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## Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade

### Boko Haram: The Islamist Insurgency in West Africa

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#### Boko Haram's Origins and Evolution

**Boko Haram began as a religious-political movement in Borno State in northeastern Nigeria around 2002.** Led by a man named Mohammed Yusuf and operating largely out of a mosque he founded in the regional capital, Maiduguri, the group advocated a return to shari'a, or Islamic law, and a rejection of secularism and corruption in public and private life. Focused on targets in Nigeria, they began to use violence to punish Muslims they deemed were indulging in apostasy, often relying on brief hit-and-run tactics using light arms and traveling by car or motorcycle.<sup>1</sup> These attacks attracted police attention, and over the next several years, the group's engagement with law enforcement escalated into ever-deadlier exchanges. The violence spread into neighboring Nigerian states and culminated in a conflagration in 2009 that left Yusuf and several hundred of his adherents dead, and hundreds more captured by police.

The group seemed to be in full retreat, and was inactive for almost a year until Yusuf's second-in-command, Abubakar bin Mohammad Shekau, released a video and a manifesto announcing his leadership of Boko Haram and threatening revenge on the Nigerian state as well as its Western backers. Often expressing common cause with al Qaeda, at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 the group launched a series of improvised explosive device (IED) attacks against government installations, religious leaders, and politicians. In mid-June, the group executed the first suicide bombing attack inside Nigeria against the police Inspector-General, and in August it launched another suicide bombing against the UN offices in the country's capital, Abuja.<sup>2</sup> Attacks escalated through 2013 and 2014, when Boko Haram expanded its array of targets, frequently engaged Nigerian forces directly, and overran border towns and increasing swaths of Nigerian territory. The attacks became numbing in their

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<sup>1</sup> J. Peter Pham, "How Boko Haram Became the Islamic State's West Africa Province." *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, Winter, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Senan Murray and Adam Nossiter, "Suicide Bomber Attacks UN Building in Nigeria." *The New York Times*, August 26, 2011.

*Bold.*

*Innovative.*

*Bipartisan.*

frequency, claiming 70 lives one day, 19 the next, 21 the day after.<sup>3</sup> The group was so successful at cowering security forces and terrorizing local populations that Shekau declared it had enough territorial control to have established a “caliphate” in northern Nigeria.<sup>4</sup>

As Boko Haram’s capacity expanded, it absorbed more and more local people into its ranks, many of them unwilling victims. Young boys were conscripted into service while girls were kidnapped and used or sold as sex slaves and domestic workers.<sup>5</sup> Most famously, in April of 2014 Boko Haram kidnapped almost 300 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok, more than 200 of whom have never been recovered.

By the end of 2014, Boko Haram had earned the dubious honor of being called the world’s deadliest terror group by the Institute for Economics and Peace. In its 2015 report on global terrorism, the IEP noted that in 2014, Nigeria “witnessed the largest increase in terrorist deaths ever recorded by any country, increasing by over 300 percent to 7,512 fatalities.” IEP also reported that Boko Haram was responsible for 10 of the 20 most fatal terrorist attacks worldwide in 2014.<sup>6</sup>

## Boko Haram Today

Since that report was released, a multinational offensive against Boko Haram killed hundreds of militants and severely degraded the group’s territorial control and capacity to confront national security forces directly (more below). This is the second retreat for the group since 2009, and demonstrates its comparative weakness when confronted with a well-organized and determined military force.

In an insurgency, however, the offense often has the advantage. Battered but undeterred, Boko Haram has turned again to asymmetric tactics on a rich array of targets. Relying primarily on suicide bombings, the group terrorizes public spaces that are notoriously difficult to secure, such as markets and transit depots. Attacks often feature multiple coordinated bombings<sup>7</sup> and increasingly rely on kidnapped women and girls.<sup>8</sup> These strikes have succeeded in re-establishing the group’s pre-2015 daily tempo of casualties, killing and injuring upwards of 50-100 people in an average attack. While aiming at poorly defended rural areas and camps for the displaced, the group has also renewed its assault on the city of Maiduguri, now home to some two million people in a combination of permanent residents and refugees from the years of fighting in the region. This mix of attacks on urban and rural areas gives the population a sense that there is no refuge from Boko Haram’s reign of terror.

