

American Foreign Policy Council

BOKO HARAM

QUICK FACTS

Geographical Areas of Operation: Northern Nigeria, northern Cameroon, Lake Chad Basin, and southeast Niger.

Numerical Strength (Members): Membership is estimated to be several thousand fighters.

Leadership: Abu Musab al-Barnawi

Religious Identification: Sunni Islam

Quick Facts Courtesy of the 2015 edition of the U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism

OVERVIEW

Boko Haram is an Islamist militant group in northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. But since former Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to the Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in March 2015, Boko Haram now is called “Islamic State’s West Africa Province”, or ISWAP. Boko Haram traces its ideological origins to the Nigerian Salafi imam Mohammed Yusuf. Yusuf was killed during the 2009 Boko Haram uprising. Abubakar Shekau was Yusuf’s deputy during his lifetime and successor after his death. After Shekau’s pledge to the Islamic State, he was deposed due to a long-standing feud within Boko Haram’s ranks. His successor was Abu Musab al-Barnawi, Yusuf’s son.

Under Yusuf, Boko Haram sought to create an Islamic State in northern Nigeria based on the model of the Taliban in Afghanistan. However, it was not until Shekau took power in 2010 that Boko Haram began to build international connections and gain international legitimacy in the jihadist community. In 2014, the group announced an “Islamic State” in areas under Boko Haram control in northeastern Nigeria in 2014. This announcement was a harbinger of growing ties with the Islamic State and

would culminate with Shekau's declaration of allegiance to al-Baghdadi in 2015 and al-Baghdadi's and Islamic State's acceptance of the declaration with great fanfare. But soon after the pledge, a combined Nigerian and regional military offensive pressured Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria, causing Shekau's declared state to collapse. At the same time, the Islamic State also faced pressure from national armies, rival rebels, and international forces in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. That pressure limited the extent to which the Islamic State could support new provinces, such as ISWAP. However, the groups did fully integrate their respective media arms.

In joining Islamic State, Shekau lived up to Yusuf's belief that an Islamic State: "should be established in Nigeria, and if possible all over the world," but there were differences between the two men's ideologies.¹ Shekau's emphasis was strictly on militancy and jihadism, while Yusuf combined preaching with preparing for jihad more concretely, such as by sending young men to Afghanistan to learn how to build bombs.² While Yusuf commonly appeared on television and radio as a preacher, he also surreptitiously sent followers to the Sahel, Sudan, Pakistan and Afghanistan to receive funds to build madrasas and mosques, and so they could acquire militant training and advice from al-Qaeda in preparation for an inevitable confrontation with the Nigerian government. That confrontation finally occurred in July 2009 and led to Yusuf's death.³

In recalling this history, Abu Musab al-Barnawi said in the interview with Islamic State that announced his ascension to wali (governor), on August 3, that: "The group went through stages and many developments in its jihadi march, and among these developments was its thorough striving to rescue its captives who were captured in the first assault on the group, its sending its soldiers to the Greater Sahara to be trained there, and also its transitioning from the stage of guerrilla warfare to the stage of empowerment and spreading control. Also among most prominent developments was that historic development that astonished the entire world, when our pledge of allegiance was announced to the Caliph of Muslims, al-Qurashi [Abubakar al-Baghdadi], may Allah preserve him."⁴

Boko Haram has already evolved from being a local threat to a sub-regional threat, with attacks in Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. There are signs that ISWAP not only has networks throughout Africa and beyond, as evidenced by the Islamic State relationship, but that it has operational cells in Senegal and other West Africa countries.⁵ It may only be a matter of time before Islamic State uses sub-Saharan African foreign

fighters who trained in Libya to carry out attacks through West Africa on behalf of ISWAP in a similar way to how European foreign fighters trained in Syria have done the same in France, Belgium and Germany.

