukdel’s advice to Sahelian militants that it is “better for you to be silent and pretend to be a ‘domestic’ movement...There is no reason for you to show that we have an expansionary, jihadi, al-Qaeda or any other sort of project.”

Ansaru, which the UK designated as a proscribed terrorist group in 2012, has been responsible for the following attacks, among others:

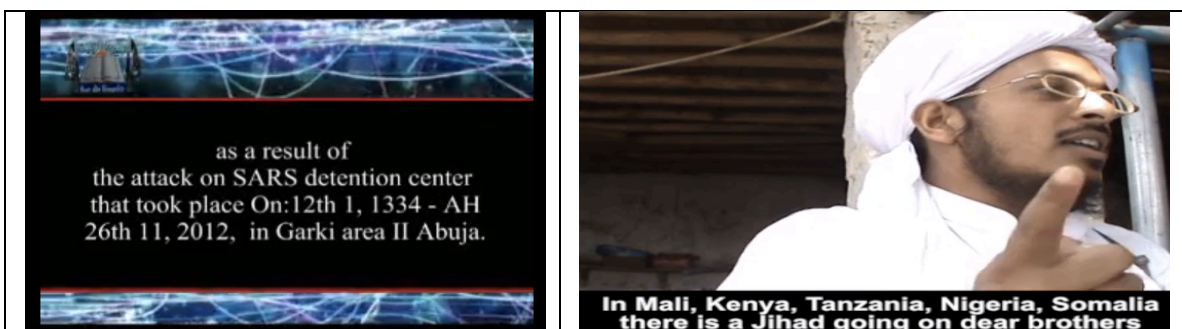
- Kidnapping and killing a British and Italian engineer of an Italian construction company in Sokoto in January 2012;
- Kidnapping and killing a German engineer in Kano in May 2012 (which was claimed by and carried out with AQIM);
- Attacking the Special Anti-Robbery Squad prison in Abuja in November 2012 and freeing dozens of prisoners;
- Kidnapping a Frenchman from the compound of an energy company near the border with Niger in Katsina State in December 2012 (he remains in captivity).
- Ambushing a convoy of three buses carrying 180 Nigerian soldiers through Okene, Kogi State, en route to Mali, killing two soldiers. Ansaru claimed the troops “were aiming to demolish the Islamic Empire of Mali” and warned African countries to “stop helping Western countries fight Muslims.”
- Breaking into a prison and kidnapping and killing seven foreigners from a construction site in northeastern Nigeria’s Bauchi State in February 2013.
- Ansaru was also likely responsible for the **UN Headquarters bombing** in Abuja on August 26, 2011 and the string of **suicide bombings of churches** in the Middle Belt in 2011 and 2012. Its members may also have participated in the **kidnapping of a seven-member French family in northern Cameroon** on February 19, 2013 (the family was released weeks later in exchange for \$3 million and the release of Boko Haram members from Cameroonian prisons). Finally, its members participated in Mokhtar Belmokhar’s attacks at the energy plant in **In Amenas, Algeria in February 2013 and attacks in Arlit and Agadez, Niger in May 2013.**



One example of the AQIM-Ansaru connection is evidenced by their symbolism. The Algerian national emblem (left), the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat logo (center), and Ansaru logo (right) all include a rising sun symbolizing a “new dawn.” When a Boko Haram-Ansaru courier was arrested in 2012, he told the security forces that his funding came not from Boko Haram but from the “Group from the Sunset.” The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat was the predecessor to AQIM.



Similar to AQIM, Ansaru depicts itself in Sahelian attire (left), while Boko Haram, which is the more “Nigerian” group, depicts itself in green military fatigues similar to the U.S. and Nigerian militaries (right).



An example of Ansaru’s connections with the broader al-Qaeda movement is that in November 2012 its video claim (left) of a prison break in Abuja contained the exact same nasheed (Islamic music) as the Pakistan-based Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan’s praise of jihads (right) in various theatres of Africa, including Nigeria. The nasheed is extremely rare and includes the chant “Ansar.” In contrast, Boko Haram has frequently reached out to al-Qaeda, but al-Qaeda has not “endorsed” Boko Haram—likely because its killing of civilians would be a detriment to al-Qaeda’s image. If the intelligence community fails to recognize Ansaru’s international connections, it will inhibit operations against its networks in the future.



