“Boko Haram” refers to a network of Islamist militant factions in northern Nigeria that trace their ideological origins to the slain imam Mohammed Yusuf (1970 – 2009). The most violent faction of Boko Haram is called Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad, and has been led by Yusuf’s former deputy, Abu Shekau, since he announced that he had “assumed leadership” in July 2010. Under Yusuf, Boko Haram sought to create an Islamic State in northern Nigeria based on the model of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Yusuf believes the Islamic State “should be established in Nigeria, and if possible all over the world, through preaching the faith (dawa’a).” However, he also sent members to the Sahel, Sudan, Pakistan and Afghanistan to receive funds to build madrasas and mosques and acquire militant training and advice from al-Qaeda in preparation for an inevitable confrontation with the Nigerian government.

In contrast, since Shekau emerged as Boko Haram’s leader in July 2010 – one year after Yusuf and 1,000 followers were killed in a four-day battle with Nigerian security forces – Boko Haram has sought to create that Islamic State not through dawa’a, but through violent jihad. It leverages its safe havens in the Nigeria-Cameroon border area to hold hostages-for-ransom and train and recruit new militants. Shekau believes that
Boko Haram cannot negotiate any final solution to the conflict with the Nigerian government until Boko Haram has created an Islamic state or Nigeria adopts a Boko Haram-approved version of sharia law. Since July 2010 Boko Haram’s name under Shekau has been Jama’atu Ablis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad, which incorporates both the terms dawa’a from Yusuf and jihad from Shekau. In English, the name translates to “Sunni Group for Preaching and Jihad.”

Boko Haram has carried out about 1,000 attacks since launching its first attack on Bauchi prison on September 7, 2010, and has been responsible for the deaths of nearly 10,000 people since then. The group mostly targets political and religious leaders, churches, schools, government buildings, beer halls, and border posts. Boko Haram has also established funding, training, recruiting and logistical networks with other Islamist groups in Africa (particularly in northern Mali and Somalia), has threatened to attack the West, particularly the United States, and has connections not only to al-Qaeda affiliates in Africa but also is known to have received messages from Osama bin Laden. A faction of Boko Haram called Ansaru, whose leaders are former members of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), has also imported kidnapping-for-ransom operations typical of the Sahel region into Nigeria, with a focus on targeting foreigners-for-ransom.

Boko Haram has already evolved from a local threat into a regional one, and there are signs that some factions of the group have already abandoned Nigeria-oriented objectives in favor of transnational militant goals, and extended their networks from Nigeria to Sudan and as far as the United Kingdom.

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

From 2002 to 2009, Boko Haram was led by Mohammed Yusuf, a charismatic imam in northeastern Nigeria’s Borno State, who preached that “Western education is sinful,” which in the Hausa language translates to Boko Haram. Yusuf also taught that employment in the Nigerian government was haram for Muslims because Nigeria was not an Islamic State, and that sports were haram because they could lead to idol worship.

Yusuf and his followers, who came from Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, became known in northern Nigeria and abroad as the “Nigerian Taliban” because of their adherence to the theology of the Taliban in Afghanistan, which Nigerian Taliban members cited as their source of inspiration, along with Osama bin Laden. Yusuf’s anti-Western and anti-education ideology appealed to many northern Nigerian
Muslims who believed Nigeria was losing its Muslim identity to Western influence and Christianity, and that the secular government was failing to provide adequate services to the people of northern Nigeria.

Before the British colonial period (1850 – 1960), a large swath of northern Nigeria, southern Niger and Cameroon were under the rule of the Sokoto Caliphate (1804 – 1903), while Nigeria’s Borno and Yobe States and parts of northern Cameroon, southeastern Niger and western Chad were under the rule of the Borno Empire (1380 – 1893).

The British disbanded both of these Muslim empires and established the Northern Nigeria Protectorate in 1900, which later became part of colonial Nigeria in 1914, and then part of independent Nigeria in 1960. Colonization brought with it British education, including Western schools and Christian missionaries. By the time of Nigerian independence in 1960, southern Nigeria, where British influence was strongest (especially in cities like Lagos and the oil hub Port Harcourt), was economically more powerful and more educated than northern Nigeria. Moreover, its population, which was almost completely animist before the arrival of the British, was by 1960 predominantly Christian. Northern Nigeria, on the other hand, was and remains predominantly Muslim.

When democracy was institutionalized in Nigeria in 1999 after several failed attempts at political liberalization, many northern Nigerian Muslims saw democracy as a byproduct of American influence and a ploy that would lead to the marginalization of northern Nigerian Muslims. Between 1999 and 2011, it appeared that a Christian candidate was virtually guaranteed to win the presidency because southern voter turnout is much higher than that in the Muslim-dominated north. (There are discussions underway to create a “rotational presidency” system, whereby political parties agree not to field Christian candidates every other term, but its fate is unclear).

