

Backgrounders

Boko Haram

Authors: Mohammed Aly Sergie, and Toni Johnson

Updated: October 7, 2014

Introduction

Boko Haram, a diffuse Islamist sect, has attacked Nigeria's police and military, politicians, schools, religious buildings, public institutions, and civilians with increasing regularity since 2009. More than [five thousand people have been killed in Boko Haram](#)-related violence, and three hundred thousand have been displaced. Some experts view the group as an armed revolt against government corruption, abusive security forces, and widening regional economic disparity. They argue that Abuja should do more to address the strife between the disaffected Muslim north and the Christian south.

The U.S. Department of State designated Boko Haram a [foreign terrorist organization](#) in 2013. Boko Haram's brutal campaign includes a suicide attack on a United Nations building in Abuja in 2011, repeated attacks that have killed dozens of students, the burning of villages, ties to regional terror groups, and the abduction of more than two hundred girls in April 2014. The Nigerian government hasn't been able to quell the insurgency, and in May 2014 the United States deployed a [small group of military advisers to help find the kidnapped girls](#).

The Road to Radicalization

Boko Haram was created in 2002 in Maiduguri, the capital of the northeastern state of Borno, by Islamist cleric Mohammed Yusuf. The group aims to establish a fully Islamic state in Nigeria, including the implementation of criminal [sharia courts](#) across the country. [Paul Lubeck](#), a University of California, Santa Cruz professor who researches Muslim societies in Africa, says Yusuf was [a trained Salafist](#) (an adherent of a school of thought often associated with jihad), and was strongly influenced by [Ibn Taymiyyah](#), a fourteenth-century legal scholar who preached Islamic fundamentalism and is an important figure for radical groups in the Middle East.

Boko Haram is so diffuse that fighters associated with it don't necessarily follow Salafi doctrine.

The sect calls itself *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad*, or "people committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and jihad." It is widely known as Boko Haram, which is colloquially translated as "[Western education is sin](#)" for the group's rejection of Western concepts such as evolution and the Big Bang theory.

Before 2009, the group did not aim to violently overthrow the government. Yusuf criticized northern Muslims for participating in what he saw as an illegitimate, non-Islamic state and preached a doctrine of withdrawal. But [violent clashes between Christians and Muslims](#) and harsh government treatment, including pervasive [police brutality](#), encouraged the group to radicalize. Boko Haram's hundreds of followers, also called *Yusuffiya*, consist largely of impoverished northern Islamic students

and clerics, as well as professionals, many of whom are unemployed.

In July 2009, Boko Haram members refused to follow a motorbike helmet law, leading to heavy-handed police tactics that set off an armed uprising in the northern state of Bauchi and spread into the states of Borno, Yobe, and Kano. The incident was suppressed by the army and left more than eight hundred dead. It also led to the televised execution of Yusuf, as well as the deaths of his father-in-law and other sect members, which human rights advocates consider to be extrajudicial killings. In the aftermath of the 2009 unrest, "an Islamist insurrection under a splintered leadership" emerged, says Lubeck. Boko Haram carried out a number of suicide bombings and assassinations from Maiduguri to Abuja and staged a prison break in Bauchi, freeing more than seven hundred inmates in 2010.

Attacks continued to escalate, and by 2013 some analysts began to see [greater influence by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb](#) in Boko Haram operations. Terrorist acts against civilians, like the murder of sixty-five students while they slept at the agricultural college in Yobe state in September 2013, chainsaw beheadings of truck drivers, and the [killing of hundreds on the roads of northern Nigeria](#) raised doubts about the central government's ability to control territory and amplified fears of protracted violence in the country. Violence returned to Abuja in April 2014 with the [bombing of a bus station that killed nearly one hundred people](#), followed by the abduction of more than two hundred schoolgirls in northeastern Nigeria.

Nigeria assembled a joint task force (JTF) of military and police units to battle Boko Haram and declared a state of emergency in three northeast states—Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa—in May 2013. The move pushed the militants out of cities, but [attacks in rural areas continued](#) [PDF]. Members of the JTF, augmented by vigilantes who were folded into its officially sanctioned civilian units, have been implicated in extrajudicial killings of militants and civilians, which may have galvanized support for the insurgents.

