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Boko Haram (The Islamic State's West Africa Province)

Overview

Boko Haram, which emerged in Nigeria over a decade ago as a small Sunni Islamic sect advocating a strict interpretation and implementation of Islamic law for the country, has grown since 2010 into one of the world's deadliest terrorist groups. Calling itself *Jama'a Ahl as-Sunna Li-da'wa wa-al Jihad* (roughly translated from Arabic as "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad") until 2015, 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 narrative that Western education and culture have been corrupting influences that are *haram* ("forbidden"). In May 2015, its leadership pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS or ISIL), and the group has since sought to rebrand itself as *Wilayah Gharb Afriqiyyah* (the Islamic State's West Africa Province, aka ISWAP).

Civilians in Nigeria's impoverished, predominately Muslim northeast have borne the brunt of Boko Haram's violence, which has spread into border areas of Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. In total, Boko Haram has reportedly killed more than 15,000 people since 2011, including more than 6,500 in 2015 alone. Its attacks in early 2016 have claimed hundreds of lives. More than 2.4 million people in the region are displaced—over half of them are children.

Boko Haram has attracted international headlines with its brutal tactics and targeting of civilians. Abductions such as the kidnapping of more than 270 schoolgirls the Nigerian town of Chibok in April 2014 have been common—Amnesty International estimated one year later that more than 2,000 women and girls had been abducted by the group. Boko Haram's increasing use of women and children as suicide bombers has drawn widespread condemnation—UNICEF estimates 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.

Boko Haram conducted its first lethal attack against Western interests in August 2011, with the deadly bombing of the United Nations building in Nigeria's capital, Abuja. That remains, to date, its most prominent assault on an international (non-regional) target. It has also kidnapped European and Chinese citizens in the region.

In mid-2014, Boko Haram commenced a territorial offensive that Nigerian security forces struggled to reverse until regional forces, primarily from neighboring Chad, launched an offensive against the group in early 2015. The group has since resorted to asymmetric attacks, operating from remote border areas in the Lake Chad Basin region.

Leadership

Abubakar Shekau is Boko Haram's most visible leader. He succeeded the group's original leader, Mohammed Yusuf,

who was killed in police custody after a July 2009 security crackdown in which hundreds of his followers died. Along with Shekau, the State Department named two other individuals linked to Boko Haram, Khalid al Barnawi and Abubakar Adam Kamar, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs) in 2012. Both were identified as having close links to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a regional terrorist network affiliated with Al Qaeda. Kamar was reportedly killed in 2012, and in April 2016, Nigerian officials confirmed the arrest of Barnawi, whom they allege was the mastermind of the 2011 U.N. attack. Two other Boko Haram-linked individuals were designated as SDGTs in 2015: Mohammed (Mamman) Nur and Mustapha Chad.

A Boko Haram splinter faction, Ansaru (aka *Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis-Sudan*, or Vanguard for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa), emerged in 2012. It was publicly critical of Boko Haram's killing of Muslim civilians and appeared focused on government and foreign targets. Several kidnappings attributed to the group resulted in the killing of foreign hostages. Ansaru has issued few public statements since 2014, and some analysts suggest that some of its members may have been killed or reabsorbed into Boko Haram, while others may have joined other jihadist groups in the Sahel. Mamman Nur, purported to be one of Ansaru's ideological leaders and a rival of Shekau, is rumored to have links to Al Shabaab in Somalia, as well as to AQIM and other Al Qaeda affiliates. It is unclear what his current relationship is with Boko Haram.

Objectives

Boko Haram has publicly called for an uprising against secular authority and the establishment of an Islamic state in Nigeria. It draws on a narrative of resentment and vengeance against state abuses to elicit sympathizers and recruits. Some attacks have targeted Christian communities in the north, fueling existing religious tensions in the country. According to Boko Haram's narrative, the state and Christians have collaborated against Nigerian Muslims. The majority of Boko Haram's victims, though, have been Muslim—Shekau advocates an exclusivist Muslim identity and justifies brutality against so-called "apostates," both Sunni and Shiite.