Although all twelve states in northern Nigeria have adopted sharia law since 2000, many Muslims in northern Nigeria, including Salafists like Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf, considered this only “half-sharia” because it is not imposed throughout the entire country and the traditional Islamic leaders still support secular institutions like democracy and co-ed schooling. The Sultan of Sokoto, who is supposed to be the leader of all Muslims, even publicly backed the Christian southern candidate Goodluck Jonathan in his landslide presidential 2011 election victory against the northerner Muslim Muhammad Buhari. This move was widely condemned by Boko Haram and other Salafists in Nigeria.

As a result of the perceived empowerment of southern Nigeria at the expense of northern Nigeria, the restoration of the Islamic State and the elimination of all forms of Western influence and education became a rallying cry for the followers of Mohammed Yusuf when he founded Boko Haram in 2002. According to Yusuf, for a short-lived period in 2003, several thousand members of the Nigerian Taliban “left
the city, which is impure, and headed for the bush, believing that Muslims who do not share their ideology are infidels.” They called their encampment, which was located two miles from Nigeria’s border with Niger, “Afghanistan.”

The local government ordered the Nigerian Taliban to leave “Afghanistan” when the community failed to respect local ordinances and the friction between the Nigerian Taliban and the local government led to frequent clashes. During one battle in early 2004, several hundred members of the Nigerian Taliban attacked the residences of local government heads, regional officials, and the divisional police, killing several policemen and stealing police weapons and vehicles. The Nigerian security forces responded to the attacks by killing several Nigerian Taliban members, arresting a number of others, and destroying “Afghanistan.”

In 2004, Yusuf’s followers attempted four attacks on Nigerian security forces, three of which failed. For the next five years, Yusuf’s followers generally avoided conflict with the Nigerian government and security forces. Yusuf fled to Saudi Arabia in 2005 but returned shortly thereafter when northern Nigerian politicians assured him that he would not be harmed. He was arrested several times between 2005 and 2009, but for the most part he maintained an uneasy truce with the government and security forces.

The apparent truce came to an end in July 2009 when for four days Yusuf’s followers and the government engaged in battles in Borno State and several other states in northeastern Nigeria. The Nigerian security forces captured Yusuf at the house of a relative in Borno State’s capital, Maiduguri, and executed him after interrogation at a police station. They also killed up to 1,000 of his followers during the four days of clashes.

While the government and Yusuf’s followers blamed each other for instigating the clashes, conflict may have been inevitable given Yusuf’s rising popularity in northeastern Nigeria; his rejection of the legitimacy of the Nigerian state; his sermons encouraging his followers to hoard weapons in preparation for battle; and the establishment of training and financial contacts with al-Qaeda during the mid-2000s. Yusuf’s followers were said to have received “coded messages from Pakistan… on how to carry out terrorist activities against American interests in Nigeria.”

For one year after Yusuf’s death, his followers went underground and took refuge in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, all of which border Borno State. Shekau, who was Yusuf’s deputy, reportedly went into hiding in the “desert between Chad and Sudan,” possibly in Darfur. In July 2010, Shekau, who Nigerian security forces believed had been killed in the July 2009 clashes, emerged in a video statement as Boko Haram’s new leader. His message was issued “on behalf of my mujahideen brothers in some African territory called Nigeria... to the soldiers of Allah in the Islamic State of Iraq in particular.” It warned that “Jihad has just begun… O America, die with your fury.” On October 2, 2010, AQIM’s media wing, al-Andalus, also published a statement
by Shekau to the Shumukh al-Islam *jihadist* web forum, which marked the first time that AQIM disseminated an official message from another militant leader or group. In the message, Shekau offered “glad tidings” to various al-Qaeda leaders and affiliates.15

**GLOBAL REACH**

Boko Haram does not claim to have carried out any major attacks in the predominantly Christian oil-producing zones of southern Nigeria, including Lagos and Port Harcourt. However, in several videos in 2014, Shekau threatened that Boko Haram would extend its war to Lagos and Abuja, after which the group carried out several bombings in Abuja in central Nigeria.16

Boko Haram’s attacks have instead been concentrated in northern Nigeria, especially Borno State, as well as in northern Cameroon and occasionally in Niger and Chad. In April 2012, Boko Haram militants, including Shekau, were reportedly in northern Mali with the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Ansar al-Din when the Islamist militias established the “Islamic State of Azawad.” A French-led military intervention eventually expelled them from the region in early 2013.17 During that time, Boko Haram reportedly took part in attacks on the forces of the secular Tuareg-led militia, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and the Malian army, as well as the kidnapping of Algerian diplomats at their consulate in Gao, Mali. Nonetheless, Boko Haram’s main focus remains northern Nigeria.

