

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

“Boko Haram: The Islamist Insurgency in West Africa”

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Keating, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I would like to thank you for the invitation to testify at today's hearing, "Boko Haram: the Islamist Insurgency in West Africa," which could not be more timely or important.

My name is Jennifer Cooke, and I direct the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a bipartisan, nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C. Political, economic, and security dynamics in Nigeria have been a priority focus of my work with the CSIS Africa Program over the last 15 years: from insurgency in the country's oil-producing Niger Delta, to energy sector reform, health service delivery, the fight against corruption, electoral politics, and the early emergence of Boko Haram. I have traveled extensively within Nigeria and the broader West African sub-region. My testimony today reflects findings from a trip in January of this year to Abuja and Maiduguri, the birthplace of Boko Haram, and to Niamey, Niger, as part of a CSIS project on violent extremism in the Sahel. I've also recently traveled to Senegal and Northern Mali as part of this project. My remarks and written testimony represent my views and not those of my colleagues or of CSIS as an institution.

Mr. Chairman, recent assaults against unprotected civilian populations in North East Nigeria, northern Cameroon, and Niger are a stark illustration of Boko Haram's enduring lethality and the terrible human cost of the asymmetrical incursions—suicide bombings and "hit and run" attacks, improvised explosive devices—that have been its enduring tactical mainstay. In late January, Boko Haram militants launched a particularly brutal assault on Dalori, a village on the outskirts of the Borno State capital of Maiduguri in North East Nigeria, detonating suicide vests and fire-bombing houses while occupants, including many children, were trapped within. The Dalori attack left some 85 people dead. Just a few weeks later, two female suicide bombers killed more than 60 people in a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Borno town of Dikwa. A third would-be assailant in that attack, a teenage girl strapped with explosives, had a last minute change of heart, confessing that she did not want to kill her parents, who were residents of the camp. Little more than a week later, in the village of Mémé in northern Cameroon, two militants detonated explosives hidden in the village's drinking water supplies, killing themselves and 20 people and leaving many more injured.

Boko Haram has been significantly weakened over the last 18 months, as a more robust and concerted effort by the Nigerian military—in partnership with security forces in neighboring Chad, Cameroon, and Niger—has routed the group from territories that it controlled and significantly degraded its capabilities and leadership. Many thousands of Boko Haram members, along with a number of its senior leaders, have been killed or captured, and the group no longer appears to have access to the kinds of transport and equipment—tanks, armored vehicles, Toyota Hilux trucks—that it has had in the past. Regional forces have continued to destroy Boko Haram camps and rear bases; the

Nigerian Air Force has been engaged in a sustained assault on Boko Haram redoubts in Sambisa Forest, taking out fuel pumps, solar panels, and weapons caches. Regional military forces have rescued thousands of women and girls who had been kidnapped by Boko Haram members and held in the most appalling of circumstances. The group's media operation—which reportedly received technical assistance from ISIL—has gone largely quiet, and there have been no video appearances by erstwhile leader Abubakar Shekau (or by any of his alleged imposters) since early 2015. These advances against Boko Haram are real: they should be acknowledged and supported by the United States and international community. But this progress is cold comfort for the victims and families of Boko Haram's most recent attacks and the many communities of North East Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin region who remain vulnerable to the group's continuing predations.

The fight against Boko Haram is far from over. The group's strength was never as an organized fighting force, but rather as a fractured, ruthless organization, willing to inflict maximum damage on the softest of targets—school children, marketplaces, mosques, and churches. Eliminating the capacity for these attacks will be far more difficult than territorial rout.

Further—and one reason that today's hearing is so important—it is important to remember that Boko Haram has proved resilient to setbacks in the past. The possibility that it will regroup and rebuild should be the source of critical regional and international concern. In the current global and regional context, where jihadist groups compete for notoriety and ISIL entrenches its presence in Libya, there is an urgent need to prevent Boko Haram from regenerating and possibly coming back more virulent, destructive, and globally connected than before.