Despite their continued ability to menace daily life in the northeast, just how large and capable the group is today compared to late 2014 is difficult to assess. Boko Haram’s members seem to be scattered throughout the Nigerian countryside and the border regions with Chad, Niger, and

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<sup>3</sup> Department of State, Nigeria Country Report on Human Rights, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Grossman, “Boko Haram’s New Caliphate.” *The Long War Journal*, August 25, 2015. [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/08/boko\\_harams\\_new\\_cali.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/08/boko_harams_new_cali.php)

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, Nigeria Country Report on Human Rights, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/236604.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2015: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism.” November, 2015. <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2015-Global-Terrorism-Index-Report.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> “Nigeria Suicide Bombings Kill at Least 16 in Chibok.” *The Guardian*, January 28, 2016

<sup>8</sup> “Teenager Seized for Boko Haram Attack Tells How She Tore off Suicide Vest and Fled.” *The Guardian*, February 11, 2016

Cameroon. While there were reports that militants abandoned large weapons caches and vehicle depots when fleeing from government troops, they nevertheless have been using rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and small arms alongside their IEDs.<sup>9</sup> Their use of kidnapped women to execute suicide attacks, while tactically advantageous (providing greater access even to secured areas), also suggests a shrunken supply of adult male foot soldiers. The group has been reduced to ambushes along rural roads in lieu of territorial control. Shekau, too, has lowered his public profile, perhaps as a result of being subordinated to a region-wide Islamic State hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> Regardless, Boko Haram has retained a presence in and around the northeast, and continues to menace cities as far west as Kano and Zaria and as far south as Abuja. In short, Boko Haram has been set back on its heels, but this status may be temporary, and the group is by no means yet defeated.

## A Networked Threat

Boko Haram has demonstrated its ambitions to join global Islamist terrorist movements since at least 2009. Shekau began by emulating al Qaeda propaganda and making efforts to connect with its core leadership. More recently, he signaled an affinity for the Islamic State. Not only did he begin to refer to the territory seized in northern Nigeria as a caliphate and express support for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, but Boko Haram also adopted the Islamic State's signature black flag.<sup>11</sup> By March of last year, Shekau publicly declared Boko Haram's allegiance to the organization, a fealty that al-Baghdadi eventually accepted.<sup>12</sup> Now, Boko Haram is attempting to re-brand itself as the Islamic State's "West Africa Province."

Despite the appearance of preferential alliances, growing links between al Qaeda-affiliated groups and the new allies of the Islamic State in Africa suggest there is more collaboration than rivalry among the continent's terrorist groups. They also suggest an increasing appreciation among these groups for a common purpose: the rejection of decades of failed governance in their home countries and an effort to replace those failures with a rigid form of Islamist authority.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, Boko Haram's connections with other African terrorist groups seem to have had a more tangible effect on their capacity to wage successful terrorist attacks than their communications with groups outside the continent. As early as 2010, the leader of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), mainly operating out of northern Mali, expressed support for the group, while Boko Haram itself claimed in 2011 to have made contact with al Shabaab in Somalia. In 2012, Boko Haram reportedly sent dozens of operatives to AQIM-controlled areas in Mali to receive training, and those same operatives later returned to Nigeria with more sophisticated equipment, including shoulder-fired rockets.<sup>14</sup> AQIM, notorious kidnapers, may also have inspired Boko Haram to undertake kidnapping

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<sup>9</sup> "Boko Haram Assault on Maiduguri Leaves Scores Dead in Nigeria." *Associated Press*, 28 December, 2015

<sup>10</sup> Jacob Zenn, "A Biography of Boko Haram and the Bay'a to al-Baghdadi." *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 8, Issue 3. Combatting Terrorism Center, West Point: March 2015. There are also claims that Shekau has been severely wounded or even killed, although audio and video of the putative leader keep surfacing, and there is no hard evidence of his demise. See Will Hartley, "On the ropes? Boko Haram attacks continue apace despite Nigerian claims." *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, October 1, 2015

<sup>11</sup> Pham, 2016, p. 23

<sup>12</sup> Zenn, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> For a further exploration of this phenomena, see Yaroslav Trofimov, "Jihad Comes to Africa." *Wall Street Journal*, February 5, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Pham, 2016, p. 21

for ransom operations in earnest. Today, links between groups in Libya, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria are fluid and pragmatic. While different organizations still operate independently from each other and continue to focus on local objectives, the mentoring and mutual support available among terrorist groups fuel the radical Islamist momentum in West Africa.