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

Yusuf led Boko Haram from 2002 to 2009. He preached that “Western education is sinful,” which in Hausa language translates to Boko Haram (Boko can mean “Book” or, more broadly, “Western education,” and Haram means “sinful” or “forbidden”). Yusuf also taught that employment in the Nigerian government and participation in democracy was haram for Muslims because Nigeria was not an Islamic State. He also preached that activities, such as sports or listening to music, were haram because they could lead to idol worship.⁶

Yusuf’s estimated 280,000 followers, who came from Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, either listened to his sermons in-person or on audiocassettes. They 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.⁷ Yusuf’s anti-Western and anti-education ideology appealed to many northern Nigerian Muslims that believed Nigeria was losing its Muslim identity to Western influence and Christianity. They also felt 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 had higher levels of education 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, although since independence the influence of Islamic practices from Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, such as Salafism and Shiism, have become among the most prominent strands in northern Nigerian Islam and heavily influenced the doctrines of Muhammed Yusuf and his followers.

When democracy was institutionalized in Nigeria in 1999 after several failed attempts at political liberalization, some northern Nigerian Muslims saw democracy as

a byproduct of American influence and a ploy that would lead to the marginalization of northern Nigerian Muslims.⁸ As a result, to maintain the Muslim identity of the region, twelve states in northern Nigeria adopted sharia laws since 2000. But Salafists like Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf considered this only “half-sharia” because it was not imposed throughout the entire country and the traditional Islamic leaders still mixed sharia with secular institutions like electoral democracy and co-ed schooling.⁹

As a result of the perceived weakened identity and practice of Islam in northern Nigeria, Yusuf’s rallying cry when he founded Boko Haram in 2002 was the creation of a true Islamic state and the elimination of all forms of Western influence and education.¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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. 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 leaders, regional officials, and the divisional police. They killed several policemen and stole police weapons and vehicles.¹² 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 Yusuf’s followers and the security forces engaged in battles in Borno State and several other states in northeastern Nigeria for four days. Police captured Yusuf and killed him in an extrajudicial execution. During the uprising, more than 700 people were killed, many of them innocent bystanders.¹³

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 popularity, combined with his rejection of the legitimacy of the Nigerian State; his sermons encouraging his followers to hoard weapons in preparation for battle; and his establishment of training and financial contacts with al-Qaeda

during the mid-2000s; all gave Yusuf credibility as a serious threat. Yusuf's followers were said to have received "coded messages from Pakistan... on how to carry out terrorist activities against American interests in Nigeria."¹⁴ The rapid acceleration in militant capabilities of Yusuf's followers starting in 2010 also attested to the training they received from al-Qaeda. That training could not have happened if Yusuf did not forge alliances with al-Qaeda, especially AQIM, throughout the mid-2000s.

During the year after Yusuf's death, Yusuf's followers went underground in Nigeria or 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."¹⁵ In July 2010, Shekau, who Nigerian security forces believed was killed in the July 2009 clashes, emerged in a video statement as Boko Haram's new leader. His video 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."¹⁶ 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" and mourned the deaths of two al-Qaeda in Iraq leaders and offered: "condolences on behalf of the Mujahideen in Nigeria to the Mujahideen in general, in particular to those in the "Islamic State of Iraq, Osama bin Laden, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Abu Yahya Al-Libi, Abu Abdullah Al-Muhajir, the Emir of the Islamic State in Somalia, the Emir of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Emir of the Mujahideen in Pakistan, in Chechnya, Kashmir, Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula, and our religious clerics whom I did not mention."¹⁷

Shekau would remain leader from 2010 through his pledge of allegiance of al-Baghdadi in 2015 and until 2016, when rival factions endorsed by Islamic State deposed him. The transition of power culminated in the Islamic State's announcement on August 3, 2016 that the new wali ((governor) of "West Africa Province" was Abu Musab al-Barnawi. Shekau, in turn, reverted back to his pre-West Africa Province title of "imam" of Boko Haram (Jamaatu ahlis Sunna li'Dawati wal Jihad), while still maintaining his loyalty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as Caliph.

