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# **Nigeria's Boko Haram: Frequently Asked Questions**

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## 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 narratives of religious exclusivism, victimization, and vengeance for state abuses to elicit sympathizers and recruits. The group's April 2014 abduction of almost 300 schoolgirls drew particular international attention, including from the Obama Administration and Members of Congress. Boko Haram's high death toll and its pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIL or ISIS) in March 2015 have further raised the concern of U.S. policymakers. The group has sought to rebrand itself as the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), though it remains more popularly known by its original nickname. The State Department has named several individuals linked to Boko Haram, including its leader, Abubakar Shekau, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists; the group was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the State Department in November 2013.

More than 15,000 people are estimated to have been killed by Boko Haram, including more than 6,500 in 2015 alone, making it one of world's deadliest terrorist groups. By U.N. estimates, roughly 2.4 million people have been displaced by Boko Haram-related violence in the Lake Chad Basin region, where approximately 9.2 million are in need of humanitarian aid. Boko Haram has focused on a wide range of targets, but civilians in Nigeria's impoverished, predominately Muslim northeast have borne the brunt of the violence. Since 2014, Boko Haram has also staged attacks in neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger with increasing frequency.

Nigeria has struggled to respond to the growing threat posed by Boko Haram. Former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan was widely criticized for his administration's response to the crisis, which some observers described as ineffective, heavy-handed, and marred by high-level corruption in the security sector. Some observers suggest Nigeria's new head of state, Muhammadu Buhari, has taken a more proactive approach than his predecessor toward countering the group, including by directing new military leadership to conduct more strategically-focused operations and undertaking measures to address security sector corruption. Nonetheless, concerns over the Nigerian response—in particular, over reported human rights abuses by security forces—continue to constrain some donor support and collaboration.

In view of the growing impact Boko Haram has had on neighboring Cameroon, Niger, and Chad, U.S. officials have increasingly sought to support programs to improve counterterrorism coordination between Nigeria and its neighbors, and to improve each country's capacity to contain the group. U.S. security assistance to the Lake Chad Basin countries has increased significantly in recent years—all four countries benefit from a \$40 million Global Security Contingency Fund (GSCF) program that began in FY2014, and the region is a focal area for the Administration's new Counterterrorism Partnership Fund (CTPF). In total, Boko Haram-related counterterrorism assistance to the region has totaled more than \$400 million to date, though support for Nigeria's military has been constrained by human rights and policy concerns. In October 2015, the Obama Administration announced the deployment of up to 300 U.S. troops, along with surveillance drones, to Cameroon to assist in regional counter-Boko Haram effort.

Boko Haram has attracted increasing attention from Members of Congress. Relevant legislation includes S.Res. 433 and H.Res. 573 (“Condemning the abduction of female students by armed militants from the terrorist group known as Boko Haram”) in the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress; and H.Res. 46 (“Condemning the recent terrorist attacks in Nigeria that resulted in the deaths of over 2,000 innocent persons”); H.R. 2027 (“Boko Haram Disarmament and Northeast Nigeria Recovery Act of 2015”); and S. 1632 (“To require a regional strategy to address the threat posed by Boko Haram”) in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress.

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## Overview

Boko Haram, a violent Islamist insurgent group originally based in northeast Nigeria, continues to wage a deadly campaign in Nigeria and neighboring countries in the Lake Chad Basin region. A State Department-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization since November 2013, the group drew widespread international attention for its April 2014 abduction of almost 300 schoolgirls as well as its subsequent pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIL or ISIS) in March 2015. More than 15,000 people are estimated to have been killed in Boko Haram violence—including more than 6,500 in 2015 alone—and the conflict has caused a humanitarian emergency around Lake Chad, displacing more than 2.4 million people and cutting off humanitarian access to thousands.

Operations by regional forces, most notably those from Chad and Nigeria, reversed the territorial advances that Boko Haram made from mid-2014 into early 2015, when it took nominal control of large swathes of territory in northeastern Nigeria under a self-described Islamic caliphate. The group has since reverted to asymmetric attacks, largely against soft targets in northeastern Nigeria and northern Cameroon. Despite its loss of territory, Boko Haram maintains the ability to move and conduct attacks in an area that stretches from southern Niger's Diffa region south into northern Cameroon. The group has also demonstrated its ability to attack the Chadian capital, N'djamena, killing scores in multiple bombing incidents. Notably, there has been a significant increase over the past year in the use of suicide bombers, most of them women and children.

Many observers assess that Nigeria's new head of state, Muhammadu Buhari, has taken a more proactive approach toward countering Boko Haram than his predecessor, President Goodluck Jonathan, who was widely criticized for what has been described as a mismanaged and heavy-handed response to Boko Haram. Nonetheless, the extent to which Nigerian security forces "control" territory reclaimed from the group remains subject to debate, and Nigeria and Cameroon have drawn criticism from human rights groups for alleged abuses against civilians by security forces during counterinsurgency operations.

In view of the growing impact Boko Haram has had on neighboring Cameroon, Niger, and Chad, U.S. officials have increasingly sought to support programs to improve regional counterterrorism capabilities and coordination. This support is channeled through various regional programs and funding mechanisms, including the Global Security Contingency Fund (GSCF) and the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund (CTPF), as well as through bilateral security assistance. In total, Boko Haram-related counterterrorism assistance has totaled more than \$400 million to date. The U.S. military has deployed surveillance assets and related personnel to the region to support regional efforts, and advisory support by U.S. military personnel is now reportedly under consideration for Nigeria. Additionally, the United States supports programs to counter violent extremism in the region, including more than \$30 million in activities managed by the USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI). The United States also provides substantial humanitarian aid for the Lake Chad Basin area, totaling almost \$200 million in FY2015 and FY2016 to date.

Congress and Obama Administration officials continue to weigh additional options for strengthening 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.