First steps in the long road ahead.

There is broad consensus among policymakers and analysts that for sustained security against Boko Haram and possible successor groups over the long term, regional governments will need to plan—and, when possible, rapidly implement—comprehensive strategies that improve socioeconomic conditions for impoverished and marginalized communities. Infrastructure development, economic revitalization, transparent and accountable governance, and an end to corruption are all high on the priority list. At the center of that longer-term strategy must be a major effort to provide the region's youthful populations with improved access to quality education and economic opportunity. But these longer-term strategies, even if started with urgency, will take time to bear fruit, and they are predicated on a level of security and normalcy that today does not exist. Counting on a comprehensive development and governance approach to secure the peace is not realistic right now, but neither is a purely military effort to “destroy” Boko Haram.

There are three priority areas that warrant United States support:

Prevent Boko Haram from regenerating.

Boko Haram has proved resilient in the past, and constraining its ability to regroup or resupply itself by drawing on regional networks and transport corridors is critical. Boko Haram members have always been able to move with ease across Nigeria's northern borders: to Chad (via Lake Chad and its many islands), to Niger, and through the heavily forested and mountainous areas that straddle the Nigeria-Cameroon border. Following the extrajudicial killing of founder Mohammed Yusuf in 2009, much of Boko Haram's leadership fled Nigeria across these porous northern frontiers. During that hiatus, Abubakar Shekau is said to have traveled to northern Mali and trained with the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO); other members reportedly traveled through Chad and Niger to train and fight alongside jihadist elements in Somalia, Algeria, and Afghanistan. They returned to Nigeria in 2010, and Boko Haram reemerged as a far more deadly and sophisticated enterprise. Turmoil in Libya and the fall of Muammar el-Qaddafi in 2011 resulted in an additional influx of weaponry from Libyan arsenals and of Nigerian fighters (many Nigerians were members of Qaddafi's security forces), arriving primarily through supply routes in Chad.

Today, as ISIL expands operations in Libya, it will likely become a magnet for Boko Haram fighters driven out by Nigerian, Chadian, Nigerien and Cameroonian forces. This may appear to offer some respite to the Lake Chad Basin region, but if international moves against ISIL in Libya are eventually successful, those fighters are almost certain to return, and the possibility of an even more sophisticated, battle-hardened, and ruthless Islamist insurgency should be an issue of grave concern.

Sustain diplomatic pressure for more effective regional cooperation.

Essential to preventing regeneration of Boko Haram will be cooperation among Nigeria and its regional neighbors to block supply routes and exfiltration, eradicate rear-bases and training camps, and share intelligence on movements of fighters and on sources of funding and supply. The regional Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), which comprises Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, was established to do just that. The task force has largely stalled, however, as distrust and mutual recriminations between Chad and Nigeria persist, and as differences in perceptions of threat, responsibility, and priority are hampering progress. Less than half of the task force's estimated \$700 million budget has been raised, and both Chad and Nigeria—where oil exports are the primary source of government revenues—are in fiscal crisis. Key diplomatic and security partners—including the United States, France, the African Union, and United Nations—should intensify the push for more robust regional cooperation and ensure that those efforts are adequately and appropriately funded.

Assist in disrupting Boko Haram's financial lifelines.

As important as blocking the physical ingress and egress of fighters and weapons from the region will be a transnational, coordinated effort to track and disrupt Boko Haram's domestic and international sources of finance. The U.S. government, through the Treasury Department's Terrorist Financing Tracking Program, is uniquely positioned to assist in this regard and should mobilize significant support and technical assistance to expand the capacity of Nigeria's Financial Intelligence Unit. Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari has expressed his commitment to uncovering and pursuing Boko Haram's financial sponsors, and the United States, in partnership with regional and international law enforcement agencies and financial institutions, can play an important role in helping Nigeria and its neighbors map and disrupt these flows.

Support an off-ramp for Boko Haram fighters.

