



April 3, 2015

Boko Haram

Boko Haram, which emerged in Nigeria over a decade ago as a small Sunni Islamic sect advocating a strict interpretation and implementation of Islamic law for the country, has grown since 2010 into one of the world's deadliest terrorist groups. 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 its view that Western education and culture have been corrupting influences that are *haram* ("forbidden").

Civilians in Nigeria's impoverished, predominately Muslim northeast have borne the brunt of Boko Haram's violence. The group conducted its first lethal attack against Western interests in August 2011, with the deadly bombing of the United Nations building in Nigeria's capital, Abuja. After attracting international headlines with the kidnapping of more than 270 girls from a school in the Nigerian town of Chibok in April 2014, Boko Haram commenced a territorial offensive that Nigerian security forces struggled to reverse until regional forces, primarily from neighboring Chad, launched an offensive against the group in early 2015. Private mercenaries have also been used in the campaign.

In total, Boko Haram may have killed more than 11,000 people, with more than 5,500 people killed in 2014 alone. Its raids and bombings in early 2015 have claimed hundreds of lives. The group's March 2015 pledge of allegiance to the self-described Islamic State (IS) has raised its profile.

Leadership

Abubakar Shekau is Boko Haram's most visible leader. He succeeded the group's original leader, Mohammed Yusuf, who was killed in police custody after a July 2009 security crackdown in which hundreds of Boko Haram followers also died. Along with Shekau, the State Department named two other individuals linked to Boko Haram, Khalid al Barnawi and Abubakar Adam Kamar, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs) in 2012. Both are identified as having close links to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a regional terrorist network affiliated with Al Qaeda. Kamar was reportedly killed in 2012; Barnawi, by some accounts, now leads a Boko Haram-aligned faction, *Harakat al Muhajirin*.

A Boko Haram splinter faction, Ansaru (aka *Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis-Sudan*, or Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa), emerged in 2012. It was publicly critical of Boko Haram's killing of Muslim civilians and appeared focused on government and foreign targets. Several kidnappings attributed to the group resulted

in the killing of foreign hostages. Ansaru has claimed no recent attacks, and some analysts suggest that some elements of the group may have been killed or reabsorbed into Boko Haram, while some may have joined other jihadist groups in the Sahel. Mamman Nur, purported to be one of Ansaru's ideological leaders and a rival of Shekau, is rumored to have links to Al Shabaab in Somalia, as well as to AQIM, the Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and other Al Qaeda affiliates. By some accounts, Nur, who is Cameroonian, may have been behind the 2011 U.N. bombing in Abuja. It is unclear what his current relationship is with Shekau and Boko Haram.

Objectives

Boko Haram has publicly called for an uprising against secular authority, a war against Christianity, and the establishment of an Islamic state in Nigeria. Its recent pledge to join the Islamic State's self-proclaimed caliphate suggests that the promotion of a West African *wilaya* ("state") under IS leadership may be a near-term goal.

Boko Haram draws on a narrative of resentment and vengeance against state abuses to elicit recruits and sympathizers, and its attacks appear aimed at undermining the government's control over the northern part of the country. Some attacks have targeted Christian communities in the north, threatening to fuel existing religious tensions in the country. The majority of Boko Haram's victims, however, have been Muslim. Key factors that have given rise to its insurgency include a legacy of overlapping intercommunal, Muslim-Christian, and north-south tensions within Nigeria and popular frustration with elite corruption and other state abuses. The Nigerian security forces' heavy-handed counterterrorism response in the northeast may have driven recruitment in some areas.

Areas of Operation

Boko Haram attacks have been primarily concentrated in northeast Nigeria, but the group has claimed responsibility for attacks across north and central Nigeria. Attacks in 2014 reportedly extended as far south as Lagos. Security forces from Cameroon, Chad, and Niger have increasingly clashed with the group as it has crossed into northern Cameroon, southern Niger, and the Lake Chad Basin area. The group has been linked to kidnapping operations, including against Europeans, in northern Cameroon.

Attacks against U.S. interests

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 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. In November 2013, the State Department designated Boko Haram and its splinter faction Ansaru as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).