## Efforts to Counter Boko Haram

### *The Nigerian Response*

As discussed above, the initial government response to Boko Haram was swift and brutally executed, imposing a series of setbacks on the organization. But under the leadership of Shekau, the insurgency regrouped and pushed back with increasingly lethality, leveraging their reconstituted numbers, training, and often-superior equipment. In this second phase of the group's development, Boko Haram's boldness and tactical dominance throughout began to push government forces out of much of the northeast. Declaring a state of emergency in the northern states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, the Nigerian government launched a Joint Military Task Force (JTF) and tasked the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division with pushing back against the group. Security forces reportedly responded to Boko Haram's brutality with their own, using ruthless tactics and indiscriminate violence to intimidate both the terrorists and any possible sympathizers.<sup>15</sup> In its 2014 Country Report on Human Rights, the State Department noted, "observers asserted that the climate of impunity for serious crimes led to the victimization of the civilian population by both Boko Haram and government forces."<sup>16</sup> Despite international pressure and a renewed effort to professionalize the military forces, accusations of extrajudicial killings continue to dog Nigerian forces today.<sup>17</sup>

Upon his election in 2015, Nigeria's new president, Muhammadu Buhari, himself a retired Major General in the Nigerian Army, pledged to defeat Boko Haram by the end of the year and took several actions to advance toward this goal, including moving the force headquarters from Abuja to Maiduguri and dismissing several senior military officers suspected of corruption. The government ostensibly has also increased resources for the military after years of under-investment, to include ensuring on-time personnel payment.<sup>18</sup> The reinvigorated effort, coupled with regional pressure on the group, is paying operational dividends, as Nigerian forces have successfully routed Boko Haram from all of the territory it previously held and seized weapons caches and destroyed former hideouts. At the same time, the Buhari administration has announced renewed efforts to investigate and prosecute military violations of human rights and corruption.<sup>19</sup> It is unclear how far these anti-corruption efforts aimed at the security services will truly go, but Buhari's efforts to date represent long-overdue steps in the right direction.

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<sup>15</sup> Amnesty International, "Stars on their Shoulders, Blood on their Hands: War Crimes Committed by the Nigerian Military." June 2, 2015. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr44/1657/2015/en/>

<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of State, Nigeria Country Report on Human Rights, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Michelle Faul and Ibrahim Abdulaziz, "Nigeria: People Detained by Military Disappear in Northeast." *The Washington Post*, February 20, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Government of Nigeria Ministry of Budget and National Planning, "Appropriation Bill 2016."

<http://www.budgetoffice.gov.ng/pdfs/2016/2016AppropriationBill.pdf>. See also, Muhammadu Buhari, "The Budget of Change." Speech Delivered to the National Assembly, December 22, 2015.

<http://www.budgetoffice.gov.ng/pdfs/2016/2016BudgetSpeech.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> "Top Nigerian Military Officer Arrested Over Arms Scandal." *News24*, February 10, 2016.

<http://www.news24.com/Africa/News/top-nigerian-military-officer-arrested-over-arms-scandal-20160210-2>

### *Regional Cooperation*

Nigeria's revitalization of its counterterrorism operations was preceded by a regional and international push for collaboration to combat the threat in the wake of the Chibok kidnappings in 2014. Benin, Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Nigeria first met in Paris in May of 2014 along with representatives of the US, UK and EU to reactivate a long-standing but disused Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF) originally organized through the Lake Chad Basin Commission. At a series of follow-on meetings, member countries pledged troops to the fight against Boko Haram, and by January of 2015 the African Union had endorsed plans for an 8,700-strong force and requested a UN trust fund to resource the effort. The MNJTF's tasks were to include targeted operations against Boko Haram, capturing members of the terrorist group, border security, recovery of abductees, regional coordination, and intelligence sharing.<sup>20</sup> Coupled with Nigeria's renewed offensive late in former President Goodluck Jonathan's term, regional efforts have seen tangible results. As recently as this month, Cameroon launched highly effective operations against Boko Haram both on its own soil and across the border into Nigeria.<sup>21</sup> There are also ongoing reports of Nigerian military operations destroying abandoned Boko Haram camps and hideouts.<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately, the MNJTF has had an uneven start, with troop shortfalls and limited coordination efforts leading to questions about the task force's sustainability. Task force members focus largely on their own border regions, and it is unclear how much tactical, operational, or strategic coordination actually occurs.<sup>23</sup> Boko Haram also refused to go quietly, demonstrating its withering, if episodic, ability to overtake military bases. The capture of the town of Baga and the MNJTF headquarters there in early 2015 was an early setback for regional efforts.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, real operational gains have resulted from the combined, if not entirely coordinated, efforts.