Boko Haram is so diffuse that fighters associated with it don't necessarily follow the Salafi doctrine. Many foot soldiers are drawn from [impoverished, religiously uneducated youth](#), according to [Jacob Zenn](#), an African affairs analyst at the Jamestown Foundation. Some fighters claim to have been trained in Iran and are part of a Shiite Muslim group, Zenn writes, while others were involved in other conflicts in Nigeria and the Sahel region and are now caught up in the latest violent extremist group.

Rising Against the State

The Nigerian government's assessment that Boko Haram was an al-Qaeda-linked terrorist movement left it with few options other than using force to deal with the group. Analysts say the focus on a link to international terrorist organizations ignores the context in which Boko Haram emerged and emphasizes security issues that may only radicalize the group further.

"The problem with understanding Boko Haram is definitional. What do we mean by Boko Haram?" says CFR Senior Fellow [John Campbell](#). Yusuf, Boko Haram's founder, didn't have complete control of the group, and after his execution his followers splintered into at least five factions. Boko Haram's putative leader today, Abubakar Shekau, appears to be focused on fighting the Nigerian government in Borno, Campbell says, while other units expanded their attacks in Nigeria and have conducted limited operations in neighboring Cameroon and Niger, including the [kidnapping of the wife of Cameroon's vice prime minister in July 2014](#), signaling an evolving regional vision for the group.

While Boko Haram can't be neatly characterized as an insurgency or terrorist organization, its origins appear rooted in grievances over poor governance and sharp inequality in Nigerian society.

Nigeria's military claimed to have [killed Shekau at least three times](#), yet videos of the leader threatening his enemies, congratulating his jihadi comrades in Iraq and Syria, and [declaring an Islamic state](#) continue to emerge. Nigerian officials and many experts are convinced that Shekau has become a [brand adopted by leaders of different factions of Boko Haram](#), and that the men in the videos are actually look-alikes.

While Boko Haram can't be neatly characterized as an insurgency or terrorist organization, its origins appear rooted in grievances over poor governance and sharp inequality in Nigerian society. "The emergence of Boko Haram signifies the maturation of [long-festering extremist impulses](#) that run deep in the social reality of northern Nigeria," writes Nigeria analyst Chris Ngwodo. "But the group itself is an effect and not a cause; it is a symptom of decades of failed government and elite delinquency finally ripening into social chaos."

Efforts to address dissatisfaction among Muslims in northern states, such as the reintroduction of sharia criminal courts, were not successful because the courts were not considered fair. Human Rights Watch said in a 2011 report that "[corruption is so pervasive](#) in Nigeria it has turned public service for many into a kind of criminal enterprise."

Police brutality and impunity added to the tensions. A 2009 [Amnesty International report](#) [PDF]

said Nigerian police were responsible for hundreds of extrajudicial killings and disappearances each year that largely "go uninvestigated and unpunished." The group said in a later report that [nearly one thousand people](#), mostly Islamist militants, died in military custody in the first half of 2013.

The North-South Divide

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with more than 174 million people and nearly 350 ethnic groups speaking 250 languages. The country is split between Muslims and Christians, with 10 percent of the people belonging to indigenous sects. Nigeria has long grappled with how to govern a diverse nation in which the struggle between Christians and Muslims over political power remains a significant factor in ongoing unrest. Sectarian violence, particularly in Kaduna, Plateau, Nasarawa, and Benue states, the central part of the country where religious groups as well as farmers and herders collide, boosted the death toll. More than twenty-five thousand people were killed in Nigeria since 1999, according to Human Rights Watch and the [CFR Nigeria Security Tracker](#).

Despite a per capita income of more than \$2,700 and vast wealth in natural resources, Nigeria has one of the world's poorest populations. An estimated 70 percent of the population lives on less than \$1.25 a day. Economic disparities between the north and the rest of the country are particularly stark. In the north, 72 percent of people live in poverty, compared to 27 percent in the south and 35 percent in the Niger Delta.

