



**Congressional  
Research Service**

Informing the legislative debate since 1914

---

# Nigeria's Boko Haram: Frequently Asked Questions

**Lauren Ploch Blanchard**  
Specialist in African Affairs

May 28, 2014

**Congressional Research Service**

7-5700

[www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov)

R43558

## Summary

Boko Haram, a violent Nigerian Islamist movement, has grown increasingly active and deadly in its attacks against state and civilian targets in recent years, drawing on a narrative of resentment and vengeance for state abuses to elicit recruits and sympathizers. The group's April 2014 abduction of almost 300 schoolgirls has drawn international attention, including from the Obama Administration and Members of Congress. Periodic attacks against foreign targets in the region and growing evidence of ties to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a regional terrorist network affiliated with Al Qaeda, have also raised the concern of U.S. policy makers. The State Department named several individuals linked to Boko Haram, including its leader, Abubakar Shekau, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists in 2012, and Boko Haram was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the U.S. State Department in November 2013. The Obama Administration does not currently consider Boko Haram to be an affiliate of Al Qaeda.

More than 4,000 people are estimated to have been killed in Boko Haram-related violence, making it one of the deadliest terrorist groups in the world. U.N. and Nigerian officials report that more than 6 million Nigerians have been affected by the conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian government, and more than 300,000 have been displaced. The group has focused on a wide range of targets, but civilians in the impoverished, predominately Muslim northeast have borne the brunt of the violence. Nigeria's heavy-handed response to Boko Haram's insurgent and terrorist operations has also taken a toll on civilians and complicated U.S. efforts to pursue greater counterterrorism cooperation with the Nigerian government, in spite of shared concerns about Boko Haram and its ties to regional and international terrorist groups and operatives. Coordination on counterterrorism efforts has also been hampered at times by a lack of cooperation from Nigerian officials.

U.S. policy toward Boko Haram reflects both the Administration's perception of the threat the group poses and the strategic importance of the U.S. relationship with Nigeria. At this point, Boko Haram appears to pose a threat primarily to stability in northern Nigeria, and potentially to surrounding areas in neighboring countries. Some of Boko Haram's attacks have targeted Christian communities in the north, threatening to fuel existing religious tensions in the country. The group also poses a threat to international targets, including Western citizens, in the region.

The Nigerian government has struggled to respond to the growing threat posed by Boko Haram. Multiple factors have constrained the Nigerian security force response, notably security sector corruption and mismanagement. By many accounts, Nigerian troops are not adequately resourced or equipped to counter the insurgency. The government has been criticized in domestic and international press reports for what has been widely perceived as a slow response to the abduction of the schoolgirls in April, and to offers of international assistance in support of the investigation and possible rescue efforts. To date, it remains unclear to what extent Nigerian officials are cooperating with foreign advisors and experts, including those from the United States.

Some Members of Congress have engaged in deliberations with the Administration for several years about the extent to which Boko Haram poses a threat to the United States. Legislation was introduced in both the 112<sup>th</sup> and 113<sup>th</sup> Congresses to press the State Department to designate the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. More recently, some Members expressed support through various public statements and correspondence for efforts to find and rescue the abducted schoolgirls, including a letter to President Obama signed by all 20 female Senators that urged further sanctions on the group. Related legislation includes S.Res. 433 and H.Res. 573.

## Contents

Overview.....	1
Frequently Asked Questions.....	1
What is Boko Haram? .....	1
What is the impact of Boko Haram violence and who are its victims?.....	3
What is known about the kidnapping of the Nigerian schoolgirls?.....	5
Are attacks against schools or women a common tactic for the group?.....	5
To what extent does Boko Haram pose a threat to neighboring countries, and what is the regional response? .....	6
Does Boko Haram have ties to Al Qaeda or other international jihadist groups and does the group pose a threat to the United States or U.S. interests?.....	7
How is the Nigerian Government responding? .....	9
What is U.S. policy toward Boko Haram? .....	10
What assistance has the United States provided to Nigeria to help it counter the Boko Haram threat? .....	12
How is the United States responding to the abduction of the schoolgirls?.....	12
What are the major factors constraining further U.S. assistance to the Nigerian security forces in their operations against Boko Haram? .....	14
What assistance is the United States providing to neighboring countries to help them contain and respond to the Boko Haram?.....	16
What other assistance does the United States provide to Nigeria?.....	17
How has Congress responded to the Boko Haram threat? .....	17
How does Boko Haram's status as a Foreign Terrorist Organization impact the U.S. response to the threat? .....	18
Why wasn't Boko Haram designated as an FTO earlier?.....	19
How have others in the international community responded to the abductions? .....	20

## Figures

Figure 1. Boko Haram's Increasing Impact on Northeast Nigeria.....	2
--	---

## Contacts

Author Contact Information.....	21
---------------------------------	----

## Overview

The United States has offered support to the government of Nigeria to investigate and facilitate the release of almost 300 female students who were abducted from their school in northern Nigeria in April by Boko Haram, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization. The case has attracted extensive international attention, driven in part by public rallies and a social media campaign known on Twitter by the slogan *#BringBackOurGirls*. Many Members of Congress have expressed outrage at the kidnappings, calling on the Nigerian government to more urgently and effectively respond and urging the Obama Administration to facilitate the girls' safe return. More broadly, the abduction has raised questions about what steps the Nigerian government, the United States, and others have taken to counter the rising threat posed by Boko Haram, and what impact Nigeria's years-long counterinsurgency campaign has had on the group.

The kidnapping is among the latest in a series of atrocities and terrorist attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram in an escalating campaign aimed, in part, at undermining the Nigerian government's control over the northern part of the country. Nigeria's heavy-handed response to Boko Haram's insurgent and terrorist operations has complicated U.S. efforts to pursue greater counterterrorism cooperation with the Nigerian government, in spite of shared concerns about Boko Haram and its ties to regional and international terrorist groups and operatives. Security sector corruption and mismanagement have also reportedly hampered the Nigerian response. Congress and Obama Administration officials continue to weigh additional options for responding to the mass abduction, while also seeking to strengthen U.S.-Nigerian security relations in a manner that will curtail Boko Haram's violent campaign. This report explores several questions that have been often asked in relation to the group, the impact of its attacks, and the response of the Nigerian government and other international actors, including the United States.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is Boko Haram?

Boko Haram emerged in the early 2000s as a small Sunni Islamic sect advocating a strict interpretation and implementation of Islamic law for Nigeria. Calling itself *Jama'a Ahl as-Sunna Li-da'wa wa-al Jihad* (roughly translated from Arabic as "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad"), the group is more popularly known as Boko Haram (often translated as "Western education is forbidden"), a nickname given by local Hausa-speaking communities to describe the group's view that Western education and culture have been corrupting influences that are *haram* ("forbidden") under its conservative interpretation of Islam.<sup>1</sup>

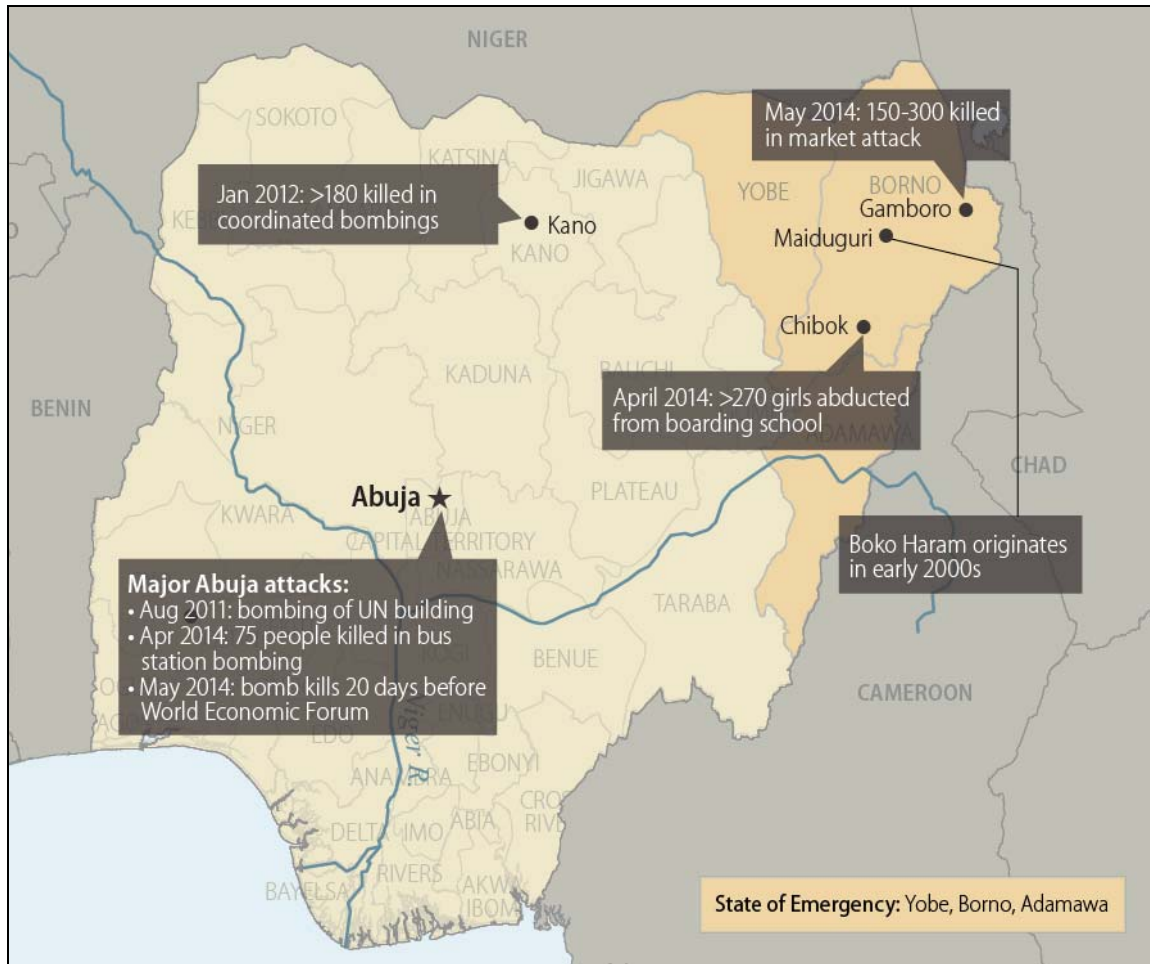
While the sect's leadership did not initially call for violence, its followers engaged in periodic skirmishes with police during its formative years. At that time the group's activities were limited in scope and contained within several highly impoverished states in the predominately Muslim