### **Implications for Regional and International Security**

It is too soon to tell how much of a practical impact on Boko Haram's operational capacity the contradictory forces of the regional offensive and the group's allegiance with the Islamic state will have. Military operations against the organization have certainly forced it to retreat from its long-held territory and hideouts, including in the Sambisa Forest. Meanwhile, there is some evidence that the Islamic State may be supporting improvements to Boko Haram's media campaign, but there are fewer signs of financial support or capacity building flowing to the West African affiliate. Some analysts speculate that the alliance largely served propaganda purposes for both groups, making the Islamic State look like it was expanding even under intense pressure in the Middle East and making Boko Haram look relevant to the global Islamist terrorist network.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ionel Zamfield, "At a Glance: African-Led Counterterrorism Measures Against Boko Haram." European Parliamentary Research Service, March 2015. See also: Department of State 2014 Counterterrorism Report [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2015/551302/EPRS\\_ATA\(2015\)551302\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2015/551302/EPRS_ATA(2015)551302_EN.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> "Cameroon stages major attack on Boko Haram base in Nigeria." *Yahoo News/ AFP*, Feb 16, 2016

<sup>22</sup> "Troops destroy Boko Haram camps in Sambisa, Alagarno." *Vanguard News*. February 17, 2016 <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2016/02/troops-destroy-boko-haram-camps-in-sambisa-alagarno/>

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Fessy, "Boko Haram: Can Regional Force Beat Nigeria's Militant Islamists?" *BBC News*, March 3, 2015. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31695508>

<sup>24</sup> "The Massacre Nigeria Forgot: A Year after Boko Haram's Attack on Baga." *The Guardian*, 9 January, 2016. See also: Pham, 2016, p. 23

<sup>25</sup> "OSINT Summary: The Islamic State Accepts Boko Haram's Pledge of Allegiance." *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, April 1, 2015.



Nevertheless, a heightened and more sophisticated media profile may help attract regional fighters to Boko Haram from both West and North Africa, particularly if the group is able to reestablish safe havens inside Nigeria. Alternatively, if Nigerian security forces are able to hold territory recently re-won in the 2015 offensive, it is possible that Boko Haram operatives will scatter further afield to join more promising campaigns, in Mali, Libya, or elsewhere. There are also concerns that the regionalization of the response to Boko Haram through the MNJTF will lead to an expansion (or diffusion) of the group's military operations to Nigeria's neighbors. Already a presence in Cameroon and long responsible for kidnappings and raids there, Boko Haram has now threatened increased violence against targets in Chad and Niger in response to their involvement in the regional offensive.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond the continuing threat of attacks, the conflict has displaced upwards of two million people, many of whom are children under the age of five.<sup>27</sup> Such a large population of essentially migratory communities is having an enormous impact on the region's economy, society, and environment. Farms lie fallow and livelihoods have been abandoned. The region's cities, already suffering from inadequate infrastructure and water shortages, are now overtaxed by swelling populations as people seek refuge away from rural areas.

There is little evidence that Boko Haram, as an organization, has developed the capability to reach beyond West Africa, and it appears from the pattern of ongoing attacks that its sights are still set mainly on Nigerian targets. However, a sure sign of both the group's reach and the impact of its affiliation with the Islamic State would be any evidence that Boko Haram members were traveling to North Africa to participate in the wider IS fight. If Nigeria and its neighbors successfully maintain pressure on the group regionally, the international community would be wise to look for signs that Boko Haram fighters were migrating to other parts of Africa or offering their services to the Islamic State elsewhere.

## What Partners Can Do

The brazenness of Boko Haram's ongoing attacks, especially against displaced civilians using kidnapped girls as suicide bombers, underscores the ongoing challenge that security forces face in defending northeastern communities. As it stands today, Boko Haram would likely attempt to recapture territory in the event of a weakening or withdrawal of government forces. Security must also be implemented in an environment with devastated infrastructure using police and military forces that will need to recover from years of under-investment and a severe trust gap with the local population. At the same time, the glut of refugees and the challenges behind reintegrating former Boko Haram captives indicate a humanitarian and social crisis that may long outlast the fighting.<sup>28</sup>

In such an environment, the Nigerian government must take a strong lead in developing the political will and financial commitment to provide holistic security in areas ravaged by Boko Haram. Such a

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<sup>26</sup> Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos, "Boko Haram: Regional Issues Around the Uprising." Jean-Jaures Foundation, February 10, 2015. <http://www.jean-jaures.org/Publications/Notes/Boko-Haram>