Figure I. Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region



**Source:** Congressional Research Service

**Note:** The shaded area illustrates Boko Haram's general area of operations in 2015-2016. It does not indicate territorial control by the group. Boko Haram periodically conducts attacks beyond this area.

## 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> In 2015, after pledging allegiance to the self-proclaimed Islamic State, the group sought to rebrand itself as the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP).

<sup>1</sup> For more on the group's ideology and stated goals, see, e.g., Alex Thurston, *The disease is unbelief: Boko Haram's religious and political worldview*, Brookings Analysis Paper (22), January 2016 and the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), *Background Report: Boko Haram*, May 2014. See also Virginia Comolli, *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist Insurgency* (London: Hurst 2015). 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.



While the sect's original leadership did not initially call for violence, its followers engaged in periodic skirmishes with Nigerian police during its formative years. At that time the group's activities were limited in scope and contained within several highly impoverished states in Nigeria's predominately Muslim 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. It is widely rumored that certain northern Nigerian politicians may have provided support and/or funding to the group in its early years, reportedly using them to exert influence or threaten rivals. The group built ties with transnational extremist groups in the region, notably Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which reportedly provided training and access to increasingly sophisticated weaponry. Boko Haram attacks since 2011 have featured improvised explosive devices (IEDs), car bombs, and suicide attacks, but fighters also continue to inflict a heavy toll using small arms and arson. The use of women and children as suicide bombers has become an increasing tactic since 2014, as is discussed below.

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 northeast Nigeria and the border areas of southeast Niger and northern Cameroon. Experts speculate that some of 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> As such, observers contend that despite the group's nickname and expressed rejection of Western culture, Boko Haram's ideology encompasses a broader worldview that combines an exclusivist interpretation of Islam—which rejects not only Western influence but also democracy, constitutionalism, and more moderate forms of Islam—with “politics of victimhood” that resonate in Nigeria's underdeveloped northern states.<sup>5</sup> Some of its fighters have reportedly been drawn into the group by financial incentive or under threat.<sup>6</sup>

U.S. officials have estimated in press reports that Boko Haram may have between 4,000 and 6,000 “hardcore” fighters, while other sources contend its force could be larger.<sup>7</sup> By some

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

<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 (more than 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> Alex Thurston, “*The disease is unbelief*”: *Boko Haram's religious and political worldview*, Brookings Analysis Paper (22), January 2016.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Andrew Walker, “*Eat the Heart of the Infidel*”: *The Harrowing of Nigeria and the Rise of Boko Haram* (London: Hurst, 2016) and Mercy Corps, “*Motivations and Empty Promises*”: *Voices of Former Boko Haram Combatants and Nigerian Youth*, February 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Nigeria's Boko Haram has up to 6,000 hardcore militants: U.S. officials,” Reuters, February 6, 2015. See also Amnesty International, “*Our job is to shoot, slaughter and kill*”: *Boko Haram's reign of terror*, April 2015.

accounts, the group may have lost some 30 percent of its fighting force during the 2015 regional offensive to reclaim territory from the insurgents.<sup>8</sup> Boko Haram is reportedly led by a shura council, under the direction of Abubakar Shekau, who, like Yusuf, is an ethnic Kanuri (the predominant ethnic group in Borno state, where Boko Haram originated). What role Islamic State representatives may now play in the leadership structure is unclear. Some observers speculate that Shekau has been sidelined by IS central leadership and possibly replaced by a Libyan-based IS official from outside the region, although there has yet to be a noticeable shift in the group's tactics or targeting to suggest a leadership change.<sup>9</sup>

The emergence of a splinter faction, Ansaru, in early 2012 contributed to speculation about divisions within the group (see below). Ansaru's leaders, some of whom reportedly had direct links to AQIM and Al Qaeda, allegedly differed with Shekau in their interpretation of Islamic law and criticized his leadership and approach.<sup>10</sup> Shekau led a purge against the faction in 2013 and some of its members reportedly reintegrated into Boko Haram; other Ansaru members may continue to work with other extremist groups in the Sahel region.

Boko Haram has demonstrated significant operational flexibility in its nearly seven year insurgency. In July 2014, the group shifted from a tactical focus on asymmetric attacks (unconventional guerilla-style or terrorist strikes) against government and civilian targets, toward a conventional offensive to seize and hold territory. Estimates on the amount of territory held by Boko Haram vary, but press reports suggest that by early 2015 the Nigerian government may have lost between 40%-70% of Borno state and some territory in neighboring Yobe and Adamawa states, including border areas near Cameroon. Operations by regional forces, most notably those from Chad and Nigeria, reversed these territorial advances, retaking much of Boko Haram's self-described Islamic caliphate. The group has since reverted to asymmetric attacks, largely against soft targets in northeastern Nigeria and northern Cameroon, and maintains the ability to move and conduct attacks in an area that stretches from southern Niger's Diffa region south into northern Cameroon. The group has also demonstrated its ability to attack the Chadian capital, N'djamena, killing scores in multiple bombing incidents. Notably, there has been a significant increase over the past year in the use of suicide bombers, most of them women and children (see below).

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

The area affected by Boko Haram is home to an estimated 30 million people. The violence has caused a humanitarian emergency around Lake Chad, displacing more than 2.4 million people and cutting off humanitarian access to thousands. The U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports that 1.3 million of the displaced are children.<sup>11</sup> By U.N. estimates, more than 9.2 million people in the region are in need of humanitarian assistance and almost three million are severely food insecure.<sup>12</sup> Most of the displaced have sought shelter with host communities and do not live in

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<sup>8</sup> Jacob Zenn, "Wilayat West Africa Reboots for the Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel*, Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, August 21, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Caleb Weiss, "Islamic State West Africa reaffirms loyalty to al Baghdadi," *Long War Journal*, April 2, 2016; Omar Mahmood, "The evolution of Boko Haram's media operations," *Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor*, April 5, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Jacob Zenn, "Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria," *CTC Sentinel*, February 24, 2014 and International Crisis Group, *Curbing the Violence (II): The Boko Haram Insurgency*, April 3, 2014. .