Another crucial factor in economic inequality is oil. In his book [Nigeria: Dancing on the Brink](#), Campbell writes that the "formal politics" of northern Nigeria are "overwhelmingly dominated by Muslim elites, who have, like their counterparts across the country, benefited from oil wealth at the expense of regional development." He says that the central purpose of the Nigerian state is to divide up the country's oil wealth among elites, making Nigeria's politics a "zero-sum game." In the oil-producing delta, for example, groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta ([MEND](#)), which has attacked oil infrastructure, are largely an outgrowth of the feeling that the south should get more revenue than it already does.

The dispute over the 2011 election results, which led to more than eight hundred deaths, also played a role in Boko Haram's escalating violence. Experts say many northern Nigerians view the presidency of Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian, as illegitimate, arguing that he ignored an informal power-rotation agreement that should have kept a Muslim as president this round. (Muslim president Umaru Musa Yar'dua died in 2010, two years into his four-year term.)

Terror Ties and Policy Prescriptions

Experts say Boko Haram's 2010 prison break, use of propaganda, and the bombing of police headquarters in June 2011 indicate an increasing level of sophistication and organization, which could indicate outside help. U.S. officials say the group has ties to northwest Africa-based [al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb](#) (AQIM), [Somalia's al-Shabab](#), and [al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula](#).

Security officials in Nigeria and around the world are concerned that the group has splintered into two factions: one that is focused on local grievances and another that is seeking regional expansion. Alleged links to al-Qaeda groups [have worried Washington](#), although some experts question the depth of regional terror ties and note that it's unclear which attacks are actually the work of Boko Haram. (Some acts attributed to Boko Haram may be the work of criminals looking to capitalize on the mayhem.) Analysts say that focusing exclusively on terrorism could distract from policy options needed to address the underlying issues driving the insurgency.

Before the UN bombing in August 2011, the Nigerian government started to look at solutions similar to

its quelling of unrest in the Niger Delta, including negotiation and amnesty. But experts say such a solution is unlikely for a group like Boko Haram, because its grievances are more diverse and less material than others. The lack of clear leadership of Boko Haram also hindered peace talks.

President Jonathan appears intent on quelling the group by force through a "state of emergency." Many experts argue that Boko Haram cannot be defeated on the battlefield; it appears to be gaining strength after the crackdown, acquiring better weapons, and fielding more fighters than ever. "Boko Haram [is] better armed and better motivated than our own troops," Borno state governor Kashim Shettima said in February 2014. "Given the present state of affairs, [**it is absolutely impossible for us to defeat Boko Haram.**](#)"

The U.S. designation of Boko Haram and Ansaru as foreign terrorist organizations will allow Washington to investigate and prosecute suspects, but there is little appetite for direct intervention. The [**State Department urged**](#) Nigeria to counter these extremist groups "through a combination of law enforcement, political, and development efforts, as well as military engagement." Analysts say the Nigerian government must do more to win hearts and minds by providing better education and health-care services in the North and including prominent, locally respected northern Muslims in the cabinet.

Additional Resources:

The [**Congressional Research Service**](#) explains the various conflicts in Nigeria and U.S. policy in the country, and this [**CRS report answers some frequently asked questions about Boko Haram.**](#)

International Crisis Groups explains the [**Boko Haram insurgency in this April 2014 report.**](#)

This [**2012 State Department report**](#) examines human rights issues in Nigeria, and [**Human Rights Watch**](#) explores Boko Haram attacks and security force abuses in Nigeria.

Jacob Zenn, an analyst on African affairs at the Jamestown Foundation, examines the leadership of Boko Haram and its connections to al-Qaeda and other militant groups in West Point's [**CTC Sentinel.**](#)

More on this topic from CFR

[**To Battle Nigeria's Boko Haram, Put Down Your Guns**](#)

Author:

[**John Campbell**](#)

, Ralph Bunche Senior Fellow for Africa Policy Studies

[**Abdulmutallab is More Than Just Al-Qaeda**](#)

Author:

[**John Campbell**](#)

, Ralph Bunche Senior Fellow for Africa Policy Studies

View more from [**Nigeria, Radicalization and Extremism**](#)

[**Back to backgrounders home**](#)