

Boko Haram

The Emerging Jihadist Threat in West Africa

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Introduction

Boko Haram, an Islamic militant group that seeks to establish an Islamic state in northern Nigeria that will strictly adhere to its interpretation of Islamic law, has raised international concern over its increasingly violent activities and its apparent links to other terrorist organizations.

The group, also known by its Arabic name *Jama'at Ahl al-Sunnah lil-Da'wah w'al-Jihaad* (the Group of the people of the Sunnah for Propagating Islam and Jihad)

garnered international attention in August 2011 after claiming responsibility for a suicide bombing at the United Nations building in the Nigerian capital of Abuja in which at least 25 were killed and more than 110 were wounded. Congress held its first hearing on the potential threats posed by the group in November 2011.



The organization gained international notoriety in May 2014, when it abducted between 250 and 300 Nigerian school girls, threatening to sell them as wives and reiterating its opposition to female education and secular studies in general. The abduction came in the midst of a series of increasingly aggressive Boko Haram attacks, including the destruction of a northern Nigerian town and massacring of approximately 300 of its inhabitants three weeks after the abductions.

Central to Boko Haram's ideology is the notion that many aspects of Western life are antithetical to Islamic civilization. Although the group's name is widely translated as "Western education is forbidden/sinful," Boko Haram's leaders insist that the name refers not just to Western education but also to Western civilization in its entirety.

In its early years, the group was popularly known as the "Nigerian Taliban" due to its shared anti-Western ideology and its willingness to use violence in an effort to impose a strict form of Shariah law. Its public statements declaring solidarity with Al Qaeda and its ideology further attest to its anti-Western views.

While Boko Haram has only minimally operated outside of Nigeria (with some incursions into neighboring Chad, Cameroon and Niger), its attack on the United Nations building demonstrates an apparent willingness to align itself with the goals and tactics of established global terrorist organizations. Boko Haram has allegedly established connections to [Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb](#), Al Qaeda's North African branch, and [Al Shabaab](#), an Al Qaeda-affiliated Islamic militant group that seeks to create an Islamic state in Somalia.

The group's leadership has also [expressed intent to target U.S. interests](#) in particular, citing U.S. support for Israel and what the group describes as American "oppression and aggression against Muslim nations."

Recognizing the potential danger that Boko Haram poses to its citizens, U.S. officials have issued several warnings, increasing in specificity since the United Nations bombing, to American travelers and others with

interests in Nigeria. Boko Haram was designated a foreign terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department in November 2013.

Background

Boko Haram emerged in the early 2000s under the leadership of Mohammed Yusuf, a self-styled Nigerian scholar who came from a privileged background and reportedly received a Western education. The group originally consisted of Yusuf and his students, who sought to instill their anti-Western interpretation of Shariah law in Nigeria.

Boko Haram operated with relative freedom until the summer of 2009, when they embarked on a series of attacks against police stations and other government facilities, prompting a government crackdown.

The resulting clashes took the lives of more than 700 people, including Yusuf, who died in police custody. The Nigerian police claimed he was killed while trying to escape. At the time Nigerian officials believed that the group had been defeated; however, it had merely been driven underground and reemerged months later, more violent than ever.

Drawn primarily from the impoverished classes of northern Nigeria, Boko Haram also has members from Chad, Somalia, Sudan, and Niger. While the group is largely self-financed, reportedly in part by demanding that members turn over their possessions to the group, unconfirmed reports indicate that it may receive financial support from other Islamic militants and traditional sponsors of terrorism. Boko Haram may also receive money from Nigeria's political opposition seeking to discredit the country's president, Goodluck Jonathan.



Online jihadist sympathizers eulogize former Boko Haram leader Mohammed Yusuf

Although it concentrates its activity in the predominately Muslim states of northern Nigeria, principally Borno State and the city of Maiduguri, Boko Haram has also carried out attacks in the south and in the capital city of Abuja. The group is reportedly preparing operations in the South's oil-rich Niger Delta region, which would bring it into conflict with Christian militias already operating there.

The group appears to have cultivated ties with established terrorist organizations in efforts to enhance its capabilities and international stature. Boko Haram members have also reportedly fought in Afghanistan alongside Al Qaeda and the Taliban. In 2009, a Nigerian named Abdul-Rasheed Abubakar claimed that Yusuf had sent him and another man to Afghanistan earlier that year for explosives training.