<sup>11</sup> UNICEF, *Beyond Chibok*, April 12, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> USAID, *Lake Chad Basin – Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #6, Fiscal Year (FY) 2016*, March 31, 2016 and UN OCHA, *Lake Chad Basin: Crisis Overview*, March 21, 2016. According to OCHA, the displacement figures include (continued...)

camps. More than one million displaced Nigerians have fled to the Borno state capital of Maiduguri, which continues to be subject to bombings, despite the expanded presence of the Nigerian army. According to UNHCR, “sweeping operations carried out by the Nigerian military have an equally disruptive effect on every-day life.”<sup>13</sup> Boko Haram attacks have damaged health centers, markets, roads, homes, and schools, deterring the return of the displaced. According to UNICEF, the violence has forced more than 1,800 schools in northeast Nigeria and Cameroon to close and disrupted the education of more than a million children. Human Rights Watch reports that Boko Haram has destroyed more than 910 schools and killed more than 600 teachers.<sup>14</sup>

Casualty counts, which are based on press reports, suggest that more than 15,000 people have been killed by the group since 2009—including more than 6,500 in 2015 alone.<sup>15</sup> The toll in 2015, if relatively accurate, would represent a slight decline from 2014, when Nigeria witnessed the largest increase in terrorist deaths ever recorded by a country (of over 300 percent, to more than 7,500 fatalities), with Boko Haram reportedly overtaking the Islamic State as the world’s deadliest terrorist group.<sup>16</sup> According to the Council on Foreign Relations’ *Nigeria Security Tracker* data set, the number of deaths attributed to Boko Haram in recent months is down from the large numbers of early/mid-2015 to a level not seen since early 2013, though still averaging more than 100 per month.

Boko Haram’s attacks have increased substantially in frequency, reach, and lethality since 2010, occurring almost daily in parts of northeast Nigeria, and with increasing frequency in Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. 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 recent attacks in Nigeria include an assault on a northeastern village, Gamboro, that may have killed more than 300 people in May 2014, and a January 2015 massacre in Baga, near Lake Chad, that may have killed as many as 2,000 people. Prominent attacks outside of Nigeria include a February 2015 assault on the northern Cameroonian town of Fotokol, which killed over 90 civilians and wounded more than 500 others, and coordinated suicide attacks in western Chad that killed a total of 47 people in October 2015.

Beyond casualties, Boko Haram attacks and associated fighting between militants and security forces have exacted a heavy toll on the Lake Chad Basin region. Nigeria’s neighbors have struggled to contend with an escalating humanitarian and refugee crisis related to the insurgency. The situation is particularly dire in Niger, where an influx of Nigerian refugees has exacerbated an already-severe humanitarian situation in the country’s southeastern Diffa region. 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. Cameroon has drawn criticism from advocacy groups and aid agencies who suggest that its military has forcibly

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(...continued)

more than 1.8 million IDPs in Nigeria, more than 48,000 in Chad, almost 60,000 in Niger, and almost 140,000 in Cameroon. Niger hosts the largest number of Nigerian refugees (almost 98,000), while Cameroon hosts 65,000 and Chad hosts 6,000.

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR, “Nigeria Situation: UNHCR Regional Update No. 19,” December 17, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria: Northeast Children Robbed of Education*, April 11, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> For fatality data, see, e.g., the Council on Foreign Relations’ *Nigeria Security Tracker* at <http://www.cfr.org>.

<sup>16</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2015*, November 2015.



returned Nigerian refugees to Nigeria. The conflict has also disrupted farming, limited the transit of basic goods to local markets, and deterred investment in the region.

## **What is Boko Haram's relationship with the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, or other international jihadist groups, and does the group pose a threat to the United States or U.S. interests?**

In August 2011, a Boko Haram suicide bomber attacked a U.N. building in the capital, Abuja, killing more than 20 people and injuring over 80. It was the group's first lethal attack on a foreign target. 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. The group has since conducted several smaller attacks against foreign targets, including kidnappings, but nothing on the scale of the U.N. attack. The increasing lethality and sophistication of Boko Haram's attacks on local targets has nevertheless raised its profile among U.S. national security officials, as have suspected and expressed ties between Boko Haram and other violent extremist groups, particularly the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS or ISIL).<sup>17</sup>

On March 7, 2015, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau released a statement pledging loyalty to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, leader of the Syria/Iraq-based IS. 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 is geographically removed from the Islamic State's core territory, and the extent to which affiliation has facilitated 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. Some reports suggest that Boko Haram militants have been sighted in with IS factions in Libya.<sup>18</sup> Analysts question what impact Shekau's pledge has had on relations with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (see below) 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. Boko Haram's videos have, to date, been the most tangible public evidence of collaboration with the Islamic State—experts suggest that their improved quality in 2015 showed signs of IS expertise.<sup>19</sup> Newer videos appear aimed at a more international audience and are more often delivered through social media platforms and IS media outlets.