Even though Boko Haram rarely carries out attacks beyond Nigeria’s borders, it is very active in Nigeria’s border regions for the purposes of refuge, training, transit, planning attacks and recruitment. In Niger, Boko Haram cells were captured in Zinder in September 2012, and in Diffa in April 2014, February 2012, and December 2011. In September 2012, a longtime Boko Haram member and employee in Nigeria’s immigration service also confessed to having trained in assassinations and special operations with 15 other militants in Niger, some of whom were government security officers.18

According to a MUJWA commander in Gao, Boko Haram members fought in Mali and traveled there “en masse,” and many have now returned to Nigeria. Like the Malian militants, they have incorporated new tactics in Nigeria, such as mounting weapons on 4x4 vehicles, kidnapping government officials and their relatives in exchange for ransoms of $10,000 to $300,000, and supporting AQIM’s ideology that calls on “Muslim youths” to fight not “in the name of any sect, clan, or country,” but for Islam.19

Whereas Niger’s vast desert makes it an ideal training ground and refuge for Boko Haram, so too is Cameroon, which shares important characteristics that make Ni-
igeria such fertile ground for Boko Haram: a relatively poor majority-Muslim north and a wealthier, majority-Christian south. Cameroon has become a hub for Boko Haram’s ideological infiltration, and reports suggest that the group uses Cameroon as a place of refuge.

Boko Haram leader Shekau reportedly fled to Ngaoundere in northern Cameroon after the group’s January 20, 2012 attack in Kano, which killed 186 people. And he was reportedly in Amchide, Cameroon after he left northern Mali in early 2013. In 2013, Boko Haram also carried out at least three kidnappings of French, Italian and Chinese citizens in northern Cameroon.

The leading militant behind these kidnappings is likely Borno-native Khalid al-Barnawi, who is believed to be the leader of Boko Haram-faction Ansaru. Like other Ansaru members, al-Barnawi was an operative of AQIM in Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. He was believed to be a main AQIM leader in the 2005 Lemgheity operation in northern Mauritania, in which AQIM killed more than a dozen Mauritanian soldiers.

It is no surprise that Ansaru propaganda materials were found in the compound of Algerian terrorist Mokhtar Belmokhtar in Gao, Mali in March 2013. Ansaru militants claimed a part in Belmokhtar’s signature operation, where his forces raided a gas plant at In Amenas, Algeria in January 2013. It is also likely that longtime Boko Haram militant and Cameroon native Mamman Nur is coordinating some kidnappings in Cameroon with al-Barnawi, as Cameroonian officials in 2014 reported that he returned to Cameroon to carry out a new wave of attacks.

Other Boko Haram commanders, including the Christmas Day 2011 church bombings mastermind, Kabiru Sokoto, have sought refuge in Cameroon. Kabiru Sokoto was captured in Taraba State less than 100 miles from the Cameroon border in January 2012 at the same that Shekau was reportedly hiding in Cameroon. Other reports of Boko Haram in northern Cameroon have included the arrest of 25 Arabic teachers with Boko Haram ties attempting to enter the country. Local villagers likewise report that Boko Haram established bases for preaching anti-Western sermons, recruiting new militants, and offering money to those willing to follow them. In December 2012, Cameroon arrested 31 Boko Haram suspects, including two Nigerians, in Amchide, a town on the Nigerian border. Boko Haram has also taken advantage of its contacts with Kanuri tribal elders in Cameroon to facilitate hostage negotiations after kidnapping foreigners in Cameroon.

Boko Haram likewise has a history of involvement in Saudi Arabia. Mohammed Yusuf found refuge in Saudi Arabia to escape a crackdown by Nigerian security forces in 2005. Boko Haram has received funding with the help of AQIM from organizations in the UK and Saudi Arabia, and its spokesman claimed that the group’s leaders met with al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia during the lesser hajj (umrah) in August 2011. In ad-
dition, the leader of a Boko Haram cell that was responsible for a November 25, 2012 attack on a church inside a military barracks in Jaji, Kaduna, which killed eleven people, was in Saudi Arabia during the months prior to the attack.24

Three months before those attacks, in August 2012, a Boko Haram faction led by Abu Mohammed also negotiated in Mecca with a Nigerian government team led by National Security Adviser Sambo Dasuki and advised by General Mohammed Shuwa. President Jonathan rejected new talks with this faction, however, on the grounds that “there can be no dialogue” with Boko Haram because it is “faceless” and because it was unclear Abu Mohammed represented Shekau.25