Size, Financing, and Capabilities

Estimates of Boko Haram's size vary. U.S. officials suggest that Boko Haram may have between 4,000 and 6,000 "hardcore" fighters, while other sources contend its force could be larger. The group appears to draw support predominately from an ethnic Kanuri base in the northeast, where the group is most active, although its operatives appear intent on expanding its recruitment base, its operational reach, and the scope of its targets. Boko Haram appears to fund its operations largely through criminal activity, including bank robberies, kidnappings, assassinations for hire, trafficking, and various types of extortion. There has been speculation for years that Boko Haram may have acquired weapons from former Libyan stockpiles through AQIM ties; it has also seized vehicles, weapons, and ammunition from the Nigerian army.

Relationship with the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and AQ Affiliates

On March 7, 2015, Shekau released a statement pledging loyalty to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, leader of the Syria/Iraq-based Islamic State. An IS spokesman welcomed the pledge, urging followers to travel to West Africa and support Boko Haram. In late March, the Islamic State's English-language magazine, *Dabiq*, heralded the alliance, declaring that "the mujahidin of West Africa now guard yet another frontier of the Khilāfah (caliphate)."

Shekau had previously voiced support for both Al Baghdadi and Al Qaeda's leader Ayman al Zawahiri, but had not pledged allegiance to either. Branding itself as part of the Islamic State may provide recruitment and fundraising opportunities, but Boko Haram's area of operations remains geographically removed from Syria and Iraq, and the extent to which affiliation might facilitate operational ties remains unclear. Reported links between Boko Haram and Islamist militants in North Africa, including other IS "affiliates" in Libya, may be of more immediate concern. Analysts question what impact, if any, Shekau's pledge may have on relations with AQIM and associated groups in the region. In the near term, the pledge may prove most effective as a propaganda tool, increasing the profile of both groups.

Outlook

Shekau's effort to align Boko Haram with the Islamic State comes at a time when both groups are under increasing international military pressure. Regional offensives since January 2014 appear to have stopped Boko Haram's territorial advance, but regional rivalries and mistrust continue to hamper cooperation between Nigeria and neighboring countries. It is unclear to what extent the upcoming transition of power in Nigeria, where former military ruler Muhammadu Buhari defeated incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan in elections on March 28, will improve Nigeria's coordination with its neighbors.

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 thin by deployments elsewhere on the continent. The United States is providing increasing counterterrorism support to these countries and has deployed advisors to N'Djamena, Chad, where the regional response is being coordinated.

Multiple factors have undermined the Nigerian security forces' response to Boko Haram, notably security sector mismanagement and corruption, as well as insufficient coordination among agencies. By many accounts, Nigerian troops are not adequately resourced or equipped to counter the insurgency despite a rising defense budget of more than \$5 billion in 2014. Many soldiers, particularly in the northeast, reportedly suffer from low morale, struggling to keep pace with a foe that appears increasingly well-armed and trained. In the assessment of U.S. Defense Department officials, Nigerian funding for the military is "skimmed off the top," and former Nigerian President Obasanjo, himself once a military leader, suggests that corruption in the army is "deeply ingrained." Other dynamics limiting the Nigerian response include the slow pace of the judicial system and a lack of sufficient training for prosecutors and judges to implement anti-terrorism laws.

Nigeria's President-elect, who is to take office in late May 2015, has pledged to "spare no effort" to defeat Boko Haram. U.S. relations with Nigeria have been strained in recent years in by disagreements over Nigeria's counterterrorism approach and its effectiveness, and the Obama Administration has increasingly sought to support a regional strategy to counter Boko Haram. To date, the Administration has resisted calls for direct U.S. military action against the group, instead offering advisory and intelligence support to the affected countries and issuing terrorist designations and related sanctions against the group. Increased U.S.-Nigerian cooperation against Boko Haram will likely depend on Buhari's approach and his willingness and ability to address U.S. concerns.

Figure 1. Boko Haram Logo



Source: Boko Haram media release, edited by CRS.

Lauren Ploch Blanchard, lploch@crs.loc.gov, 7-7640