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on the group's ideology and stated goals, see The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), *Background Report: Boko Haram*, May 2014. For more on the challenges in translating the Hausa word "boko", see, e.g., Dan Murphy, "'Boko Haram' Doesn't Really Mean 'Western Education is a Sin,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, May 6, 2014.

northeast.<sup>2</sup> In July 2009, at least 700 people were killed during an effort by Nigerian security forces to suppress the group. In the course of that violence, the group's leader, Mohammed Yusuf, a charismatic young cleric who had studied in Saudi Arabia, was killed in police custody. The group subsequently appeared to dissipate, but reemerged a year later under new leadership, orchestrating a large prison break in September 2010 that freed hundreds, including its own members. Some Boko Haram militants may have fled to insurgent training camps in the Sahel in 2009-2010. The group has built ties with transnational extremist groups in the region, which have reportedly provided training and increasingly sophisticated weaponry. Boko Haram attacks since 2011 have featured improvised explosive devices (IEDs), car bombs, and, periodically, suicide attacks, but fighters also continue to inflict a heavy toll using small arms and arson.

**Figure 1. Boko Haram's Increasing Impact on Northeast Nigeria**



**Source:** Graphic created by CRS. Map borders and cities generated by Hannah Fischer using data from Department of State and Esri (both 2013) and the National Geographic Intelligence Agency (2014).

<sup>2</sup> For more on Nigeria, see CRS Report RL33964, *Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy*, by Lauren Ploch Blanchard.

By many accounts, Boko Haram is not a monolithic organization. Beyond its core militants, who appear to ascribe to a violent Sunni extremist ideology, the group appears to draw support from a broader group of followers, predominantly young men from the northeast. Experts speculate that the group's supporters may be driven by frustration with perceived disparities in the application of laws (including *sharia*); the lack of development, jobs, and investment in the north;<sup>3</sup> and/or the abusive response of security forces in the region.<sup>4</sup> It is widely rumored that certain northern Nigerian politicians may have provided support and/or funding to the group in its early years.

The State Department estimates the number of Boko Haram fighters in the hundreds to low thousands.<sup>5</sup> The group's organizational structure is often described as diffuse (increasingly so since the death of Yusuf). Some analysts suggest that it is susceptible to fracturing—there are apparent disagreements over tactics and the group's civilian death toll. Like Al Shabaab, an Islamist insurgent group in Somalia, some Boko Haram leaders appear focused on building ties with “core” Al Qaeda and affiliated groups and pursuing a transnational agenda, while others remain focused exclusively on a domestic insurgency. It is unclear to what extent the group's leader, Abubakar Shekau, exerts operational control over its various cells. The emergence of a more internationally-focused splinter faction, Ansaru, in early 2012 contributed to speculation about leadership divisions. In its public statements, Ansaru has been critical of the killing of Nigerian Muslims under Shekau's leadership. The splinter group appears to have focused its attacks on foreigners in Nigeria and neighboring countries, primarily through kidnappings, and has been blamed for the deaths of several European hostages.<sup>6</sup>

## **What is the impact of Boko Haram violence and who are its victims?**

More than 4,000 people have been killed in Boko Haram-related violence. U.N. and Nigerian officials report that more than 6 million Nigerians have been affected and more than 300,000 have been displaced.<sup>7</sup> The group has focused on a wide range of targets, but civilians in the impoverished Muslim northeast have borne the brunt of the violence.

---

<sup>3</sup> Corruption and misrule have historically undermined state authority in Nigeria, limiting infrastructure development and social service delivery, and slowing economic growth. Development indicators are particularly low in the north, which is home to one of the world's largest Muslim populations (some 80 to 90 million people). Many analysts suggest that perceived neglect and marginalization have fueled resentment among many northerners. Real or perceived disparities in access to land, jobs, and state resources underlies ethnic and religious strife in parts of the country. While Nigeria's 12 northern states use Islamic law or *sharia* to adjudicate criminal and civil matters for Muslims, some, including but not limited to Boko Haram, contend that politicians have corrupted sharia for their own gain.

<sup>4</sup> Testimony of Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Linda Thomas-Greenfield, House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights, *Countering the Threat Posed by Boko Haram*, November 13, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013*, April 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Zenn, “Boko Haram's Evolving Tactics and Alliances in Nigeria,” *CTC Sentinel*, The Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, June 25, 2013 and “Cooperation or Competition: Boko Haram and Ansaru After the Mali Intervention,” *CTC Sentinel*, March 27, 2013; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Curbing Violence in Nigeria: The Boko Haram Insurgency*, April 2014; and “Boko Haram: Splinter Group, Ansaru Emerges,” *Vanguard*, February 1, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> U.N. Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Humanitarian Bulletin: Nigeria*, Issue 02, March 2014. See also the Council on Foreign Relations' Nigeria Security Tracker at <http://www.cfr.org> for a tally of Boko Haram attacks.



Boko Haram's leaders have called in their public rhetoric for an uprising against secular authority and a war against Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Attacks attributed to the group have not exclusively, or even primarily, targeted Christians, who are a minority in the north, and the group has yet to conduct attacks against the majority-Christian southern part of the country. Religious figures and institutions comprised an estimated 10% of the group's targets from 2009 to 2013,<sup>9</sup> but its assaults on churches have nevertheless fueled existing religious tensions in Nigeria.<sup>10</sup> These attacks, which often occur on Sundays or religious holidays, presumably to achieve maximum effect, have in some cases sparked deadly reprisal attacks by Christians against Muslim civilians. The church bombings, along with the recent spate of kidnappings and other high-profile civilian attacks, appear to be part of a deliberate effort to foment instability, possibly seeking to discredit and delegitimize the national government by exposing the weakness of its security apparatus and justice mechanisms and, potentially, to ignite a religious war.

Boko Haram's attacks have increased substantially in frequency, reach, and lethality since 2010, occurring almost daily in parts of northeast Nigeria, and periodically beyond.<sup>11</sup> In May 2013, the Nigerian government declared a state of emergency in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa in response to the escalating violence, expanding a state of emergency that had been declared in Borno and Yobe in late 2011 (see **Figure 1**). Boko Haram initially focused primarily on state and federal targets, such as police stations, but it has also targeted civilians in schools, churches, mosques, markets, bars, and villages. Cell phone towers and media outlets have also been attacked, likely for both tactical and ideological reasons. The group has assassinated local political leaders and moderate Muslim clerics. Its deadliest attacks include a coordinated series of bombings in Kano, northern Nigeria's largest city, that killed more than 180 people in January 2012; an attack on the village of Benisheikh in September 2013 that killed more than 160 civilians; and an assault on another northeastern village, Gamboro, that may have killed more than 300 people in early May 2014.

In August 2011, a Boko Haram suicide bomber attacked a U.N. building in capital, Abuja, killing more than 20 people and injuring over 80. It was the group's first lethal attack on a foreign target. It was also the group's first clearly intentional suicide bombing. Boko Haram spokesmen claimed in press reports that the U.N. attack was retribution for the state's harsh security response against its members, referencing U.S. and international "collaboration" with the Nigerian security forces.