Key factors that have given rise to the insurgency include a legacy of overlapping intercommunal, Muslim-Christian, and north-south tensions within Nigeria and popular frustration with elite corruption and other state abuses. The Nigerian security forces' heavy-handed response in the northeast may have driven recruitment in some areas. Financial incentive and social pressures have also been cited in studies on Boko Haram recruitment. Other fighters have been coerced or forced to join. Once associated with Boko Haram, former captives often face discrimination or persecution upon return to their communities.

Areas of Operation

Boko Haram attacks have been primarily concentrated in northeast Nigeria, but the group has claimed responsibility for attacks across north and central Nigeria. In 2014, the group appeared intent to expand its range, attempting several attacks in Lagos, but to date its reach in southern Nigeria appears limited. Security forces from Cameroon, Chad, and Niger increasingly clashed with the group in 2014 as it crossed into northern Cameroon, southern Niger, and the Lake Chad Basin area of eastern Chad; attacks in those countries increased after those militaries became involved in the regional offensive against the group. Boko Haram has also been linked to various kidnapping operations in northern Cameroon.

Attacks against U.S. interests

Boko Haram currently appears to pose a threat primarily to state and civilian targets in Nigeria and surrounding border areas, and to international targets, including Western citizens, in the region. Boko Haram has issued direct threats against the United States, but to date no American citizens are known to have been kidnapped or killed by the group. In November 2013, the State Department designated Boko Haram and its splinter faction Ansaru as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).

Size, Financing, and Capabilities

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

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

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

Branding itself as part of the Islamic State may provide recruitment and fundraising opportunities, but Boko Haram's area of operations remains geographically removed from the Islamic State's core territory, and the extent to which affiliation has facilitated operational ties remains unclear. Links between Boko Haram and IS "affiliates" in Libya may be of more immediate concern, given reported sightings of Nigerians at IS camps there.

Outlook

Shekau's effort to align Boko Haram with the Islamic State came at a time when both groups were under increasing international military pressure. The regional offensive in early 2015 and subsequent Nigerian operations appear to have reversed Boko Haram's territorial advance, but Nigeria and its neighbors have limited capacity to protect civilians in the remote border areas where Boko Haram continues to operate. Nigeria's new president, Muhammadu Buhari, who was elected in April 2015, has sought to improve Nigeria's coordination with its neighbors, but the operational status of the Multinational Joint Task Force authorized by the African Union remains in question.

The limited capacities of the region's security forces may constrain the prospects for sustained pressure on Boko Haram without outside support. France, the United Kingdom, and the United States have provided increasing counterterrorism support to these countries in recent years.

Multiple factors have undermined the Nigerian security forces' response to Boko Haram, notably security sector mismanagement and corruption, as well as insufficient coordination among agencies. By many accounts, Nigerian troops have not been adequately resourced or equipped to counter the insurgency despite a substantial defense budget by African standards. In the assessment of U.S. Defense Department officials in 2014, Nigerian funding for the military was "skimmed off the top." Former Nigerian President Obasanjo, himself once a military leader, has suggested that corruption in the army is "deeply ingrained." Other dynamics limiting the Nigerian response include the slow pace of the judicial system and a lack of sufficient training for prosecutors and judges to implement anti-terrorism laws.

President Buhari has pledged to "spare no effort" to defeat Boko Haram. In the early months of his administration, the military command for operations against Boko Haram was moved from Abuja to the frontlines of the conflict in Borno state. He has directed new military leadership to conduct more strategically-focused operations and is undertaking measures to address security sector corruption. Buhari drew criticism, however, in December 2015 for declaring Boko Haram to be "technically defeated," while the group has continued to conduct attacks in the northeast. In April 2016, the Nigerian army launched a new effort, Operation Safe Corridor, to encourage defections and facilitate the rehabilitation of former Boko Haram members.

U.S. relations with Nigeria were strained under President Buhari's predecessor by disagreements over Nigeria's counterterrorism approach and its effectiveness, and the Obama Administration has sought to support a regional strategy to counter Boko Haram. The Administration has offered training, equipment, advisory and intelligence support to the affected countries. Increased U.S.-Nigerian counterterrorism cooperation will likely depend on Buhari's approach and his ability to address U.S. concerns.

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

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