<sup>27</sup> See UNICEF Nigeria plan for 2016: <http://www.unicef.org/appeals/nigeria.html>

<sup>28</sup> One acute example of this social stress is the plight of women and girls kidnapped by Boko Haram and the tenuous status of the children they have had a result of sexual abuse. See: International Alert and UNICEF, "Bad Blood: Perceptions of Children Born of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence and Women and Girls Associated with Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria." February, 2016.

security plan should include an effective policing capacity to protect the population and deny Boko Haram successful attacks, coupled with military operations when necessary. Both forces should be bolstered by intelligence capabilities and linked to an efficient justice sector able to conduct detention operations and swift prosecutions according to international standards for the just rule of law. All of this must be coupled with a robust development program that can provide basic services and infrastructure to long-neglected communities. Such an effort would be unprecedented in the north and take substantial political capital from Abuja and its international backers.

Partners can reinforce Nigerian-led efforts with continued diplomatic engagement, technical advising and support, equipment assistance, and expertise. The U.S., U.K., and the EU in particular have been continually involved in efforts to fill technical gaps. The UK announced at the end of December last year that it would increase its training and advisory force in Nigeria to 300 personnel.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, the EU has dedicated tens of millions of Euros to providing humanitarian assistance to Boko Haram's victims.<sup>30</sup> After the 2014 Chibok kidnapping, the U.S. and Nigeria renewed efforts at counter-Boko Haram collaboration, with the U.S. deploying an interagency advisory team to Abuja. More recently, the Defense Department deployed 300 forces to Cameroon to support intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations focused on Boko Haram.<sup>31</sup> Nigeria is also a beneficiary of multiple U.S. security assistance programs, including the new Security Governance Initiative, the Global Security Contingency Fund, and the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund. Through these programs the U.S. has recently provided communications gear and equipment to Nigeria, including a recent delivery of 24 mine-resistant, ambush protected vehicles (MRAPs). The U.S. also supports efforts by other regional partners to combat Boko Haram, including Niger and Cameroon,<sup>32</sup> and frequently consults with European partners to coordinate efforts and share information. This broad approach ensures that the counter-Boko Haram effort is a diversified and sustainable portfolio of investment in regional partners.

## Conclusion

International efforts can only proceed at the pace set by Nigeria. The U.S. recently re-started infantry battalion training after a long hiatus,<sup>33</sup> with plans to build on such engagements and ongoing evaluations of Nigerian equipment requests. Continued accusations of human rights violations by Nigerian security forces and Nigeria's own concerns about protecting its sovereignty mean that all external support is preceded with careful and mutual evaluations of both sides' intentions. These engagements are complex but must continue in order to sustain pressure on Boko Haram. The U.S. and other Nigerian partners should continue to point out the connections between government conduct in the north and the resilience and support of local communities, sustaining an upper hand against Boko Haram.

Boko Haram has shown its own resilience over almost 14 years of organizational contraction and expansion. All told, the conflict has resulted in the deaths of some 20,000 people and displaced

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<sup>29</sup> "UK to Send More Armed Forces to Nigeria to Advise on Boko Haram." *The Guardian*, 21 December, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> European Commission, Press Release, "EU Boosts Humanitarian Aid to Those Displaced by Boko Haram Violence." June 18, 2015. [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-15-5213\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-5213_en.htm)

<sup>31</sup> White House, "Letter from the President—War Powers Resolution Regarding Cameroon." October 14, 2015. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/14/letter-from-president-war-powers-resolution-cameroon>

<sup>32</sup> "US Gives Nigeria 24 Armored Vehicles for Boko Haram Fight." *Asia News Monitor*, January 11, 2016

<sup>33</sup> Helene Cooper, "Rifts between U.S. and Nigeria Impeding Fight Against Boko Haram." *The New York Times*, January 24, 2015.

approximately 2 million,<sup>34</sup> and the group’s unabated bombing campaign belies premature claims about its operational defeat. And its ability to generate an endorsement from the Islamic State, while not necessarily a sign of operational strength, demonstrates the group’s ability to adapt and leverage relationships in order to survive. The Nigerian government must capitalize on recent operational successes in the north to build a lasting edifice against terrorist violence, and its international partners must remain vigilant against the group’s revival and possible encroachment abroad.

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<sup>34</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, “Nigeria Security Tracker.” <http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/nigeria-security-tracker/p29483>