Boko Haram attacks against soft targets, and associated fighting between militants and security forces, have extracted a heavy toll on Nigeria's northeast. Few relief agencies are present in the remote area, given the risk of attack or kidnapping, and thousands of displaced people have little access to food, clean water, or healthcare. The conflict has also disrupted farming, limited the transit of basic goods to local markets, and deterred investment. Efforts by various interlocutors to facilitate negotiations between the government and Boko Haram have been unsuccessful. Human rights advocates have urged Nigerian security forces to improve efforts to protect

---

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., "Nigeria: Translation of Arabic Portions of Boko Haram Leader's Video on Missing College Girls," *YouTube*, Open Source Center AFR2014050844828706, May 5, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> START, *Background Report: Boko Haram*, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> For more on religious tensions and sectarian violence in Nigeria, see, e.g., the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), *Annual Report 2014: Countries of Particular Concern: Nigeria*, April 30, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> The states where attacks occurred most frequently included Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Kaduna, Kano, Kogi, Plateau, Taraba, and Yobe. For accounts of atrocities attributed to Boko Haram, see, e.g., UN IRIN, "Updated Timeline of Boko Haram Attacks and Related Violence," December 12, 2013; "Boko Haram Timeline: From Preachers to Slave Raiders," *BBC*, May 13, 2013; and Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Spiraling Violence: Boko Haram Attacks and Security Force Abuses in Nigeria*, October 11, 2012.

civilians as they conduct their offensive against the militants, which has pushed more than 60,000 refugees across the border into Niger, Cameroon, and Chad.<sup>12</sup>

## **What is known about the kidnapping of the Nigerian schoolgirls?**

The abducted schoolgirls are high school seniors, mostly ages 16 to 18, who had assembled to take their final exams at Chibok Government Girls Secondary School. The government had closed all public secondary schools in the northeastern state of Borno in March in response to the threat of attacks by Boko Haram. While most of the girls regularly attended the public boarding school in Chibok, students from other schools that remained closed had also gathered for the exams, which complicated initial efforts to determine how many girls had been taken by the gunmen. The attack occurred overnight between April 14 and 15. Boko Haram fighters, reportedly numbering more than 200, overpowered security forces based in the town (local police and 17 soldiers). According to Amnesty International, the main headquarters of the army division tasked with countering Boko Haram, located 80 miles away in the state capital Maiduguri, received warning of the pending attack hours before it happened, but did not deploy forces to prevent it.<sup>13</sup> According to press reports, just over 50 of the girls were able to escape during or shortly after the incident.<sup>14</sup> The whereabouts of those still being held captive are unclear, although the Nigerian military announced on May 26 that they had identified the location of at least some of the girls. Some observers speculate that they may have been taken to the Sambisa forest (a reserve used as a refuge by the group) or to a remote mountainous area on the Cameroon border.<sup>15</sup>

A video released by Boko Haram on May 12 shows a group of about 130 girls, many of whom were subsequently identified as abductees, in conservative Muslim dress in an unidentified rural location. This may indicate that the girls have been split into groups to frustrate rescue attempts. The video shows the girls holding Korans and praying. In it, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, who had threatened to sell the girls as slaves or brides in a previous video, announced that the girls, most of whom were Christian, had been converted to Islam and suggested that they would be released if Boko Haram fighters held by the government were freed.<sup>16</sup>

## **Are attacks against schools or women a common tactic for the group?**

Since 2012, Boko Haram has increasingly claimed responsibility for setting fire to schools and attacking universities in northern Nigeria.<sup>17</sup> Initial attacks appeared to focus primarily on property

---

<sup>12</sup> U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "UNHCR Condemns Brutality in Nigeria, Fears New Displacement," May 9, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International, "Nigerian Authorities Failed to Act on Warnings About Boko Haram Raid on School," Press Release, May 9, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> For details of the attack, see, e.g., Michelle Faul, "Anatomy of a Kidnapping," *Associated Press* (AP), May 7, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> For a description of these areas, see, e.g., Kayode Bodunrin, "Inside Nigeria's Sambisa Forest," *The Nation*, April 29, 2014, and "Insurgents Regroup in the Adamawa Mountains," *Punch* (Lagos), May 21, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> "Video Released by Boko Haram Claims to Show Missing Nigerian Schoolgirls," *Agence France-Presse* (AFP), May 12, 2014. According to the State Department, 85% of the abducted girls were Christian. See Testimony of Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Robert P. Jackson, Senate Subcommittee on African Affairs, *#BringBackOurGirls: Addressing the Threat of Boko Haram*, May 15, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, *Education Under Attack 2014*, available at (continued...)



destruction, occurring mostly at night when the schools were empty. But in 2013 the group's assaults became more brutal, increasingly targeting students and teachers. In July 2013, Boko Haram's leader publicly threatened to burn secular schools and kill their teachers, describing the schools as a "plot against Islam."<sup>18</sup> The threat has deterred thousands of children from attending school in a region that already had low attendance rates and literacy levels, especially among women and girls. National statistics show huge disparities within Nigeria in the percentage of girls who attend school, with attendance lowest in the north.

The Chibok kidnapping is also not the first time Boko Haram has abducted women. In May 2013, the group released a video announcing that it had taken women and children hostage in response to the arrest of its members' wives and children. That incident was followed by a prisoner/hostage exchange. According to press reports, the kidnapping of Christian women in the north by Boko Haram members became an increasing trend in 2013. Victims of previous abductions have reportedly been forced to convert to Islam and have been used as sex slaves by fighters.<sup>19</sup>

## **To what extent does Boko Haram pose a threat to neighboring countries, and what is the regional response?**

Boko Haram has focused its attacks to date predominately on northeast Nigeria, although several kidnappings of Western citizens in neighboring Cameroon have been attributed to the group and/or to Ansaru.<sup>20</sup> Cameroon, Chad, and Niger have all nevertheless felt the impact of Boko Haram's activities—together, the three countries are host to more than 60,000 refugees who have fled Nigeria. Additionally, the threat of kidnappings and attacks affects local economies, and officials have expressed concern that Boko Haram may be transiting through or recruiting among border communities.<sup>21</sup> Boko Haram fighters have also reportedly used remote border areas as a refuge from Nigerian offensives. In 2012, Boko Haram fighters reportedly operated alongside, and received training from, Islamist insurgents in northern Mali affiliated with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), after a major Nigerian military crackdown on the group's operations.<sup>22</sup>

According to the State Department, Nigeria's neighbors have limited military and law enforcement capacity to secure their borders or respond to extremist threats, but significant political will to do so.<sup>23</sup> Governments in the region have reportedly created a multinational joint task force to coordinate their security response to Boko Haram, although details on the composition of the task force and its efforts to date are limited.<sup>24</sup> There have been several

---

(...continued)

<http://www.protectingeducation.org> and Amnesty International, "Keep Away from Schools or We'll Kill You," *Right to Education Under Attack in Nigeria*, October 4, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> "Boko Haram Leader 'Supports' Nigeria School Massacre," *AFP*, July 14, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Joe Brock, "Insight: Boko Haram, Taking to Hills, Seize Slaves 'Brides'" *Reuters*, November 17, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> In February 2013, for example, Boko Haram claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of a French family, with four children, in northern Cameroon. According to the State Department's 2013 *Country Reports on Terrorism*, Boko Haram gunmen also attacked civilians in Cameroon's far north in December 2013.

<sup>21</sup> UNHCR, "UNHCR Condemns Brutality in Nigeria, Fears New Displacement," May 9, 2014; UN IRIN, "Fears in Cameroon of Boko Haram Recruitment," April 14, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> "Top U.S. Commander in Africa Cautions Against Intervention in Mali Despite Al-Qaida Threat," *AP*, December 3, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013*, April 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Nigeria recently signed an agreement with Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Niger, and France to coordinate border policing. (continued...)

reported clashes between suspected Boko Haram fighters and Cameroonian security forces. In late May, Cameroon announced the deployment of an additional 1,000 special forces to the northern border region. The first official report of a direct Boko Haram clash with forces from Niger appears to have occurred on May 6, when a Nigerien army patrol was reportedly ambushed near the city of Diffa. Alleged Boko Haram members have also been arrested in Niger, some reportedly participated in a prison-break in Niger in June 2013 that freed Islamist militants.<sup>25</sup>

## **Does Boko Haram have ties to Al Qaeda or other international jihadist groups and does the group pose a threat to the United States or U.S. interests?**

The increasing lethality and sophistication of Boko Haram's attacks have raised its profile among U.S. national security officials. In February 2013, the State Department designated the group, along with its splinter faction, Ansaru, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).<sup>26</sup> Boko Haram currently appears to pose a threat primarily to local stability in Nigeria and to state and international targets, including Western citizens, in the region. Boko Haram's leader has issued direct threats against the United States, but to date no American citizens are known to have been kidnapped or killed by the group.<sup>27</sup> In March 2014, the commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) reiterated the U.S. military's assessment of the group's focus as primarily "a local effort," in comparison to the regional operations of groups in North Africa and the transnational focus of Al Shabaab in Somalia.<sup>28</sup> Boko Haram's ties to other extremist groups and the focus by some of its members on pursuing a transnational agenda have amplified policy makers' concerns, however. The U.S. Director of National Intelligence has warned that the decentralization of the Al Qaeda movement "has led to the emergence of new power centers and an increase in threats by networks of like-minded extremists with allegiances to multiple groups."<sup>29</sup>

Ties between Boko Haram and another FTO, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a regional criminal and terrorist network operating in the Sahel and North Africa, appear to be of particular concern.<sup>30</sup> The Obama Administration does not currently consider Boko Haram to be affiliated with Al Qaeda's central leadership, despite periodic rhetorical pledges of solidarity and support for Al Qaeda and its affiliates from Shekau.<sup>31</sup> U.S. military officials have identified Boko Haram as a "threat to Western interests" in the region for several years, referencing indications in 2013 that the group and AQIM were "likely sharing funds, training, and explosive materials," and suggesting that "there are elements of Boko Haram that aspire to a broader regional level of

---

(...continued)

It complements existing border security and intelligence coordination among the Lake Chad Basin countries.