An important part of weakening Boko Haram and undermining its ability to regenerate will be to establish a process that makes surrender a more attractive option for current members. Boko Haram members are not an undifferentiated mass: within the group's ranks are hard-line ideologues and criminal opportunists, leaders and followers, adults and children. Many were forcibly conscripted; others (including many girls and women) were kidnapped and subsequently indoctrinated; some joined for economic gain or a sense of empowerment. Even those members who were coerced into joining—or were underage—may feel “stuck” in the group, unable to return to their communities and fearful of being killed if they surrender. Many may see embedding themselves further within the group—or fleeing to Libya—as their only option. Nigeria's National Security Agency has established prison-based de-radicalization and reeducation programs, although funding and political support for the programs are weak. Nigeria will need to rapidly expand the absorptive capacity of these programs, which could also provide an important source of insight and evidence for CVE programming in Nigeria and beyond. The U.S. State Department and USAID should provide support, profile, and much-needed technical assistance for these programs, particularly in building capacities for psychosocial support, and should strongly encourage similar programs in Chad, Niger, and Cameroon.

Enhance capacities for civilian protection and welfare.

Civilian populations in North East Nigeria and the Lake Chad region remain acutely vulnerable to asymmetrical attacks by Boko Haram and to the hardship and uncertainty of displacement. Both regional security forces and civilian leaders will need to give much greater priority to civilian protection and engagement and win back the trust of communities that have suffered from decades of underinvestment and marginalization. This will require a change in mindset as well as improved capacity to deliver security and services.

Support the capacity and professionalism of regional security forces.

Preventing and responding to asymmetrical attacks across wide swathes of sparsely populated territory and pursuing increasingly fragmented and nimble cohorts of militants will remain a daunting challenge. Security forces in the region will need the equipment and materiel that allows them to collect and communicate intelligence on a real time basis, deploy quickly, and target militants with greater precision. Training by U.S. and other international partners can help build these specialized capacities and transform regional militaries into forces more capable of countering current threats.

Human rights abuses by the Nigerian military have been a sticking point in U.S.-Nigerian military engagement. Nigerian forces, ill-prepared, poorly equipped, and overwhelmed by an unprecedented threat, were responsible for a series of egregious abuses and use of disproportionate force as the insurgency intensified in 2011. President Buhari, in his inaugural address, pledged to investigate allegations of abuse and hold those found to have committed abuses to account, and the bilateral relationship appears to have gotten a fresh start. The U.S. government should continue to press for accountability, but it should also recognize that appropriate training and equipment can help mitigate the possibility of human rights abuse. As Nigerian troops have become more competent and better-equipped, incidents of abuse in the fight against Boko Haram have diminished. Boko Haram has killed more civilians in the last year than ISIL, and it is not a good time to deny regional forces access to the critical equipment they need. Armored vehicles, protective gear, state of the art technologies, and aircraft that allow rapid deployment and precision targeting will be important tools in stopping Boko Haram attacks and in giving confidence and improving the morale of forces on the front line.

Support the internally displaced and Boko Haram's surviving victims.

Some three million people in the Lake Chad region have been displaced because of Boko Haram, the vast majority within Nigeria, but with significant displacements in Cameroon and Niger as well. A small fraction live within government-sponsored camps; others have had to fend for themselves, melding into host communities or informal settlements. With insecurity and violence likely to persist, the needs of these citizens—whether they live in camps or not—will remain an urgent challenge. In 2015, some 450 children in Borno State IDP camps died of malnutrition, according to the State Emergency Management Agency. Many IDPs have been deeply traumatized and are—with good reason—wary of returning to their homes. In many cases there is little for them to go home to: villages and towns, homes, wells, and infrastructure have been destroyed. The majority of IDPs have little certainty as to when they might be able to return home, and there is a possibility that many will live in this displaced limbo for years to come. The international community, along with the Nigerian government and citizens, should rally to support these displaced communities, ensuring that the many children among them are given the education and services they need to thrive and eventually help rebuild the North East region.