Prior to its pledge to IS, Boko Haram was allegedly cooperating with another Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a regional criminal and terrorist

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<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., "Timbuktu Training Site Shows Terrorists' Reach," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 1, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Jacob Zenn, "Wilayat West Africa Reboots for the Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel*, Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, August 21, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Omar Mahmood, "JTIC Brief: The evolution of Boko Haram's media operations," *IHS Jane's Intelligence Review*, April 4, 2016; Rukmini Callimachi, "In newly sophisticated Boko Haram videos, hints of Islamic State ties," *New York Times*, February 20, 2015; Jacob Zenn, "Wilayat West Africa reboots for the caliphate," *CTC Sentinel*, August 21, 2015.

network operating in the Sahel and North Africa.<sup>20</sup> U.S. military officials had identified Boko Haram as a “threat to Western interests” in the region, 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 attacks, to include not just in Africa, but Europe and aspirationally to the United States.”<sup>21</sup> The commander of U.S. Special Operations Command reiterated this in 2014, stating “we see Boko Haram beginning to conflate with AQIM in North Africa.”<sup>22</sup> At that time, the commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) nevertheless described the group’s focus as primarily “a local effort,” in comparison to the regional operations of the groups in North Africa like AQIM and the transnational focus of Al Shabaab in Somalia.<sup>23</sup>

There has been speculation for years that Boko Haram may have acquired weapons from former Libyan stockpiles through AQIM ties.<sup>24</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.) Nigerian officials announced the capture of Barnawi in early April 2016. His arrest appears to be one of the most high-profile detentions of a Boko Haram figure since Mohammed Yusuf.

In November 2013, the State Department designated Boko Haram, along with its splinter faction, Ansaru,<sup>25</sup> as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Boko Haram currently appears to pose a threat primarily to civilian and state targets in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin area, and to 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. In March 2016, AFRICOM Commander David Rodriguez stated, “we are watching carefully for signs that the threat posed by Boko Haram to U.S. persons is growing as a result of the group’s alignment with ISIL.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For more on AQIM, see CRS In Focus IF10172, *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Al Murabitoun*, by Alexis Arieff and Tomas F. Husted.

<sup>21</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>22</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>23</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>24</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>25</sup> 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 (aka Mohammed) Nur, purported to be one of Ansaru’s ideological leaders and a rival of Shekau, has been rumored to have links to Al Shabaab in Somalia, as well as to AQIM, AQAP, and other Al Qaeda affiliates. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, Nur, who is Cameroonian, helped to organize the 2011 U.N. bombing in Abuja. It is unclear what his current relationship is with Shekau and Boko Haram, although in December 2015 he was designated pursuant to Executive Order 13224 as providing support to Boko Haram.

<sup>26</sup> Testimony of General David Rodriguez, Senate Armed Services Committee, *U.S. Central Command, U.S. Africa Command, and U.S. Special Operations Command*, March 8, 2016.

More broadly, the recruitment of Nigerians by transnational terrorist groups other than Boko Haram continues to be of concern to U.S. officials. In 2015, a Nigerian national, Lawal Olaniyi Babafemi, was sentenced to 22 years in a U.S. prison for providing material support to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Babafemi, who had been extradited from Nigeria, had pled guilty to participating in AQAP media and recruitment campaigns aimed at attracting English-speaking Nigerian recruits. Another Nigerian AQAP recruit, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, pled guilty in 2011 to the attempted bombing of a Detroit-bound airliner on Christmas 2009; he faces a life sentence. There is no evidence linking Abdulmutallab to Boko Haram.

## **What is known about the kidnapping and current whereabouts of the Nigerian schoolgirls from Chibok?**

On April 14-15, 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped more than 270 schoolgirls from the northeast town of Chibok. Boko Haram fighters, reportedly numbering more than 200, overpowered security forces based in the town. 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, was warned of the attack hours before it happened, but did not deploy forces.<sup>27</sup> According to press reports, just over 50 of the girls were able to escape during or shortly after the incident.<sup>28</sup> A video released by Boko Haram weeks later showed a group of about 130 girls, many of whom were subsequently identified as abductees, in conservative Muslim dress in an unidentified rural location. 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>29</sup> Many analysts speculate that the girls were separated into smaller groups after their abduction.

The United States offered support to Nigerian efforts to find and rescue the young women abducted from Chibok. The Obama Administration deployed a multi-disciplinary, interagency team to Abuja to provide support to Nigerian efforts in early May 2014, and later that month, President Obama notified Congress 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>30</sup> The personnel supported the operation of unmanned surveillance aircraft operating over northern Nigeria and the surrounding area. The mission reportedly ended in late 2014; in March 2015, a Pentagon spokesman stated that “we don’t have any troops in Chad right now,” remarking that the number of surveillance missions requested by the Nigerian government “had dropped to the point that we were able to cover it through other means.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Amnesty International, “Nigerian Authorities Failed to Act on Warnings About Boko Haram Raid on School,” Press Release, May 9, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> For details of the attack, see, e.g., Michelle Faul, “Anatomy of a Kidnapping,” *Associated Press* (AP), May 7, 2014.

<sup>29</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>30</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 indicated that the personnel would not be directly involved in rescue attempts—the notification was made because they were armed to protect themselves and the aircraft.

<sup>31</sup> Armin Rosen, “Almost a year after #BringBackOurGirls, they’re still missing but the US pulled its 80 troops looking for Boko Haram,” *Business Insider*, March 11, 2015.

In January 2016, President Buhari approved a new investigation into the kidnapping and the government's response. While the military has freed hundreds of Boko Haram captives in the past year, the Chibok families report that none of their daughters have been returned, and the Buhari Administration has acknowledged that it does not know whether the girls are still alive. In late March 2016, a young woman who was arrested in northern Cameroon while carrying explosives claimed to be one of the abducted girls from Chibok. Her claim has yet to be verified.

## **Are attacks against women and children a common tactic?**

Since 2012, Boko Haram has increasingly claimed responsibility for setting fire to schools and attacking universities in northern Nigeria, and its violence has forced more than one million children out of school.<sup>32</sup> Initial attacks appeared to focus primarily on property 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>33</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. In response to the Chibok attack and the broader impact of Boko Haram violence on school attendance, the Nigerian government and international aid agencies, under the leadership of U.N. Special Envoy for Global Education Gordon Brown and the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF), launched a Safe Schools Initiative in late May 2014, with more than \$23 million in initial donor pledges.<sup>34</sup> According to UNICEF, as of April 2016, over 1,800 schools in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger are closed due to the conflict.