<sup>25</sup> BBC Monitoring, "Islamist Militant Threat Stalks Niger," June 10, 2013; Navanti, "Niger: The Agadez, Arlit, and Niamey Prison Attacks," June 4, 2013, prepared for U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM).

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., "Timbuktu Training Site Shows Terrorists' Reach," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 1, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> "Nigeria: Islamic Leader Warns United States," *AFP*, July 10, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Testimony of General David Rodriguez, Senate Armed Services Committee, *Proposed Fiscal 2015 Defense Authorization for U.S. Central Command and U.S. Africa Command*, March 6, 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Testimony of Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, January 29, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> For more on AQIM, see Samuel Aronson, "AQIM's Threat to Western Interests in the Sahel," and Morten Boås, "Guns, Money, and Prayers: AQIM's Blueprint for Security Control of Northern Mali," *CTC Sentinel*, April 28, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> State Department, Daily Press Briefings, May 19 and 20, 2014.

attacks, to include not just in Africa, but Europe and aspirationally to the United States.”<sup>32</sup> The commander of U.S. Special Operations Command reiterated this concern in February 2014, stating “we see Boko Haram beginning to conflate with AQIM in North Africa.”<sup>33</sup> There has been speculation for years that Boko Haram may have acquired weapons from former Libyan stockpiles through AQIM ties.<sup>34</sup> The State Department identified two of three individuals linked to Boko Haram—Khalid al Barnawi and Abubakar Adam Kamar—who were named in June 2012 as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs), as having close links to AQIM. (Kamar was reportedly killed in 2012.) Barnawi is purportedly a leader of the splinter faction, Ansaru, which the International Crisis Group has described as “Nigeria’s Al Qaeda franchise.”<sup>35</sup>

The rise in kidnappings by Ansaru and Boko Haram of Western and other foreign citizens may be an indication of AQIM influence. AQIM has long been associated with kidnappings, and one of its splinter factions was responsible for the 2013 In Amenas hostage crisis in Algeria, in which 38 hostages were killed, including three Americans.<sup>36</sup> Several foreign hostages have been killed in captivity, and the deaths of several hostages during failed rescue attempts in the region, including those conducted by European special operations forces, highlight the challenges facing security forces as they consider options for rescuing the abducted schoolgirls.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to Boko Haram’s links to AQIM and its affiliated groups, some members of Boko Haram reportedly may have received training from the Somali terrorist group Al Shabaab in East Africa. Mamman Nur, purported to be one of the ideological leaders of the Ansaru faction, is rumored to have links to the Somali group, as well as to AQIM, the Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and other Al Qaeda affiliates. By some accounts, Nur may have been behind the 2011 U.N. bombing in Abuja.<sup>38</sup>

More broadly, the recruitment of Nigerians by transnational terrorist groups other than Boko Haram continues to be of concern to U.S. officials. The recent prosecution of a Nigerian national, Lawal Olaniyi Babafemi, in a U.S. federal court for providing material support to AQAP, does not appear to be directly connected to Boko Haram. Babafemi, who had been extradited from Nigeria, pled guilty in April to participating in AQAP media and recruitment campaigns aimed at attracting English-speaking Nigerian recruits. In January, a U.S. appeals court upheld the conviction and life sentence of another Nigerian AQAP recruit, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who pled guilty in 2011 to the attempted bombing of a Detroit-bound airliner on Christmas 2009. There has been no evidence linking Abdulmutallab to Boko Haram.

---

<sup>32</sup> Testimony of Gen. Carter Ham, Senate Armed Services Committee, *Proposed FY2013 Defense Authorization as it Relates to the U.S. European and Africa Commands*, March 1, 2012 and House Armed Services Committee, *Proposed Fiscal 2014 Defense Authorization as it Relates to the U.S. European and Africa Commands*, March 15, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Testimony of Admiral William H. McRaven, House Armed Services Committee, *Proposed Fiscal 2015 Defense Authorization for U.S. Special Operations Command and U.S. Transportation Command*, February 27, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> For more, see U.N. Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011)*, U.N. Document S/2014/106, February 19, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> ICG, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria: The Boko Haram Insurgency*, op.cit.

<sup>36</sup> See CRS Reports CRS Report RS21532, *Algeria: Current Issues*, by Alexis Arief.

<sup>37</sup> In addition to the hostage deaths associated with the In Amenas incident, French hostages held by AQIM were killed in joint rescue operations by French and regional forces in 2010 and 2011 in Niger. In Nigeria, two European hostages were killed by Ansaru during a joint operation between Nigerian and British special forces in March 2012, and seven foreign hostages were killed by the splinter group in March 2013 in response to a perceived rescue attempt.

<sup>38</sup> Jacob Zenn, “Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria,” *CTC Sentinel*, February 24, 2014.

## How is the Nigerian Government responding?

Since Boko Haram's resurgence in 2010, the Nigerian government has struggled to respond to the growing threat posed by the group, and its expanding impact on the civilian population in the northeast. Nigerian security forces have been deployed in counterterrorism operations in the most affected states since 2011—their offensives against the group had some notable successes in 2012 and early 2013, temporarily reducing attacks, but the past year has been the deadliest for civilians in the group's history. Some local communities formed informant networks and vigilante groups in 2013 to protect themselves, in part due to reportedly ineffective responses by security forces. In Borno, these groups have reportedly worked with the state government and security forces to rout Boko Haram cells. Press reports suggest that the groups, who collectively call themselves the "Civilian Joint Task Force" or Civilian-JTF, have had some positive impact on security in the Borno state capital of Maiduguri in the past year, but Boko Haram attacks in rural areas, which are sometimes claimed as retaliation against locals for their cooperation with security forces, have been increasingly lethal.<sup>39</sup> By many accounts, these civilian groups have sought to work with the Nigerian military to reduce the possibility of indiscriminate abuses against innocent civilians in the context of counterterrorism operations (see below).

The Nigerian parliament passed anti-terrorism legislation, originally introduced in 2011, in 2013. The law was designed, in part, to facilitate greater counterterrorism coordination, but interagency cooperation and information sharing remains limited. According to the State Department, the Nigerian government has made little progress in addressing broader grievances among northern populations that may fuel Boko Haram support—state government efforts to increase education and employment opportunities have had almost no support from the federal government.

Multiple factors have constrained the ability of the Nigerian security forces to counter the growing threat posed by Boko Haram, most notably security sector corruption and mismanagement. According to the State Department's 2013 terrorism report, among the various dynamics limiting the government's response to Boko Haram are a lack of coordination and cooperation between Nigerian security agencies; corruption; misallocation of resources; limited requisite databases; the slow pace of the judicial system; and lack of sufficient training for prosecutors and judges to implement anti-terrorism laws. Soldiers, particularly in the northeast, reportedly suffer from low morale, struggling to keep pace with a foe that is reportedly increasingly well-armed and trained. By many accounts troops are not adequately resourced or equipped to counter an insurgency, despite a security budget totaling almost \$5.8 billion.<sup>40</sup> In the assessment of DOD officials, Nigerian funding for the military is "skimmed off the top," and Nigerian troops are "showing signs of real fear," and becoming "afraid to even engage."<sup>41</sup>

While Nigerian security force offensives have taken a significant toll on Boko Haram's leadership and, at times, on its fighting strength, the Nigerian forces have also suffered heavy losses in Boko Haram attacks.<sup>42</sup> In the face of international criticism and a recent Boko Haram ambush that left several soldiers dead, reports circulated in mid-May 2014 of a mutiny by troops in the army's

<sup>39</sup> Adam Nossiter, "Vigilantes Defeat Boko Haram in its Nigerian Base," *New York Times*, October 20, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., Tim Cocks, "Boko Haram Exploits Nigeria's Slow Military Decline," *Reuters*, May 9, 2014 and Adam Nossiter, "Nigeria's Army Hampers Hunt for Abducted Schoolgirls," *New York Times*, May 23, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Testimony of DOD Principal Director for African Affairs Alice Friend, Senate Subcommittee on African Affairs, *#BringBackOurGirls: Addressing the Threat of Boko Haram*, May 15, 2014.

<sup>42</sup> ICG, *Curbing Violence in Nigeria: The Boko Haram Insurgency*, op.cit.

Seventh Division, which is deployed in the northeast to counter Boko Haram. The commander of the division (whom troops reportedly shot at) was subsequently replaced, on May 16, amid allegations that that he had repeatedly failed to act on information related to Boko Haram threats.