Boko Haram's many thousands of victims will need continued support and some possibility of a return to normalcy. The fate of at least 219 girls kidnapped in Chibok remains an enduring and tragic mystery, and the effort to locate and recover them should be sustained and supported. But the many girls and women who have escaped or been rescued from captivity—who have endured unthinkable brutality and trauma—should not be neglected. The U.S. government—and indeed the American people—should support and amplify the efforts of Nigeria and the region to give these survivors the psychosocial, economic, and moral support they deserve.

Improve community engagement and strategic communication.

As Boko Haram reverts primarily to asymmetrical tactics, collaboration and timely exchange of information between security forces and communities takes on paramount importance. Building trust with communities, many of which have never benefited from government service or protection, will be a long-term process, but expanding mechanisms of communication and building the basis for an eventual culture of community policing should be an urgent priority. The U.S. government and international community should support strategic communication strategies and encourage the timely and consistent provision of information and messaging to affected communities.

Think beyond Boko Haram: consider jihadist rivalries and alliances.

U.S. policymakers must consider Boko Haram in a broader global and regional context. The Sahel region, including the Lake Chad Basin, risks becoming a proxy battleground for larger ideological and geopolitical rivalries. Competition between ISIL and al Qaeda, Shiites and Sunnis—even between Iran and Saudi Arabia—could fuel increasingly deadly competition among Islamist extremist groups of the region.

Boko Haram and other Sahelian extremist groups have a long record of dynamism and opportunism. Internal disputes over ideology, ego, strategy, and leadership—and competition for profile, manpower, and resources—have ensured a continual fracturing and reforming of alliances and rivalries among them. Today, mounting rivalry between ISIL and al Qaeda could raise the stakes for jihadist competition even further. Boko Haram pledged allegiance to ISIL last year, renaming itself Islamic State West Africa Province. At the same time, al Qaeda's Sahel affiliates—Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), MUJAO, al Mourabitoun, and others—have reasserted themselves with high-profile attacks in Bamako and Ouagadougou, after being temporarily on the defensive following the French-led intervention into Mali. The quest for notoriety and one-upmanship among jihadist groups will have heavy and tragic human costs.

Compounding the possibility of sectarian and ideological competition is the rising assertiveness of Nigeria's Shiite movement. In November, Boko Haram claimed an attack against members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), the country's largest Shiite organization, as they marched in an annual pilgrimage. Just weeks later in

December, the Nigerian military killed hundreds of IMN members (the group claims as many as 700) in the North Central town of Zaria, flattening the movement's central mosque and gravely wounding its charismatic leader Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, who remains in detention. The government has remained largely silent on the real reasons for the massacre, but in private, federal officials hint at a serious and imminent threat from elements within organization, which to date has publicly professed a policy of nonviolence. An ongoing investigation may provide greater clarity on the nature of the threat and the circumstances of the assault, but many observers worry that the brutality of the military response could serve only to inflame and further radicalize Shiite elements, very much as the killing of Yusuf and his followers in 2009 generated a more vicious and violent iteration of Boko Haram.

A number of Nigerian analysts express concern that the Zaria incident—as well as the al Qaeda-ISIL rivalry—could draw Nigeria into a broader geopolitical and ideological contest. President Hassan Rouhani of Iran spoke to President Buhari following the Zaria killings, expressing his concern for the country's Shiite community and dismay that al-Zakzaky remained in detention. King Salman of Saudi Arabia called President Buhari shortly thereafter, reportedly expressing his support and pledging greater cooperation in the fight against terror.

There will be no decisive victory in the long fight against Boko Haram. With the group now largely routed from the towns it controlled, the security situation in some ways has returned to where it was before Boko Haram developed territorial ambitions. But this should not be cause for complacency. In fact, this is an important opportunity to urgently block its capacity and opportunity to regenerate and to insulate the region from possible spillover from Libyan turmoil. The U.S. has a strong interest in fortifying the countries of the region against this possibility and laying the groundwork for the much bigger task of economic revitalization and recovery.