The Chibok kidnapping was not the first time Boko Haram had 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 other abductions have reportedly been forced to convert to Islam and/or have been used as sex slaves by fighters.<sup>35</sup> Amnesty International estimated in April 2015 that more than 2,000 women and girls had been abducted since early 2014.<sup>36</sup> Human Rights Watch has sought to highlight the abduction of as many as 300 children in November 2014 from a primary school in Damasak, also in Borno state, which has received little press attention in comparison to the Chibok incident.<sup>37</sup> They also remain missing.

Troublingly, there has been a significant increase over the past two years in the use of suicide bombers, most of them women and children.<sup>38</sup> According to analysis from the Chicago Project on

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<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, *Education Under Attack 2014*, available at <http://www.protectingeducation.org>; Amnesty International, "Keep Away from Schools or We'll Kill You," *Right to Education Under Attack in Nigeria*, October 4, 2013; UNICEF, "Nigeria conflict forces more than 1 million children from school," Press release, December 22, 2015; Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria: Northeast Children Robbed of Education*, April 11, 2016; and UNICEF, *Beyond Chibok*, April 12, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> "Boko Haram Leader 'Supports' Nigeria School Massacre," *AFP*, July 14, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> For analysis of the impact of the initiative, see, e.g., Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria: Northeast Children Robbed of Education*, April 11, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Joe Brock, "Insight: Boko Haram, Taking to Hills, Seize Slaves 'Brides'" *Reuters*, November 17, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Amnesty International, *'Our job is to shoot, slaughter and kill': Boko Haram's reign of terror*, April 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria: Northeast Children Robbed of Education*, April 11, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Elizabeth Pearson, "Boko Haram and Nigeria's Female Suicide Bombers," *Newsbrief* (RUSI), September (continued...)

Security and Terrorism, 41.2% of all Boko Haram-related incidents in 2014 were reportedly carried out by female suicide bombers, many of whom were children under the age of 18.<sup>39</sup> UNICEF estimated in April 2016 that nearly 1 in every 5 of its suicide bombers since January 2014 has been a child; three-quarters of those children have been girls.<sup>40</sup> It reported that at least a further 18% of the bombers have been women (45% were men and another 18% unidentified). Experts contend that explanations for this trend may be multiple: while some women and girls may be coerced into participating in suicide attacks, others may choose to do so willingly as adherents to Boko Haram's message. Others have reportedly been sacrificed by their families to Boko Haram, either out of support for the group or in exchange for money or other goods.<sup>41</sup>

## How is the Nigerian Government responding?

Nigeria's former President Goodluck Jonathan was widely criticized during his last year in office for his administration's response to the Boko Haram crisis, which some observers described as ineffective, insufficient, and marred by high-level corruption within the security sector. The presidential campaign of Nigeria's new head of state, Muhammadu Buhari, who defeated Jonathan in the country's April 2015 elections, centered on pledges to improve the security situation and to tackle corruption in the country. Among his earliest acts in office was to replace the heads of the army, navy, and air force. The new army chief and the commanding officer in charge of operations against Boko Haram both hail from northern Nigeria, and by many accounts they have taken a more proactive approach than their predecessors toward countering the group. For example, they moved the army's operational headquarters from Abuja to Maiduguri and have deployed more long-range patrols in the region. Experts suggest that the army is now conducting more strategically-focused operations, such as those that target Boko Haram's logistics routes. According to reports, morale within the army has improved under the new leadership.<sup>42</sup>

The government has arrested several former senior officials on corruption charges, including former President Jonathan's National Security Advisor, who has been charged with fraud over a \$2 billion arms deal for equipment that was reportedly never delivered. Jonathan's former chief of defense has been accused of stealing \$20 million from the air force, and, as of late March 2016, some 300 individuals, including army officers, and companies were under investigation for the embezzlement between 2011 and 2015 of an estimated \$240 million in fraudulent or overpaid defense contracts.

Like his predecessor, President Buhari set an ambitious agenda in his public rhetoric for defeating Boko Haram, pledging to rout the group by the end of 2015 and then declaring the group "technically defeated" in late December (in a speech to the armed forces weeks later he suggested less assertively that the group had been "degraded").<sup>43</sup> In comments to the press, Buhari suggested that Boko Haram was no longer capable of carrying out conventional attacks against security forces or population centers, and had instead reverted to bombings. Many analysts

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(...continued)

25, 2015; Patricia Taft and Kendall Lawrence, *Confronting the Unthinkable: Suicide Bombers in Nigeria*, The Fund for Peace, February 29, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism, cited in Taft and Lawrence, *Confronting the Unthinkable*, op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> UNICEF, *Beyond Chibok*, April 12, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Taft and Lawrence, *Confronting the Unthinkable*, op. cit.

<sup>42</sup> See, Mirren Gidda, "Time running out on Nigeria's promise to box in Boko Haram," *Newsweek*, November 10, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> "Buhari: Nigeria has 'technically' defeated Boko Haram," VOA News, December 24, 2015; "Buhari urges unity among Nigerians, hails armed forces," *Premium Times*, January 10, 2016.



challenge the government's assessment that Boko Haram's asymmetric attacks are a sign of a diminishing threat, contending that soft targets in the region remain extremely vulnerable and suicide bombings still allow the group to have an immense psychological impact.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the extent to which the military "controls" territory reclaimed from Boko Haram also remains subject to debate.

Creating conditions for the safe return of the more than two million people displaced by Boko Haram's violence will likely be among the Buhari Administration's greatest challenges. Prolonged insecurity, combined with the impact of low oil prices on the Nigerian and Chadian governments' revenues, has had a devastating impact on local economies in the Lake Chad Basin area. In early January 2016, President Buhari appointed a new committee, led by a retired general, to oversee its ambitious reconstruction and development program for the northeast; Nigerian billionaire and philanthropist Aliko Dangote is among its members.