The Nigerian government has been criticized in domestic and international press reports for what has widely been perceived as a slow response to the Chibok abductions, and to offers of international assistance in support of the investigation and possible rescue efforts.<sup>43</sup> Official government spokespeople have issued conflicting accounts of the Chibok incident and the government's response to it, attracting further negative attention.

On May 10, the Nigerian Defense Ministry announced that two divisions of the military had been stationed in the border region near Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, where they will coordinate with their regional counterparts to track the girls. (Apparent shortfalls in regional intelligence-sharing and interoperability, which stem from a lack of capacity, political tensions, and historic factors, are a key challenge.) As part of this effort, the Nigerian Air Force has reportedly flown at least 250 sorties.<sup>44</sup> Many experts suggest that, even with good intelligence on the location of the girls, rescue operations would be extremely dangerous, and argue that a negotiated release of the hostages would be preferable. While the Nigerian government has reportedly accepted foreign offers of assistance in response to the kidnappings, it remains unclear how quickly and to what extent Nigerian officials are cooperating with foreign advisors and experts. Various additional factors that may inhibit the Nigerian response are outlined below.

## **What is U.S. policy toward Boko Haram?**

As noted above, Obama Administration officials have viewed Boko Haram primarily as a locally-focused, but potentially regional extremist threat in West Africa. U.S. policy toward the group is guided by an assessment of the extent to which it poses a direct threat to the United States and U.S. interests, and is also influenced by U.S.-Nigeria relations. Other terrorist threats on the continent have demanded greater attention and resources from the United States—Al Shabaab, in Somalia, continues to be ranked by Administration officials as the primary terrorist threat in Africa, although extremist groups in North Africa and the Sahel have been viewed as an increasing threat in recent years.<sup>45</sup> The State Department designated three individuals linked to Boko Haram as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs) in June 2012, including Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, and in June 2013 it issued a \$7 million reward for information on the location of Shekau through its Rewards for Justice program.<sup>46</sup> In November 2013, the State Department designated Boko Haram and Ansaru as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs; see below). International attention to Boko Haram's abduction of the young women in Chibok

---

<sup>43</sup> For discussion of Nigeria's slow response to international assistance offers and other issues that may constrain international cooperation, see, e.g., James Gordon Meek and Dana Hughes, "Nigeria Requested US Intel And Military Gear to Fight Terror, Docs Show," ABC News, May 9, 2014; Michelle Faul, "Nigeria Refused Help to Search for Kidnapped Girls," *Associated Press*, May 11, 2014; and Senator Christopher Coons, "Statement of Senator Coons on Status of Kidnapped Nigerian Schoolgirls," May 5, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> "Nigeria Ramps Up Search for Missing Girls," *Al Jazeera*, May 10, 2014.

<sup>45</sup> State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2013*, April 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Shekau, along with Khalid al-Barnawi and Abubakar Adam Kamar, both of whom have ties to Boko Haram and close links to AQIM, according to the State Department, have been designated as SDGTs. Individuals and entities are designated as SDGTs under Executive Order 13224, which authorizes the blocking of their assets subject to U.S. jurisdiction and prohibits U.S. persons from engaging in transactions with or for the benefit of these persons/entities.



elevated the group's status among U.S. policy makers in May 2014, and the U.S. government has deployed additional resources to the region to support Nigerian efforts to counter the group.

Successive U.S. Administrations have viewed Nigeria, a top recipient of U.S. foreign aid, as a critically strategic country on the African continent. It is Africa's largest economy and its most populous country, with almost 180 million people, roughly divided between Muslims and Christians. Its Muslim population is among the world's largest. The Nigerian government is an influential actor in African politics, and the country holds a rotating seat on the U.N. Security Council in 2014-2015. In early 2014, the Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, outlined various threats facing the country, including "critical terrorism threats from Boko Haram and persistent extremism in the north, simmering ethno-religious conflict ... and militants who are capable of remobilizing in the Niger Delta and attacking the oil industry." Clapper also warned about "rising political tensions and violent internal conflict" in the lead-up to the country's 2015 election, warning that "protests and upheaval, especially in northern Nigeria, are likely in the event of President Goodluck Jonathan's reelection."<sup>47</sup>

Many U.S. officials, while stressing the importance of the U.S.-Nigeria relationship and the gravity of security threats within and emanating from the country, remain concerned about reported abuses by Nigerian security services, and about the government's limited efforts to address perceived impunity for such abuses. For their part, Nigerian officials reportedly remain wary of perceived U.S. interference in internal affairs and dismissive of certain training offers. These factors appear to have constrained security cooperation, despite shared concerns over terrorism and other regional security threats.<sup>48</sup>

Despite concerns about Nigeria's counterterrorism approach to date, the Obama Administration has committed, through a formal dialogue mechanism known as the U.S.-Nigeria Binational Commission (BNC), initiated in 2010, to support Nigerian efforts to increase public confidence in the military and police to respond more effectively to the extremist threat.<sup>49</sup> In addition to USAID programs to counter radicalization in Nigeria, the State Department and the Department of Defense (DOD) have deliberated in recent months on how best to ensure a shift by Nigeria to "an integrated civilian-security-focused strategy to counter Boko Haram and Ansaru in a manner that adheres to the rule of law and ensures accountability."<sup>50</sup>

Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Linda Thomas-Greenfield has urged the Nigerian government to take a more "holistic" approach to terrorism, suggesting that regional and socioeconomic disparities have contributed to Boko Haram recruitment. She suggests that the Nigerian response should incorporate efforts not only to degrade the group's capacity, but also to provide justice and ensure accountability "in instances where government officials and security forces violate those [human] rights," in part to "diminish Boko Haram's appeal and legitimacy"

---

<sup>47</sup> Testimony of Director of National Intelligence James Clapper Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, January 29, 2014.

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., "On Terror's New Front Line, Mistrust Blunts U.S. Strategy," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 26, 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Through the BNC dialogue, the Nigerian government requested assistance from the United States in 2013 to develop an intelligence fusion cell, the Joint Terrorist Branch (JTAB), to streamline coordination and information sharing on counterterrorism matters among key Nigerian government agencies.

<sup>50</sup> Testimony of Assistant Secretary of State Linda Thomas-Greenfield, November 13, 2013, op. cit.



among would-be recruits.<sup>51</sup> More generally, U.S. officials have for years urged the Nigerian government to more actively address widespread under-development and poverty in the north.

## **What assistance has the United States provided to Nigeria to help it counter the Boko Haram threat?**

U.S.-Nigerian diplomatic engagement has focused on the Boko Haram threat through a Regional Security Working Group of the Binational Commission, as well as through regular engagement by U.S. embassy officials in Abuja. Through the BNC dialogue, the United States has supported Nigerian efforts to establish a joint intelligence fusion center; the FBI has also provided periodic support to the Nigerian government to assist in specific incident investigations. The United States has provided counterterrorism training and assistance to Nigerian civilian and law enforcement agencies, but counterterrorism support for the Nigerian military has been limited in comparison with that provided to some countries in the Sahel and East Africa. U.S. military assistance to Nigeria has focused primarily on professionalization, peacekeeping support and training, and border and maritime security. The country has received sizable assistance to support the Nigerian military's peacekeeping deployments through the Global Peacekeeping Operations Initiative (GPOI), totaling \$2 million to \$3 million annually in recent years. Nigeria also receives on average \$1 million annually in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), which has been used to sustain the country's fleet of C-130 aircraft. Nigerian security forces have received counternarcotics assistance from the State Department and DOD.

U.S. counterterrorism programs in Nigeria are implemented through the State Department's West Africa Regional Security Initiative (WARSI), the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and other State Department-led initiatives, including Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) and the Regional Strategic Initiative (RSI), as well as through DOD funds for counterterrorism and military-to-military cooperation activities.<sup>52</sup> Nigerian law enforcement agencies receive ATA and RSI training regularly totaling more than \$3 million per year, focusing on border security, crisis response, counter-IED, and investigative and analytic capacity. Counterterrorism assistance to the military is increasing—FY2014 assistance includes \$5 million in counter-IED and civil-military relations training, and U.S. military trainers have recently begun efforts to train a ranger battalion. Some U.S. assistance for Nigerian military and police units has been restricted based on human rights concerns (see below).

The State Department and USAID additionally support programs that focus on countering radicalization in Nigeria. Other counterterrorism-related support includes justice sector programming focused on improving Nigerian capacity to prosecute terrorist financing cases.

## **How is the United States responding to the abduction of the schoolgirls?**

The Obama Administration, with support from many Members of Congress, has offered support to Nigerian efforts to find and rescue the young women abducted from Chibok. According to

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Nigeria was the first sub-Saharan African country named eligible for counterterrorism and border security assistance under the new Global Security Contingency Fund (GSCF), although GSCF programming has yet to begin in Nigeria.