Allegations that Boko Haram identifies with Al Qaeda are bolstered by its apparent ties to [Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb \(AQIM\)](#), the terrorist organization's affiliate in North Africa. Abubakar Shekau, Yusuf's deputy whom authorities believed had been killed in the 2009 crackdown but who emerged from hiding in 2010, has reportedly sworn allegiance to Abdelmalek Droukkel, AQIM's founder and leader.

AQIM's media branch published a statement by Shekau in October 2010, marking the first time it had published statements from another jihadist organization and signifying the growing ties between the two groups. In addition, the White House's National Strategy for Counterterrorism reported in June 2011 that

AQIM has trained Boko Haram members as part of its efforts spread its influence outside its traditional region of operations—an analysis shared by Algeria's government.

Boko Haram may have also established ties with [Al Shabaab](#), an Islamic militant group that seeks to create an Islamic state in Somalia. Mamman Nur, who was arrested in connection to the August 2011 United Nations building bombing in Abuja, reportedly has Al Qaeda connections and traveled to Somalia, where Al Shabaab is based, shortly before the attack, according to Nigerian officials. A blog dedicated to Boko Haram's fatwas and other messages posted a photo claiming to depict group members training in Somalia.



Alleged Boko Haram militants training in Somalia

Growing relationships between Boko Haram and established terrorist groups like AQIM and Al Shabaab, as well as speculation that Boko Haram is being used to bridge the two, raise the specter of a transcontinental network of jihadist groups spanning Africa.

In January 2012, a new terrorist organization called Ansaru broke away from Boko Haram over ideological divisions. Ansaru shares similar goals with Boko Haram. Its attacks have focused on both military and Western targets in Nigeria and are sometimes coordinated with Boko Haram. Ansaru was designated a foreign terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department together with Boko Haram in November, 2013.

Ideology

Driven by a deeply-rooted anti-Western ideology, Boko Haram rejects all aspects of Western civilization. The group's positions were informed for many years by the extreme views its late leader Mohammed Yusuf, who rejected evolution and scientific explanations for natural phenomena such as rainfall.

Today, Boko Haram's leadership insists that its name, which is widely translated from the local Hausa language to mean "Western education is forbidden/ sinful," in fact encompasses a rejection of Western civilization in its entirety, not just its teachings. Included among the positions it advocates are rejection of women's and gay rights, democracy, and the consumption of alcohol.

In its early years, Boko Haram was often referred to as the "Nigerian Taliban" due to its shared anti-Western ideology and its use of force as a means to imposing a stricter form of Shariah law than that which was being implemented in northern Nigeria through government reforms. As a demonstration of its esteem for the Taliban, Boko Haram at one time flew the Taliban's flag at its headquarters, which it had dubbed "Afghanistan."

Leaders of Boko Haram have also indicated publicly that they subscribe to Al Qaeda's ideology. In a statement issued in the wake of Yusuf's death, Sanni Umaru, who claimed leadership of the group, declared that "Boko Haram is just a version of the Al Qaeda which we align with and respect. We support Osama bin Laden, we shall carry out his command in Nigeria until the country is totally Islamised [sic] which is according to the wish of Allah."

Consistent with Boko Haram's anti-Western views and support for terror groups that target Western interests is a deep hatred for the U.S. and Israel. The group has indicated that it views both countries as

enemies and, accordingly, as potential targets. During a March 2010 media interview, for example, a man claiming to be a Boko Haram spokesman asserted that "the United States is the number one target for its oppression and aggression against Muslim nations... and its blind support to Israel."

Major Attacks

Since 2010, when Boko Haram reemerged following a government crackdown the previous summer, the group has intensified its operations, killing hundreds in its attacks and expanding its focus from local targets to those with national and international significance. Once reliant on drive-by shootings, the group has been scaling up its attacks in recent years, even employing suicide car bombs in 2011.

Though it continues to employ its preferred tactic of carrying out ambushes on security personnel, Boko Haram has demonstrated a growing capacity to coordinate large-scale actions. It orchestrated a massive prison break in September 2010, freeing 750 inmates, more than 100 of whom were Boko Haram members who had been detained. The attack on the prison, which killed at least two security personnel and two civilians, demonstrated the group's increasing tactical abilities and access to firepower.