According to the State Department's most recent terrorism report (issued in early 2015, prior to Buhari taking office), among the various dynamics limiting the Nigerian government's response to Boko Haram were a lack of coordination and cooperation between 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. Reports of serious abuses by military forces in some parts of the country, including but not limited to the northeast, continue to constrain greater donor support and collaboration. The army's raids against a Shia Muslim community in the northern city of Zaria in December 2015, during which more than 300 people may have been killed, may, to some extent, dampen donor interest in deepening security cooperation (see below).<sup>45</sup>

Outside of the official government response, 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, some of these groups have 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 (C-JTF), have had some positive impacts on security in the Borno state capital of Maiduguri, but have been occasionally targeted in retaliatory attacks by Boko Haram. Local NGOs have accused the C-JTF of recruiting children and committing extrajudicial killings of suspected Boko Haram members, further aggravating the human rights situation.<sup>46</sup> The government still appears to sometimes rely on such forces, and has yet to transfer the responsibilities of these groups to formal institutions, such as the police or the army, or formally recruit their members into the ranks of those institutions.

## **How are other governments in the region responding?**

Boko Haram has expanded its operations into neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger—since early 2014, these countries have increasingly been subject to attacks by the group. Chad suffered its first attacks in February 2015, shortly after it commenced military operations against the group inside Nigerian territory. The Chadian government has declared its Lake Region under a state of emergency. Chad tightened its terrorism laws in 2015, conducting its first executions of Boko Haram suspects in August. Chad was the first in the Lake Chad region to ban Muslim women

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., "Nigeria likely to miss Boko Haram deadline: analysts, Agence France-Presse, December 7, 2015; Sarah Chayes, "The Right Way to Fight Boko Haram—and How the U.S. Should Help," *Defense One*, January 13, 2016; and Hillary Matfess, Peter M. Lewis, and Nathaniel D.F. Allen, Unbroken Boko Haram, *Foreign Affairs*, March 21, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., "Activists: Nigeria Military Killed Hundreds of Shiites," *New York Times*, December 15, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., State Department, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014: Nigeria*.

from wearing burqas or full veils, in June 2015 after a series of attacks by female suicide bombers: Niger and Cameroon subsequently banned veils in Boko Haram-affected regions (Nigeria has yet to implement a ban). Chad hosts the headquarters of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), authorized by the African Union with over 8,700 troops. Its operational status is subject to debate, despite officially commencing operations in October 2015. By many accounts the national forces of its troop contributors continue to operate largely independently under their own respective national commands rather than under the direction of the Nigerian general in charge of the Task Force.

Among Nigeria's neighbors, Cameroon has been subject to the largest number of suicide bombings and guerilla-style attacks, totaling more than 80 in 2015, and resulting in at least 1,200 deaths, by U.N. estimates.<sup>47</sup> Cameroon's military response to Boko Haram has drawn some criticism from human rights groups—among other incidents, in March 2015, Cameroonian forces were accused of torturing and summarily executing Boko Haram suspects; in November, the army forcibly returned more than 17,000 Nigerian refugees to Nigeria; and in December, Nigerian villagers accused Cameroonian army units of killing more than 150 residents in one incident and more than 70 in another attack weeks later.<sup>48</sup>

As in Nigeria, some local communities in Cameroon have formed “self-defense groups” to patrol Boko Haram-affected areas. The Cameroonian government has repeatedly praised such groups, but has urged them to focus on monitoring their villages and to leave more dangerous activities, such as landmine removal, to the security services.<sup>49</sup>

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

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 its humanitarian impact and by an assessment of the extent to which it poses a direct threat to the United States and U.S. interests, and it is also influenced by U.S.-Nigeria relations. The State Department has designated five individuals linked to Boko Haram as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs), including Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, and in 2013 it issued a \$7 million reward for information on the location of Shekau through its Rewards for Justice program.<sup>50</sup> In November 2013, the State Department designated Boko Haram and a splinter faction, Ansaru, as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs). International attention to Boko Haram's abduction of the young women in Chibok elevated the group's status among U.S. policymakers, and the U.S. government has provided advisors, intelligence, training, equipment, and logistical assistance to support regional efforts to counter the group. AFRICOM's theater campaign plan for 2016-2020 includes containing Boko Haram among its five planned “lines of effort” over the next five years.<sup>51</sup>

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

<sup>47</sup> USAID, *Lake Chad Basin – Complex Emergency Fact Sheet #3, Fiscal Year (FY) 2016*, December 22, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., John Campbell, “What lies behind alleged abuses by Cameroon's troops?” *Newsweek*, December 31, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Moki Edwin Kindzeka, “Cameroon Vigilantes Hunt for Boko Haram Landmines,” *Voice of America*, March 4, 2016.

<sup>50</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.

<sup>51</sup> Jim Garamone, “Africom Campaign Plan Targets Terror Groups,” *DOD News*, January 5, 2016.

populous country, with more than 180 million people, roughly divided between Muslims and Christians. Its Muslim population, concentrated in the north, is among the world's largest. 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 have been described in the past as wary of perceived U.S. interference in internal affairs and dismissive of certain training offers. These factors have constrained security cooperation, despite shared concerns over terrorism and other regional security threats.

Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Linda Thomas-Greenfield has long urged the Nigerian government to take a more "holistic" approach to terrorism, suggesting that regional and socioeconomic disparities have contributed to Boko Haram recruitment. In February 2016, she noted that the United States was exploring options to enhance security cooperation with Nigeria, but reiterated that "the fight cannot be won just on the battlefield," and suggested that "equipment and training are only useful when employed by professional forces that respect human rights and earn the respect of the population."<sup>52</sup> In those public comments, she reiterated that "Nigeria and Lake Chad Basin countries must address the drivers of extremism that gave rise to Boko Haram." Other regional experts have similarly urged Nigeria to take a "more multifaceted approach that prioritizes civilian protection and engagement," and pursues greater cooperation with its neighbors and international partners.<sup>53</sup>

## **What assistance has the United States provided to help the region counter the threat?**

In view of the growing impact Boko Haram has had on neighboring Cameroon, Niger, and Chad, U.S. officials have increasingly sought to support programs to improve counterterrorism coordination between Nigeria and its neighbors, and to improve each country's capacity to contain the group. In September 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry declared during a visit to Nigeria that he and President Buhari had pledged to "join together in an effort to do a better job of taking on Boko Haram," tacitly acknowledging tensions and challenges in U.S.-Nigeria counterterrorism cooperation during the Jonathan Administration.