Secretary of State John Kerry, “the kidnapping of hundreds of children by Boko Haram is an unconscionable crime, and we will do everything possible to support the Nigerian government to return these young women to their homes and to hold the perpetrators to justice.”<sup>53</sup> On May 6, 2014, Secretary Kerry announced that he had spoken with the Nigerian president on behalf of President Obama and offered American support for the Nigerian response. That offer, which had been mentioned by the White House press secretary on May 5, is part of ongoing diplomatic and programmatic engagement with the Nigerian government to support efforts to counter the Boko Haram threat. The extent to which the Jonathan Administration, or Nigerian military officials, have accepted various types of U.S. assistance is uncertain.

Following Secretary Kerry’s remarks, the United States deployed a multi-disciplinary, interagency team to Abuja to provide support to Nigerian efforts to find and rescue the abducted schoolgirls. The interagency team adds to existing support already provided by U.S. Embassy Abuja and DOD. Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Sarah Sewall and AFRICOM Commander General David Rodriguez traveled to Abuja in mid-May for meetings with senior Nigerian officials to discuss cooperation on the response. The interagency team includes advisors to the government and its military counterparts. They will offer assistance on law enforcement best practices, hostage negotiations, assistance to victims, forensics and investigations, gathering and analyzing intelligence, using imagery, conducting strategic communications, and other aid.<sup>54</sup> A USAID component will also engage civil society on longer-term efforts to enhance civilian security, including the development of early warning networks and strategies to promote defections. The U.S. military contribution includes 16 uniformed military personnel who will advise and assist the Nigerians with communications, logistics, and intelligence. White House and DOD officials have emphasized that they are not currently considering the deployment of U.S. forces to directly participate in rescue operations.<sup>55</sup>

On May 10, First Lady Michelle Obama delivered the President’s Weekly Radio Address, stressing in the context of a Mother’s Day message that the situation in Nigeria was “of great significance” to her, and reiterating that the President had directed U.S. agencies “to do everything possible to support the Nigerian government’s efforts to find these girls and bring them home.” U.S. officials have since indicated that the United States is providing commercial satellite data and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support to Nigeria’s military,<sup>56</sup> and the two governments reached an intelligence sharing agreement in mid-May, although Administration officials indicate that the United States is not sharing raw intelligence with the Nigerian military. On May 21, President Obama notified Congress, “consistent with the War Powers Act, that he was deploying approximately 80 U.S. military personnel to neighboring Chad “as part of the U.S. efforts to locate and support the safe return” of the schoolgirls, “in furtherance of U.S. national security and foreign policy interests.”<sup>57</sup> The notification indicated that the personnel would specifically support the operation of unmanned surveillance aircraft operating over northern Nigeria and the surrounding area.

---

<sup>53</sup> State Department, Remarks by Secretary of State John Kerry in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, May 3, 2014.

<sup>54</sup> On May 12, the State Department indicated that the team consisted of 27 members, from various U.S. agencies.

<sup>55</sup> See, among other statements, comments by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel on ABC’s “This Week,” May 11, 2014 and White House, Daily Press Briefing, May 14, 2014.

<sup>56</sup> State Department, Daily Press Briefing, May 12, 2014.

<sup>57</sup> The White House, Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, May 21, 2014. U.S. officials indicate that the deployed personnel will not be directly involved in rescue attempts—the notification was made because the personnel are armed to protect themselves and the aircraft.

Various operational and political challenges may continue to complicate U.S.-Nigerian cooperation, not least of which may be the question of whether there is sufficient Nigerian political will to accept foreign assistance that could be perceived as impinging on the country's sovereignty. In considering any proposals for more extensive and public U.S. involvement, U.S. officials may weigh whether U.S. action could provoke Boko Haram and further endanger the schoolgirls, and/or enhance the group's stature among other extremist groups, recruits, and potential financial backers.

## **What are the major factors constraining further U.S. assistance to the Nigerian security forces in their operations against Boko Haram?**

Human rights concerns have constrained U.S. security assistance to Nigeria for both legal and policy reasons, and coordination on counterterrorism efforts has also been hampered at times by a lack of cooperation from Nigerian officials. U.S. legal provisions, popularly known as the Leahy Laws, that prohibit assistance to foreign security force units implicated in gross violations of human rights have had a significant impact on U.S.-Nigerian security cooperation.<sup>58</sup> DOD officials have further described Nigeria as “an extremely challenging partner to work with,” and “slow to adapt with new strategies, new doctrines, and new tactics.”<sup>59</sup>

Nigerian security forces have been accused of committing serious human rights abuses in the context of their operations against Boko Haram. The State Department's 2013 human rights report documents numerous “arbitrary or unlawful killings” by security forces, including “summary executions, assaults, torture, and other abuses” under the auspices of security operations in the northeast.<sup>60</sup> By some accounts, these abuses are not isolated incidents but part of a set of informal rules of engagement that are condoned by the government. Amnesty International has reported that thousands of people suspected of links to Boko Haram have been extra-judicially executed or unlawfully killed by security forces, and thousands of suspects have died in military or police custody.<sup>61</sup> Allegations of torture by the Nigerian security forces in the context of counterterrorism operations in the northeast have become increasingly common.

In the past decade, the Nigerian government has deployed special combined military and police units known as Joint Task Forces (JTFs) to respond to specific conflicts that the government classifies as national emergencies.<sup>62</sup> Forces deployed to counter Islamist militants in the northeast

---

<sup>58</sup> These provisions are included in Section 620M of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (FAA), as amended, and recurring DOD appropriations bills, most recently P.L. 113-76. For more on these provisions, see CRS Report R43361, “Leahy Law” Human Rights Provisions and Security Assistance: Issue Overview.

<sup>59</sup> Testimony of DOD Principal Director for African Affairs Alice Friend, Senate Subcommittee on African Affairs, #BringBackOurGirls: Addressing the Threat of Boko Haram, May 15, 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Other recent reports on abuses include Michelle Faul, “Nigeria's Military Killing Thousands of Detainees,” *Associated Press*, October 18, 2013; HRW, *Arbitrary Killings by Security Forces and Spiraling Violence*, op. cit.; Amnesty International, *Stop Torture—Country Profile: Nigeria*, May 13, 2014, *Nigeria and Nigeria: Trapped in the Cycle of Violence*; and *Criminal Force: Torture, Abuse, and Extrajudicial Killings by the Nigerian Police Force*, by the Open Society Justice Initiative and the Network of Police Reform in Nigeria.

<sup>61</sup> Amnesty International, *Nigeria: More than 1,500 Killed in Armed Conflict in North-Eastern Nigeria in Early 2014*, March 31, 2014.

<sup>62</sup> The first JTF was established in the Niger Delta. In 2009, it launched an offensive against Delta militants during which thousands of civilians were reportedly displaced.

under a JTF known as “Operation Restore Order” have been implicated in a range of abuses that have significantly complicated U.S.-Nigerian security cooperation. In April 2013, for example, more than 180 people were killed in fighting between security forces and suspected Boko Haram militants in the village of Baga, according to the Nigerian Red Cross and local officials; among the dead were reportedly innocent bystanders, including children.<sup>63</sup> Military officials disputed the number of casualties. Multiple human rights groups have implicated the JTF in mass arrests during raids in response to Boko Haram attacks, alleging that civilians are often held in military detention facilities for lengthy periods without charge or due process.

The Nigerian government ostensibly disbanded the JTF in August 2013, replacing it with the army’s Seventh Division as the umbrella command for joint security operations. The State Department reports that many of the commanders and units remained the same, and the joint forces operating in the region continued to be referred to in the press as the JTF. A reported effort by Boko Haram gunmen to free prisoners held at Giwa military barracks in the Borno capital, Maiduguri, in March 2014 brought renewed international attention to the large number of detainees held by the military. During that incident, Amnesty International estimates that more than 620 people, including attackers and unarmed detainees, were killed by the military.<sup>64</sup>

The United States is not the only donor government that has restricted security assistance based on human rights concerns; the United Kingdom, once a major provider of training and equipment to the Nigerian military, has significantly reduced its assistance in recent years, and the sale of lethal weapons to Nigeria is now prohibited under UK law.<sup>65</sup>

Nigerian officials have acknowledged some abuses by security forces in the context of the fight against Boko Haram, but few security personnel have been prosecuted.<sup>66</sup> In May 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry stated that he had raised human rights issues with Nigeria’s foreign minister, and that they had “talked directly about the imperative of Nigerian troops adhering to the highest standards and not themselves engaging in atrocities or in human rights violations.”<sup>67</sup> President Obama, prior to a bilateral meeting with President Jonathan in New York in September 2013, referred to Boko Haram as “one of the most vicious terrorist organizations in the world.” He noted, “We want to be cooperative in that process of building capacity inside Nigeria to deal with that terrorist threat, but doing so in a way that is consistent with human rights. Because we strongly believe that the best way to undermine the agenda of those who would do violence is to make sure that governments are responsive to the needs of people and following rule of law.”<sup>68</sup>

In March 2014, following the Giwa barracks incident, Nigeria’s National Security Advisor, Mohammed Sambo Dasuki, unveiled a new “soft approach” strategy to countering the insurgency.<sup>69</sup> As part of the strategy, Dasuki announced the creation of a new Counter Terrorism

---

<sup>63</sup> See, e.g., “Scores Killed in Nigeria Violence,” *Al Jazeera*, April 23, 2013.

