

CRS Insights

Nigeria's Boko Haram and the Islamic State

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On March 7, 2015, Abubakar Shekau, leader of the Nigerian Islamist insurgent group Boko Haram, released a statement pledging loyalty to the leader of the Syria/Iraq-based Islamic State (IS/ISIL) organization, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Al Baghdadi has yet to respond publicly, as he has done with other pledges. Shekau had previously voiced support for both Al Baghdadi and Al Qaeda's leader Ayman al Zawahiri, but had not formally pledged allegiance to either. In recent months, some analysts suggested that the Nigerian group's [increasingly sophisticated use of video](#) and [social media](#), and its [taking of territory](#), might reflect influence or inspiration from the self-styled Islamic State. In February, a jihadi media group [hinted on Twitter](#) that Boko Haram was considering such a pledge. Shekau's latest message raises a series of questions about its meaning and implications. Open source reporting does not currently point to direct organizational ties between the groups. However, [media reports](#) of relations between the Islamic State organization and groups in North Africa suggest that IS leaders may use clandestine outreach efforts.

For Congress, Boko Haram's message and the potential organizational ties it portends may have direct implications for ongoing consideration of the President's legislative proposal for an authorization for the use of military force (AUMF) against the Islamic State (see CRS Report R43760, [A New Authorization for Use of Military Force Against the Islamic State: Issues and Current Proposals in Brief](#)). Some Members of Congress have already raised concerns about the potential geographic and organizational scope of such an authorization, given the number and diversity of adherents across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia from which the Islamic State group has already attracted pledges of loyalty. Others argue that geographic constraints on an authorization may limit the effectiveness of future U.S. military action. The President's proposal would authorize the use of force against the Islamic State and "associated persons or forces," which it defines as "individuals and organizations fighting for, on behalf of, or alongside ISIL or any closely-related successor entity in hostilities against the United States or its coalition partners." On March 11, [senior Administration officials testified](#) that they do not currently interpret the proposed text to cover Boko Haram, but if the group "start[s] to attack the United States or join with ISIL in a specific strategy to attack coalition partners," this authorization could cover them.

To date, the Obama Administration has resisted [calls for direct U.S. military action](#) against Boko Haram, instead offering [advisory and intelligence support](#) to Nigeria's military and issuing terrorist designations and related sanctions against the group and several top commanders. U.S. concerns regarding Nigeria's counterterrorism approach, its military's poor human rights record, and tensions in the bilateral relationship have limited greater cooperation with Nigeria in efforts to counter the group (see CRS Report R43881, [Nigeria's 2015 Elections and the Boko Haram Crisis](#)). The United States, along with France and other counterterrorism partners, has increasingly sought to build the capacity of neighboring states—particularly Chad, Cameroon, and Niger—to contain Boko Haram, which has conducted increasing cross-border attacks in recent months and threatened regional trade routes.

On March 3, the [African Union authorized a regional force](#) of up to 10,000 military and other personnel to combat Boko Haram. The African Union is now seeking authorization for the mission from the U.N. Security Council. The African force would likely rely on voluntary contributions from donors, including the United States. To that end, the U.S. State and Defense Departments may seek to augment existing assistance to enhance regional capabilities to counter Boko Haram. Current assistance includes [U.S. Africa Command's annual Flintlock exercise](#) in Chad, training and equipment under the aegis of the interagency Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), and a planned \$40 million Global Security Contingency Fund program.

Boko Haram's brutal tactics, which have included beheadings and the use of women and children as

suicide bombers, predate the rise of the Islamic State, and its deadly campaign has already claimed more than 10,000 lives and displaced over 1.5 million people. Shekau's effort to align Boko Haram with the Islamic State comes at a time when both groups are under [increasing international military pressure](#). In July 2014, Boko Haram, which had previously relied primarily on hit-and-run attacks against government and civilian targets, launched a territorial offensive in northeast Nigeria. On August 24, it declared an Islamic state in areas under its control. The group's advance went largely unchecked until late January, when Chad deployed troops into Nigeria. Since then, Chadian and Nigerian forces have steadily reclaimed territory from Boko Haram, and troops from Niger recently joined the offensive.

Regional rivalries and mistrust have hampered regional cooperation, and the extent of [Nigeria's coordination with its neighbors](#) in current operations is subject to debate. The limited capacities of the neighboring forces may constrain the prospects for sustained pressure on Boko Haram without [outside support](#). France has long provided military advisors and intelligence to its former colonies, but its own military is stretched by deployments elsewhere on the continent.

While a possible Islamic State-Boko Haram alliance has attracted considerable media attention, the practical implications of Shekau's pledge are, for now, unclear. Branding itself as part of the Islamic State may provide recruitment and fundraising opportunities, but Boko Haram's territory remains geographically removed from Syria and Iraq, and the extent to which affiliation might facilitate operational ties remains unknown. [Reported links between Boko Haram and Islamist militants in North Africa](#), potentially including other IS "affiliates" in Libya, may be of more immediate concern. Analysts have also questioned what impact Shekau's pledge may have on relations with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), with which Boko Haram has reportedly historically had ties. In the near term, the pledge may prove most effective as a propaganda tool, increasing the profile of both groups. The potential alliance also raises the stakes for Nigeria's March 28 presidential elections, with incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan facing [heavy criticism](#) for his government's handling of the crisis. In February, his government cited security threats from Boko Haram as the rationale for postponing the elections, heightening political tensions in the country.