Boko Haram also has significant connections to several other African countries. In Burkina Faso, Boko Haram recruits have reportedly trained and one of its militants reportedly held citizenship in the country. In Senegal, Boko Haram commanders reportedly held negotiations with one of President Goodluck Jonathan’s closest advisors in late 2012 (a leading imam in the country has also claimed that Boko Haram was recruiting young Senegalese in Bignona). In Algeria, AQIM militants send approximately $250,000 in funding to Boko Haram to facilitate kidnappings of foreigners for the purpose of obtaining ransoms to buy weapons from AQIM. The group’s former third-in-command, Cameroonian Mamman Nur, reportedly traveled to and received explosives training from al-Shabaab in Somalia before returning to Nigeria in the weeks before Boko Haram’s attack on the UN Headquarters in Abuja on August 26, 2011.26 And in Libya, man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) have been captured and may have entered Nigeria through Tuareg networks in Niger potentially linked to AQIM and MUJWA. Such equipment can be used by Boko Haram to shoot down commercial airlines flying into Niger, Chad and Nigeria.27 In addition, dozens of Boko Haram members have reportedly trained in Afghanistan, and in northern Nigeria.

Finally, while Boko Haram’s main enemies are “infidel” Christians, secular Muslims, and government officials and religious leaders who publicly disagree with Boko Haram, there has also been a global focus in Boko Haram’s ideology since Shekau became the group’s leader. For example, in 2010, Boko Haram issued four statements, three of which focused on international themes and specifically mentioned the United States or al-Qaeda. In 2011, Boko Haram issued 30 statements, six of which focused on international themes and four of which specifically mentioned the United States or al-Qaeda. And in 2012, Boko Haram issued 38 statements, five of which focused on international themes and three of which specifically mentioned the United States or al-Qaeda. Notably, while claiming a kidnapping in Chibok in a May 5, 2014 video, Shekau also said “we are together with Usman dan Fodio,” referencing the founder of the Sokoto Caliphate that extended from Borno through Cameroon, Chad, and Niger to southern Libya and Sudan.
RECENT ACTIVITY

In 2012, Boko Haram expanded its geographic area of operations twofold. By the end of that year, attacks were still most intense in Boko Haram’s principal hub of operations (Borno State and Kano) but there were also attacks in Kogi State in the south of the country and in Sokoto State. Sokoto is located in the far northwest only 300 miles from the region of northern Mali called “Azawad,” which is controlled by the Islamist militias AQIM, MUJWA, and Ansar al-Din.

The degree of coordination between Boko Haram and these three Islamist militias became increasingly clear in late 2012, when numerous reports emerged of Boko Haram fighters traveling to join the militias in northern Mali and partaking in key battles in central Mopti province on January 8, 2013. Boko Haram’s connection to these militias has likely been a major factor in the internationalization of Boko Haram’s insurgency and improvement of its fighting techniques since 2013.

The Boko Haram faction Ansaru, which first announced its formation in January 2012, also became increasingly active in 2013 and raised its profile through a series of online media releases, attacks on foreigners, and a prison break. Almost all of Ansaru’s leaders, like Khalid al-Barnawi, were AQIM members during the mid-2000s, but have now returned to Nigeria in order to expand AQIM’s influence into Nigeria. When Ansaru carried out its first operation in May 2011 and kidnapped a British and Italian engineer of an Italian construction company near the border with Niger in Kebbi State, it used the name “al-Qaeda in the Lands Beyond the Sahel.”

This name likely reflected the vision of longtime AQIM kidnapping mastermind, Mohtar Belmokhtar, and his Malian brother-in-law, Oumar Ould Hamaha. The latter proclaimed that the two wanted to expand their zone of operations “throughout the entire Sahel” to Nigeria and target the increasing number of foreigners and energy and mining companies in the Sahel. This desire to expand southward from Algeria was shared by AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel, who had a long-time “dream” of “expanding AQIM’s zone of operations.” In 2010, an Algerian newspaper wrote also an article on AQIM southern commander Abu Zeid, who foresaw that “AQIM’s future is in Nigeria not the Sahel.”

Thus, Ansaru militants, who since mid-2013 have reintegrated into Boko Haram after first rejecting Shekau’s “ruthless” style of leadership, are likely responsible expanding Boko Haram’s operations from Nigeria into Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Central African Republic. They also likely facilitated the kidnapping of more than 25 foreigners in Nigeria and Cameroon since 2011, including at least one kidnapping of a French priest in Cameroon in 2013, which Boko Haram claimed was in “coordination” with Ansaru.

In April 2014, Ansaru militants also kidnapped two Italian priests and a Canadian nun in Tcheré, Cameroon and brought them to the Nigerian border, where they were
released in June 2014 under unknown terms. Ansaru also kidnapped 10 Chinese engineers in Waza, Cameroon on May 17, 2014, and, like the Tchére kidnapping, they were probably taken to Borno.
ENDNOTES

[29] Ansaru broke from Boko Haram after the January 20, 2012 attacks in Kano, which killed more than 150 innocent civilians, mostly Muslims.