<sup>64</sup> Amnesty International, *Nigeria: More than 1,500 Killed in Armed Conflict in North-Eastern Nigeria in Early 2014*, op. cit.; Adam Nossiter, “Nigerian Army Facing Questions as Death Toll Soars After Prison Attack,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2014; Adam Nossiter, “Bodies Pour in as Nigeria Hunts for Islamists,” *New York Times*, May 7, 2013.

<sup>65</sup> Andrew Walker, “Why Nigeria Has Not Defeated Boko Haram,” *BBC*, May 14, 2014.

<sup>66</sup> “Nigeria Condemns Police ‘Killing,’” *BBC*, March 5, 2010.

<sup>67</sup> “Kerry: Nigeria Acknowledged Human Rights Abuses in Terror Fight,” *CNN*, May 25, 2013.

<sup>68</sup> The White House, Remarks by President Obama Before Bilateral Meeting with President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria, September 23, 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Ronald Mutum, “Nigeria: FG Announces ‘Soft’ Counter-Terror Strategy,” *Daily Trust*, March 19, 2014.

Center in his office and outlined new measures to improve coordination between the federal, state, and local governments, as well as new counter-radicalization efforts and prison reforms.

One of the primary aims of DOD engagement is to “convince the Nigerians to change their tactics, techniques, and procedures toward Boko Haram,” and toward that end the U.S. military team deployed to Nigeria will seek to analyze the Nigerian operations and identify gaps for which international experts can provide assistance.<sup>70</sup> The DOD team includes several U.S. military advisors who were recently deployed in Central Africa to help regional forces, primarily from Uganda, counter the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), another brutal group that has long terrorized civilians.<sup>71</sup> As in the counter-LRA operations, for which the United States has provided military advisors, logistical support, equipment, and ISR assets, the U.S. team could provide advice that might help the Nigerians act on intelligence about Boko Haram movements. At the same time, DOD officials indicate they are being “exceedingly cautious when it comes to sharing information with the Nigerians because of their unfortunate record” and have sought assurances from Nigerian officials that they would use any shared U.S. intelligence “in a manner consistent with international humanitarian and human rights law.”<sup>72</sup>

## **What assistance is the United States providing to neighboring countries to help them contain and respond to the Boko Haram?**

The United States has provided significant counterterrorism assistance to several countries in the Sahel, including Nigeria’s northern neighbor, Niger, as part of the State Department’s Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), its DOD component, Operation Enduring Freedom—Trans-Sahara (OEF-TS), and bilateral assistance programs, notably DOD’s “Section 1206” train-and-equip program and regular joint combined exchange training (JCETs) and exercises. These efforts have primarily focused on countering the threat posed by AQIM and affiliated groups. Niger has been a significant recipient of Section 1206 funds, totaling almost \$35 million since FY2012. In February 2013, the Administration reported to Congress the deployment of about 100 U.S. military personnel to Niger’s capital, Niamey, to manage a new base for unarmed, unmanned aerial vehicles.<sup>73</sup> The reported focus of that surveillance has been northern Mali.<sup>74</sup> Cameroon recently became the newest member of TSCTP (which already included Chad, Niger, and Nigeria, among other countries) because of the growing regional threat posed by Boko Haram. State Department and DOD officials are currently planning a new security initiative that would focus on the four countries most affected by Boko Haram. The State Department has also allocated TSCTP resources for counter-radicalization programs in northern Cameroon and Niger.

---

<sup>70</sup> Testimony of DOD Principal Director for African Affairs Alice Friend, Senate Subcommittee on African Affairs, #BringBackOurGirls: Addressing the Threat of Boko Haram, May 15, 2014.

<sup>71</sup> For more on U.S. efforts to counter the LRA, see CRS Report R42094, *The Lord’s Resistance Army: The U.S. Response*, by Alexis Arieff and Lauren Ploch Blanchard.

<sup>72</sup> Testimony of DOD Principal Director for African Affairs Alice Friend, Senate Subcommittee on African Affairs, #BringBackOurGirls: Addressing the Threat of Boko Haram, May 15, 2014.

<sup>73</sup> The White House, “Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate,” February 22, 2013; Eric Schmitt and Scott Sayare, “U.S. Opens Drone Base in Niger, Building Africa Presence,” *New York Times*, February 22, 2013.

<sup>74</sup> Eric Schmitt, “Drones in Niger Reflect New U.S. Tack on Terrorism,” *New York Times*, July 10, 2013.



## **What other assistance does the United States provide to Nigeria?**

Nigeria routinely ranks among the top recipients of U.S. bilateral foreign assistance in Africa. The United States is Nigeria's largest bilateral donor, providing roughly \$700 million annually in recent years. Strengthening governance, mitigating conflict, improving agricultural productivity and access to education and health services, promoting new jobs and increased supplies of clean energy, and professionalizing and reforming the security services have been the main areas of focus for U.S. support. According to the Administration's FY2015 bilateral aid request for Nigeria, which totals more than \$720 million, "The primary goal of U.S. foreign assistance to Nigeria is to mobilize key institutions to support a resilient, equitable, and better-governed nation." Of the total amount of aid requested for Nigeria, more than 87% is targeted at health programs. FY2014 bilateral funding totaled over \$702 million.

Nigeria is a focus country under the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the President's Malaria Initiative (PMI), both part of the Administration's Global Health Initiative (GHI; Nigeria would rank at the top of GHI recipients in the FY2015 request). Nigerian farmers benefit from agriculture programs under the President's Global Hunger and Food Security Initiative, Feed the Future (FTF), that focus on building partnerships with the private sector to expand local supplies and exports of staple foods and generate employment. Interventions to encourage private sector participation in trade and energy are also key components of the Administration's economic growth initiatives in the country. Despite being one of the world's largest oil exporters, Nigeria faces major constraints to domestic power production, and the United States is providing significant support to the Nigerian government's efforts to increase the energy supply through various Power Africa investments.<sup>75</sup>

In addition to being a major recipient of U.S. foreign assistance, Nigeria is the second largest destination for U.S. private investment in Africa, totaling roughly \$5 billion. Nigeria has regularly ranked among the United States' largest sources of imported oil. U.S. imports, which accounted for over 40% of Nigeria's total crude oil exports until 2012, made the United States Nigeria's largest trading partner, although U.S. purchases of Nigerian sweet crude dropped in 2012 and 2013 as domestic U.S. crude supply increased. Asian countries, notably India, which ranked second to the United States in 2012 as the largest market for Nigerian exports, have replaced much of the demand for Nigerian oil as U.S. imports have declined. Nigeria is eligible for U.S. trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act, as amended (AGOA). Nearly all of Nigeria's AGOA-eligible exports are petroleum products.

## **How has Congress responded to the Boko Haram threat?**

Many Members of Congress have engaged in deliberations with the Administration about the extent to which Boko Haram poses a threat to the United States for several years. In November 2011, the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence held the first congressional hearing on the group, and committee leadership have repeatedly raised concerns about the amount of information available on Boko Haram and the potential to underestimate its threat to U.S. interests.<sup>76</sup> The House Foreign Relations Subcommittees on Africa

---

<sup>75</sup> Power Africa is an Obama Administration initiative announced in mid-2013. It is designed to increase access to electricity in multiple African countries. See White House, *Fact Sheet: Power Africa*, June 30, 2013.

<sup>76</sup> House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, *Boko Haram: Emerging Threat to the U.S. Homeland*, committee print, 112<sup>th</sup> Cong., November 30, 2011 and House Homeland Security Committee, *Boko* (continued...)



and on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade held a joint hearing on Boko Haram in November 2013. Legislation was introduced in both the 112<sup>th</sup> and 113<sup>th</sup> Congresses to press the State Department to designate the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (see below), and Congress directed the Director of National Intelligence to provide an assessment of the Boko Haram threat to Congress in the FY2013 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA; P.L. 112-239).

Some Members of Congress have expressed support for efforts to find and rescue the young women abducted from Chibok in various public statements and correspondence to both President Obama and President Jonathan, including a letter signed by all 20 female Senators that urged further sanctions on the group. Related legislation includes S.Res. 433, which passed on May 6, and H.Res. 573, which passed on May 20. These resolutions condemned Boko Haram's attacks on civilian targets and expressed support for the Nigerian people and the families of the abducted girls, for efforts to hold the group accountable, and for U.S. offers to assist in the search for the girls. The resolutions also encouraged efforts to strengthen initiatives to promote education and human rights in Nigeria.

## **How does Boko Haram's status as a Foreign Terrorist Organization impact the U.S. response to the threat?**

Deliberations within the U.S. government over whether to designate Boko Haram as an FTO concluded in November 2013, when the State Department designated both Boko Haram and Ansaru as FTOs under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, as amended, and as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs) under Executive Order 13224 (2001). The FTO designations aim to assist U.S. and other law enforcement agencies in efforts to investigate and prosecute suspects associated with the group, and have been described by U.S. officials as an important step in supporting the Nigerian government's effort to address the threat.<sup>77</sup> The FTO designation triggers the freezing of any assets a group might have in U.S. financial institutions, bans FTO members' travel to the United States, and criminalizes transactions (including material support) with the organization or its members.