A series of assassinations or attempted assassinations in 2010 and 2011 targeting security personnel, ceremonial leaders, political opponents and politicians reflects Boko Haram's focus on individuals and institutions it perceives as embodying or enabling sin. The group's use of violence to express its staunch opposition to the government, for example, includes its January 2011 assassination of Alhaji Modu Fannami Gubio, a political candidate, and its failed attempt to assassinate the governor of Borno state in November 2011.

At times, Boko Haram has also targeted its critics, both perceived and real. The group claimed responsibility for the October 2011 assassination of a journalist whom it accused of spying for Nigerian security services. Less than a year earlier, the group killed two clerics, Sheikh Ibrahim Abdullahi Bolori and Sheikh Bashir Mustapha, both of whom had voiced criticism against it.

A spate of bombings against political institutions, churches, venues serving alcohol and large public events further reflects Boko Haram's desire to force its issues through acts of violence. In May and June 2011, respectively, the group killed 14 in an attack following President Goodluck Jonathan's inauguration and 25 in an attack at a crowded beer garden. It has also carried out bombings at churches on Christmas Eve and a fish market on New Year's Eve, both in 2010, and in October 2011 threatened to attack Nigeria's Independence Anniversary celebration, although no attack took place. Boko Haram bombed four churches over Christmas 2011, killing 39 and drawing international condemnation.

On January 20, 2012, a series of coordinated bombings and gun attacks targeting police stations, the local intelligence headquarters, and immigration centers in the northern city of Kano, killed at least 200 people. A group spokesman said the attacks came after repeated warnings to local leaders to end "the persecution of our members." In the days following the attack, Nigerian security forces arrested more than 150 suspected group members. Authorities also announced that police had discovered and seized ten car bombs and more than 300 explosives hidden in cans and bottles throughout the city.

Boko Haram carried out its most infamous operation in April 2014, when it abducted between 250 and 300 Nigerian school girls, threatening to sell them as wives and reiterating its opposition to

female education and secular studies in general. The abduction came in the midst of a series of increasingly aggressive Boko Haram attacks focused primarily on Northeastern Nigeria. In May 2013, Nigeria announced a state of emergency in its northeastern states to address Boko Haram's growing threat there. Among the attacks that followed was the destruction of a Nigerian town and massacring of approximately 300 of its inhabitants three weeks after the abductions.

Boko Haram undertook its first suicide bombing on June 16, 2011, killing six at the Nigerian Police headquarters in Abuja and raising the group's international profile. Just two months later, a Boko Haram suicide bombing at the United Nations building in Abuja on August 26, 2011, left at least 25 dead and more than 110 wounded.

With its first attack on an international institution, Boko Haram staked a claim on the global stage, perhaps seeking to emulate [Al Qaeda in Iraq](#) and [Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb](#), both of which have targeted United Nations buildings in the past.



Mohammed Abul Barra, UN building suicide bomber

In a video message released in conjunction with the bombing, Abubakr Shekau, who had served as Yusuf's deputy and emerged from hiding in 2010 after being believed to have been killed in the 2009 crackdown, asserted that the United Nations is the "forum of all global evil" and that the bombing was meant to convey a message to Western powers, whom he described as "infidels." Another Boko Haram spokesman said that the group views the United Nations as a proxy for the United States and that it was targeted because of America's role in supporting the Nigerian government in its efforts to suppress the group. The video was partly in Arabic in addition to the local Hausa language, further demonstrating Boko Haram's growing international focus.



Boko Haram leader Abubakr Shekau

Though Boko Haram has not yet directly targeted U.S. interests, it has stated its intention to do so. In a March 2010 interview, a man claiming to be a Boko Haram spokesman identified the United States as "the number one target for its oppression and aggression against Muslim nations... and its blind support to Israel."

Indications that Boko Haram may target the U.S. have not gone unnoticed. The U.S. State Department has issued several warnings to American travelers and others with interests in Nigeria, with greater specificity since the United Nations bombing. General Carter Ham, the commanding officer of AFRICOM, the agency responsible for military operations and relations with 54 African countries, including Nigeria, has also indicated that he believes Boko Haram poses a threat to the U.S.