3. Where do Boko Haram and Ansaru get their funding?

Before July 2009, Boko Haram received funding through Salafist and other Sunni Islamic organizations, such as those in Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Libya. Some of these organizations were likely connected to the UK. Boko Haram was also supported by Nigerian politicians, who wanted to curry favor with the group (since it was popular) and to benefit from “hiring” its rank-and-file *al-majiri* Islamic student members to carry out local vendettas on rivals. Such connections between politicians and Boko Haram likely still exist, but not as much as before July 2009. Since 2010, Boko Haram has also robbed dozens of banks in northern Nigeria and stolen cattle and other valuable items from locals in northern Nigeria. Ansaru and Boko Haram both have received significant funding from AQIM and kidnappings-for-ransom.

4. Are Boko Haram and Ansaru connected to al-Qaeda?

Yes, Ansaru is an extension of AQIM in Nigeria and is connected to the broader international al-Qaeda network. Boko Haram has benefitted from connections to AQIM and al-Shabaab for weapons procurement, safe havens and receiving training in the Sahel, although al-Qaeda has never declared it an affiliate. Boko Haram’s killing of innocent civilians has likely alienated al-Qaeda, which already has a “public relations” problem of being perceived as killing too many innocent civilians; this is one reason why Ansaru formally announced that it broke away from Boko Haram in 2011.

5. Do Boko Haram and Ansaru present a threat beyond Nigeria?

Yes, they both can carry out attacks throughout West Africa. Ansaru has operated with AQIM from Algeria to Niger to Nigeria. Boko Haram, however, has confined its attacks to Nigeria 99% of the time, but uses bases in Niger, Cameroon and Chad to retreat, regroup and recruit. However, both organizations, especially Boko Haram, have not developed a sophisticated online “outreach strategy” to connect with potential sympathizers in the West. Moreover, the Nigerian diaspora is mostly Christian and unsympathetic to Boko Haram. The possibility of attacking the U.S. homeland is a mid-term to long-term threat and would require enhanced capabilities and connections for both groups. They are more likely to target U.S. interests and personnel in southern Nigeria as a next step before the U.S. homeland.

Sources consulted:

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Biography:

Jacob Zenn is an expert on northern Nigerian security and consultant on countering violent extremism for U.S think-tanks and international organizations in Nigeria and Tajikistan. He is the author of "Northern Nigeria's Boko Haram: The Prize in Al-Qaeda's Africa Strategy," published by The Jamestown Foundation in 2012 and based on his fieldwork in Boko Haram's main area of operations in northern Nigeria, northern Cameroon, Chad, and southern Niger. Mr. Zenn also writes reports on Nigerian security for The Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor, West Point Combating Terrorism Center and The Soufan Group and produces geospatial analysis products for visualization for Courage Services. He is also a subject matter expert on Nigeria for the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO).

In February 2013, Mr. Zenn provided testimony on Islamist militancy in Central Asia to the US Congress Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade. He also briefed the Cultural Knowledge Consortium of Department of Defense, Department of State Center for Strategic Counter-terrorism Communications, Canadian Security and Intelligence Services, and Royal United Services Institute on Nigerian security. Mr. Zenn's forthcoming publications examine Boko Haram's threat to the United States, Algeria-Nigerian jihadist networks, women in Boko Haram operations and propaganda, and a monograph on "Violent Extremism in Nigeria: A Practical Policy Guidance For Decision Makers."

Mr. Zenn speaks Arabic, Swahili, Chinese, Russian, French, Uighur and Spanish in addition to his native English, and he is studying Hausa. He holds a Juris Doctorate from Georgetown Law, where he earned the commendation of Global Law Scholar. His legal expertise focuses on international civil society law and best practices related to freedom of association, and he co-leads a USAID-funded law reform program in South Sudan. Since September 2013, he has also served as a policy adviser to the Nigeria-American Leadership Council, which works with the Nigerian diaspora, US government and think-tanks, and civic groups in Nigeria to counter radicalization and promote accountability.



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