FTO status may serve to help prioritize greater U.S. security and intelligence resources toward a group, but this is not a legal requirement of the designation, and the Administration has not indicated what additional resources, if any, were focused on Boko Haram after the designation. The prioritization of such assets is based on intelligence assessments and policy direction from the Administration or authorizations and appropriations from Congress. An FTO designation does not convey statutory authorization for direct U.S. military action against a terrorist group.

It is unclear what impact, if any, the FTO designation may have had on Boko Haram financing—the extent to which they raise funds from abroad is unclear, and to date there have been no charges filed in U.S. courts related to support for the group. Boko Haram appears to fund its operations largely through criminal activity, including bank robberies, kidnapping for ransom, assassinations for hire, trafficking, and various types of extortion. According to press reports, Boko Haram may have been paid more than \$3 million in ransom for a French family that was

---

(...continued)

*Haram: Growing Threat to the U.S. Homeland*, committee print, 113<sup>th</sup> Cong., September 13, 2013.

<sup>77</sup> State Department, Daily News Briefing, November 13, 2013.

kidnapped in northern Cameroon in February 2013 and freed in April.<sup>78</sup> Cameroon also reportedly freed several Boko Haram detainees as part of that deal; however, France and Cameroon both deny that any ransom was paid. According to the State Department, Boko Haram does appear to receive funding from AQIM, and some experts suggest the group may get funds from groups in the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia through AQIM connections.<sup>79</sup>

With ransom payments thought to contribute to Boko Haram's finances, the expansion of international sanctions against the group could have implications for its kidnapping operations. The Nigerian government formally designated Boko Haram and Ansaru as terrorist groups in 2013. The British government named Ansaru as a "Proscribed Terrorist Organization" in November 2012 (after the group kidnapped and murdered a British construction worker), describing it as broadly aligned with Al Qaeda, and designated Boko Haram as such in July 2013. Boko Haram was added to the U.N. Al Qaeda sanctions list on May 22, 2014, after the Nigerian government reversed its prior reservations about the group being listed.<sup>80</sup>

## **Why wasn't Boko Haram designated as an FTO earlier?**

Some Members of Congress pressed for the designation of the group as an FTO for several years before the State Department decision was made.<sup>81</sup> Nigeria experts who opposed the designation argued that it would have few practical effects, given limited information suggesting material support for the group from individuals in U.S. jurisdiction, and they cautioned that a designation might actually serve as a recruitment and fundraising tool for the group. Some experts saw Boko Haram's shift toward Christian targets as tactical—part of an effort to elicit a stronger response from President Jonathan (a Christian from the southern Niger Delta region) and other southern politicians, or from Western governments. Those experts cautioned U.S. policy makers to avoid taking positions that might fuel perceptions that the United States had "taken sides" between Christians and Muslims in the country.<sup>82</sup> Some also argued that an FTO designation might be seen, by both the Nigerian government and the northern population, as an endorsement by the United States of "excessive use of force at a time when the rule of law in Nigeria hangs in the balance."<sup>83</sup> These concerns were shared by State Department officials, according to former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson.<sup>84</sup> State Department deliberations were also influenced by Nigerian government concerns about the impact of a designation.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Tim Cocks, "Nigerian Islamists Got \$3.15 Million to Free French Hostages - Document," *Reuters*, April 26, 2013.

<sup>79</sup> Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's International Connections," *CTC Sentinel*, January 14, 2013.

<sup>80</sup> The U.N. sanctions regime applies to individuals, groups, undertakings, or entities associated with Al Qaeda as outlined in Security Council Resolution 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and subsequent resolutions, including 2083 (2012). In designating Boko Haram, the Sanctions Committee declared the group to be associated with Al Qaeda for "participating in the financing, planning, facilitating, preparing, or perpetrating of acts or activities by, in conjunction with, under the name of, on behalf of, or in support of" Al Qaeda and AQIM. The Committee identified the relationship with AQIM as one for "training and material support purposes." Two Sahel-based groups associated with AQIM were added to the U.N. list in December 2012 and March 2013.

<sup>81</sup> Legislation included H.R. 5822 and S. 3249 in the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress and H.R. 3209 and S. 198 in the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress.

<sup>82</sup> Testimony of Darren Kew, House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights, *The Crisis in Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria*, July 10, 2012.

<sup>83</sup> Letter to Secretary Clinton by 21 American academics with Nigeria expertise on May 2012.

<sup>84</sup> James Gordon Meek and Dana Hughes, "Debates in DC Delayed Action on Boko Haram, Officials Say," ABC News, May 8, 2014.

<sup>85</sup> Testimony of Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Robert P. Jackson, Senate (continued...)

State Department officials have also stated that, in the course of the extensive interagency process involved in making the determination, they sought to “deepen [their] understanding of the organization,” suggesting that Boko Haram’s “decentralized and factionalized” nature, with its “loose command-and-control structure,” complicated the process.<sup>86</sup> Reports suggest that security restrictions on travel by U.S. embassy personnel to large parts of northern Nigeria hindered the mission’s ability to maintain contacts and may also have limited State Department reporting.<sup>87</sup>

## **How have others in the international community responded to the abductions?**

On May 9, 2014, the U.N. Security Council issued a press statement expressing outrage at the abduction of the Nigerian school girls and demanding their release. The Security Council also condemned a May 5 Boko Haram attack on Gamboru, a remote village near the Nigeria-Cameroon border, in which between 150 and 300 people were reportedly killed. The Council expressed “deep concern” with terrorist attacks committed by the group since 2009, which “represent a threat to peace and stability in West and Central Africa.” The Council noted that it would consider “appropriate measures” against Boko Haram. Such measures could include U.N. sanctions or other efforts to hold the group accountable for its abuses.

The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, who referred to Boko Haram’s actions as “increasingly monstrous” during a 2014 visit to Nigeria, has issued a specific warning in response to the group’s threat to sell the girls as slaves, stressing that such an act would constitute a violation of international law and could constitute crimes against humanity.<sup>88</sup>

Members of the Security Council reportedly disagreed on whether the May 9 press statement should reference the International Criminal Court (ICC).<sup>89</sup> The ICC Prosecutor reported in August 2013 that, based on a preliminary examination, “there is a reasonable basis to believe” that Boko Haram has committed crimes against humanity, namely acts of murder and persecution, resulting in the killing of more than 1,200 Christian and Muslim civilians.<sup>90</sup> The Office of the Prosecutor has sought to assess whether Nigerian authorities are conducting “genuine proceedings” against those who may be responsible in order to determine whether a full investigation by the ICC is warranted. (Nigeria, which is a state party to the Rome Statute that established the ICC, has not referred the Boko Haram situation to the Court, but the Prosecutor, with the assent of the ICC judges, has the ability to commence an investigation on her own initiative.)

In addition to the United States, several foreign governments have offered assistance to Nigeria in its efforts to find and rescue the girls. Both the United Kingdom and France have offered experts

---

(...continued)

Subcommittee on African Affairs, *#BringBackOurGirls: Addressing the Threat of Boko Haram*, May 15, 2014.

<sup>86</sup> State Department, Daily News Briefing, November 13, 2013.

<sup>87</sup> State Department Office of the Inspector General, *Inspection of Embassy Abuja and Consulate General Lagos, Nigeria*, ISP-I-13-16A, February 2013.

<sup>88</sup> U.N. Office at Geneva, Regular Press Briefing, May 6, 2014.

<sup>89</sup> “Security Council Press Statement on Boko Haram,” *What’s In Blue*, May 9, 2014. According to this report, Nigeria initially proposed the reference to the ICC in the press statement, with support from France, the UK, and the United States, but Chad, Russia, and Rwanda objected to any ICC reference.

<sup>90</sup> The Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC, *Report on Preliminary Examination Activities 2013*, November 2013.

and advisors. France hosted an international conference on the Boko Haram threat in Paris on May 17 attended by regional heads of state, including President Jonathan, and representatives of the European Union, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The conference sought to intensify regional and international mobilization, not only on cooperation to free the abducted school girls, but also to combat Boko Haram and protect victims. Israel and China have also reportedly offered assistance, although the details of their offers have not been made public.

International outrage against Boko Haram's atrocities does not appear to have deterred attacks—three weeks after the abduction of the girls from Chibok, another eight girls, aged 12 to 15, were taken from Warabe, a Nigerian village near the Cameroon border. On May 2, Boko Haram claimed responsibility for a rare attack in the country's capital, Abuja, killing at least 19 in a bombing near a bus station that a Boko Haram cell had targeted on April 14, hours before the Chibok kidnapping. (The April 14 attack, an apparent suicide bombing, killed 75 people.) The May 5 attack on Gamboru may be Boko Haram's deadliest attack to date, depending on the casualty count, which is disputed between local and federal officials.

## **Author Contact Information**

Lauren Ploch Blanchard  
Specialist in African Affairs  
lploch@crs.loc.gov, 7-7640