U.S. security assistance to the Lake Chad Basin countries has increased significantly in recent years—all four countries benefit from a \$40 million Global Security Contingency Fund (GSCF) program that began in FY2014, and the region is a focal area for the Administration's new Counterterrorism Partnership Fund (CTPF).<sup>54</sup> Under the CTPF, DOD plans to allocate \$105 million for the Lake Chad Basin region in FY2016, and has requested \$125 million for FY2017.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Remarks by Assistant Secretary Linda Thomas-Greenfield at the Capitol Visitor Center, "Boko Haram and its Regional Impact," February 9, 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Jennifer Cooke, "Now comes the hard part: Five priorities in the continuing fight against Boko Haram," *Premium Times*, February 6, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Security assistance information herein draws from State Department and Department of Defense (DOD) congressional notifications. DOD security assistance in recent years includes \$70 million for Cameroon, \$100 million for Chad, and \$153 million for Niger, in addition to funds provided under the GSCF program. State Department counterterrorism assistance is more difficult to account for on a bilateral basis since many of those programs are not notified to Congress with country-specific detail.

<sup>55</sup> DOD's FY2017 budget request states that CTPF funds for the Lake Chad Basin would be used to support partner nations' ability to secure their borders and "conduct counter-incursion operations to interdict, disrupt, and destroy" Boko Haram, along with enhancing interoperability and collaboration. This effort would also aim to build partners' (continued...)

The State Department has provided additional counterterrorism assistance, primarily through its Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) account. In September 2015, the Secretary of State also authorized the use of up to \$45 million in defense articles and services, including military training, to support the efforts of the countries participating in the MNJTF to counter Boko Haram.<sup>56</sup> In total, Boko Haram-related counterterrorism assistance has totaled more than \$400 million to date. Niger, which faces multiple terrorism threats, is the largest recipient of U.S. security assistance in the region, and the U.S. military's footprint there is growing. Chad and Cameroon were not significant security assistance recipients until in 2014—military aid has increased substantially since then. Counterterrorism assistance to Nigeria's military has been comparatively small, based on human rights and other policy concerns, although the Obama Administration has expressed its intent to increase cooperation.<sup>57</sup> Nigeria recently received more than two dozen Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles through the Excess Defense Articles (EDA) program.

In addition to military aid, the United States supports programs to counter violent extremism in the region, including more than \$30 million in activities managed by the USAID Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) and other programs funded through the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). U.S. humanitarian aid for the Lake Chad Basin area totaled almost \$168 million in FY2015 and more than \$27 million to date in FY2016.

The U.S. counter-Boko Haram strategy has also included deploying U.S. military advisers to the region. As noted above, the United States deployed approximately 80 U.S. military personnel to Chad to assist in the effort to locate the kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls; that mission reportedly ended in late 2014. In October 2015, Administration officials announced that the United States would send as many as 300 U.S. troops, along with surveillance drones, to Cameroon to conduct Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) operations in the region. According to President Obama, it is a noncombat operation, and troops “are equipped with weapons for the purpose of providing their own force protection and security.”<sup>58</sup> As of late February 2016, roughly 250 troops had deployed.<sup>59</sup> According to *The New York Times*, the Department of Defense is also considering sending dozens of military advisers to Maiduguri, Nigeria, to serve in noncombat advisory roles.<sup>60</sup>

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ability to absorb and sustain this assistance.

<sup>56</sup> These funds were authorized pursuant to section 506(a)(1) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended, for “an unforeseen emergency” in which the requirements could not be met under the authority of the Arms Export Control Act or any other provision of law.

<sup>57</sup> Bilateral military aid for Nigeria provided under traditional State Department authorities totaled more than \$1.3 million in FY2015, roughly equivalent to that provided to Ethiopia and among the largest allocations in sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria also receives peacekeeping support. The Nigerian military also routinely receives training and equipment under DOD counternarcotics authorities.

<sup>58</sup> President Obama, quoted in Reuters, “Obama sends U.S. troops, drones to Cameroon in anti-Boko Haram fight,” October 14, 2015.

<sup>59</sup> Eric Schmitt and Dionne Searcey, “U.S. Plans to Put Advisers on Front Lines of Nigeria's War on Boko Haram,” February 25, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

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

Reports of serious abuses by Nigerian military forces in some parts of the country, including but not limited to the northeast, have constrained greater donor support and counterterrorism collaboration.<sup>61</sup> 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>62</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>63</sup> Nevertheless, the State Department has cleared more than 1,000 members of the Nigerian security forces, and several hundred military and police units, for U.S. assistance in recent years.

The State Department’s 2014 country report on human rights practices in Nigeria notes that “in its response to Boko Haram, and at times to crime in general, security services perpetrated extrajudicial killings and engaged in torture, rape, arbitrary detention, mistreatment of detainees, and destruction of property.”<sup>64</sup> By some accounts, these abuses are not isolated incidents but part of a set of informal rules of engagement that have been 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>65</sup> Allegations of torture by the Nigerian security forces in the context of counterterrorism operations in the northeast have been common. In 2015, the State Department listed Nigeria among eight countries identified in its annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report as having government-supported armed groups that recruit or use child soldiers, and in September President Obama determined that it was in the national interest to waive the application of restrictions on foreign aid established Child Soldier Prevention Act of 2008 (CSPA, 22 U.S.C. 2370c-1) in order to continue assistance “to professionalize Nigeria’s military;” enhance its ability to counter terrorism, piracy, and oil bunkering; and contribute to peacekeeping.

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> Some officials reportedly object to these comments regarding human rights abuses as perceived U.S. interference in internal affairs, and are dismissive of certain training offers.<sup>67</sup> Nigerian frustration also appears in part driven by unsuccessful efforts to acquire certain major U.S. defense equipment; the country has turned to Russia and China in recent years for helicopters, jets, and unmanned aerial

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<sup>61</sup> The United States is not the only donor 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 UK law has prohibited the sale of lethal weapons to Nigeria.

<sup>62</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, coordinated by Nina M. Serafino. See also Testimony of Lauren Ploch Blanchard, House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, *Human Rights Vetting: Nigeria and Beyond*, July 10, 2014.

<sup>63</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>64</sup> State Department, *Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2014*, op. cit.

<sup>65</sup> See, e.g., Amnesty International, “Welcome to Hell Fire”: Torture & Other Ill Treatment in Nigeria, September 2014.

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

<sup>67</sup> See, e.g., On Terror’s New Front Line, Mistrust Blunts U.S. Strategy,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 26, 2013.



platforms. Media reports suggest that these factors have strained the relationship between U.S. defense officials and certain branches of the Nigerian armed forces.<sup>68</sup> In November 2014, Nigeria suspended advanced infantry training by U.S. Special Forces for an elite Nigerian army unit that had been cleared for assistance.

While stressing the importance of the U.S.-Nigeria relationship and the gravity of security threats in, and potentially emanating from, the country, many U.S. officials remain concerned about these reported abuses, and about the role they may play either in tainting the military's credibility among the population in the north or in fueling support for the insurgency. 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>69</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>70</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>71</sup>

Recent reports of abuses by Cameroonian troops—including torture and summary executions of Boko Haram suspects—may have repercussions for U.S. assistance. According to the State Department's 2014 human rights report, security force torture and abuse ranked among “the most important human rights problems” in Cameroon, and impunity for such crimes remains widespread.<sup>72</sup>

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

Several Members of Congress have sought to elevate public awareness of the Boko Haram threat in recent years, and some have engaged in deliberations with the Administration about the extent to which the group may pose a threat to the United States and how the United States should calibrate its response. In November 2011, the House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence held the first congressional hearing on the group; subsequent hearings have been held by the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. 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>73</sup> Selected relevant legislation includes the following:

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<sup>68</sup> Eric Schmitt, “With Schoolgirls taken by Boko Haram, US-Nigeria ties falter,” *New York Times*, December 31, 2014.

<sup>69</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>70</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, Lauren Ploch Blanchard, and Tomas F. Husted.

<sup>71</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>72</sup> State Department, *Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2014*, op. cit

<sup>73</sup> House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, *Boko Haram: Emerging Threat to* (continued...)

- Legislation 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);
- P.L. 112-239 (FY2013 National Defense Authorization Act, 112<sup>th</sup> Congress), directing the Director of National Intelligence to provide an assessment of the Boko Haram threat to Congress;
- S.Res. 433 and H.Res. 573 (113<sup>th</sup> Congress), condemning Boko Haram's attacks on civilian targets and expressing support for the Nigerian people and the families of the girls abducted from Chibok, for efforts to hold the group accountable, and for U.S. offers to assist in the search for the girls<sup>74</sup>;
- H.R. 2027 (114<sup>th</sup> Congress), directing the President to develop and submit to Congress a regional strategy to guide U.S. support for multilateral efforts to eliminate the threat of Boko Haram and enforce the rule of law and ensure humanitarian access in Boko Haram-affected areas; and
- S. 1632 (114<sup>th</sup> Congress), requiring the Department of Defense and the Department of State to jointly develop a regional strategy to address the threat posed by Boko Haram.

## **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>75</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. 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.

The FTO designation does not appear to have had an impact on Boko Haram financing yet—the extent to which the group raises 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

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(...continued)

*the U.S. Homeland*, committee print, 112<sup>th</sup> Cong., November 30, 2011 and House Homeland Security Committee, *Boko Haram: Growing Threat to the U.S. Homeland*, committee print, 113<sup>th</sup> Cong., September 13, 2013.

<sup>74</sup> Congressional support for efforts to rescue the young women abducted from Chibok included various public statements and official correspondence, such as a letter signed by all 20 female Senators that urged further sanctions.

<sup>75</sup> State Department, Daily News Briefing, November 13, 2013.

operations largely through criminal activity, including bank robberies, kidnapping for ransom, assassinations for hire, trafficking, and various types of extortion. The group was also reportedly able to seize sizable amounts of military equipment and ammunition in 2014-2015 from the Nigerian army. In early 2016, Nigeria closed several cattle markets in the northeast where Boko Haram was suspected of selling stolen cattle. Those closures have reportedly had a devastating impact on the local economy. It remains unclear what impact, if any, Boko Haram's pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State has had on its financing.

Local kidnapping operations reportedly provide funding, as do ransoms paid for some of Boko Haram's foreign victims. According to press reports, Boko Haram may have received more than \$3 million in ransom for a French family that was kidnapped in northern Cameroon in 2013.<sup>76</sup> Cameroon also reportedly freed several Boko Haram detainees as part of that deal; France and Cameroon both deny that any ransom was paid. Other prominent kidnappings include the abduction in 2014 of ten Chinese construction workers in Cameroon and the kidnapping of the wife of Cameroon's deputy prime minister. Ransoms were reportedly paid in both cases.

The expansion of international sanctions against the group in recent years may 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>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Tim Cocks, "Nigerian Islamists Got \$3.15 Million to Free French Hostages - Document," *Reuters*, April 26, 2013.

<sup>77</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.