GLOBAL REACH

Boko Haram has only claimed to have carried out one attack in the predominantly Christian oil-producing zones of southern Nigeria. That attack occurred in June 2014, when Shekau claimed responsibility for a female suicide bombing at Apapa Port in Lagos in June 2014 (Shekau did not, however, refer to the identity of the attacker).¹⁸ This was the second female suicide bombing that Boko Haram carried out and represented the start of what by mid-2016 would be more than 120 such female suicide bombing operations involving more than 200 women and girls (often in tandem or trios).¹⁹

Boko Haram's attacks have instead been concentrated in northern Nigeria, especially Borno State, with occasional large bombings in the Middle Belt region, as well as in northern Cameroon, 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" in northern Mali.²⁰ A French-led military intervention eventually expelled them from the region in early 2013.²¹ 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.²²

After the French-led military intervention, some of these Boko Haram members returned to northern Nigeria and used similar tactics of desert warfare to overrun Nigerian military barracks throughout Borno State.²³ This allowed Boko Haram to become the de-facto military power in large swaths of Borno State in 2014 and provided grounding for Shekau's announcements in 2014 that Boko Haram established an "Islamic State." The videos carried the same visual signatures of Islamic State's own releases and hinted that a pledge from Shekau to al-Baghdadi was in the making.²⁴ This control over territory in northeastern Nigeria, combined with Boko Haram's tactics, such as kidnapping and proudly enslaving the more than 250 schoolgirls from Chibok impressed the Islamic State and facilitated its eventual recognition of Boko Haram as ISWAP.

Coinciding with Boko Haram's merger with the Islamic State in March 2015, Nigeria and regional militaries from Niger, Chad and Cameroon launched incursions into northeastern Nigeria to oust Boko Haram from the territories it controlled. This, in turn, led Boko Haram to retaliate against all of these countries. In February 2015, Boko Haram sent a tandem of a male and female suicide bomber to attack Diffa, Niger. In June 2015, Boko Haram sent two suicide bombers to N'djamena, Chad to attack the government buildings. The Islamic State later claimed those operations.²⁵ Later, two other suicide attackers targeted markets in N'djamena, while other suicide bombers, often female, began to target islands in Lake Chad with regularity. Cameroon had been a target of Boko Haram's as early as 2014, even before the regional military offensive against the group. By 2015, Boko Haram targeted Cameroon's northern region as frequently as northern Nigeria, again also primarily using women as suicide bombers.²⁶

Cameroon's large-scale counterinsurgency effort, however, rolled back Boko Haram attacks in the country by 2016. Chad, too, managed to mitigate further Boko Haram attacks in the country by 2016, possibly based on the way it dealt with factions of Seleka in Central African Republic or rebels in Darfur, by coming to a tacit truce or understanding with Boko Haram. According to Chadian analysts, the country's President Idriss Deby needs both foreign aid to keep coming and Chad's trade route

through northern Cameroon to remain open. Chad may have made a deal with Boko Haram, perhaps pledging to not interfere in its operations so long as Boko Haram does not close the northern Cameroon transportation routes or attack Chad. At the same time, Chad may leverage its ability to “control” Boko Haram to demand concessions in terms of foreign aid from France and other Western countries with a subtle threat that if aid is not forthcoming Chad will allow Boko Haram to reign free around the Lake Chad region. Whatever the cause, after Boko Haram attacks, around Lake Chad in Chad in early 2016 and suicide bombings in N’djamena in June 2016 the country has managed stay relatively free of any further Boko Haram attacks since then.

Niger, however, has suffered the brunt of Boko Haram attacks in 2016, with several large-scale Boko Haram operations in Diffa and Bosso in the country’s southeast. A June 2016 raid by more than 100 Boko Haram militants destroyed a military barracks in Bosso.²⁷ Boko Haram filmed a video entitled: “Invading Niger: Scenes from Liberating the Nigerien Apostate Army Camp in the Area of Bosso.”²⁸ Boko Haram released the video via the Islamic State’s media channels in July 2016.

Boko Haram has also established cells in Senegal in 2015 and 2016. They, however, are not yet focused on carrying out attacks but rather recruitment, financing and training.²⁹ There are approximately 100 Nigerians and several dozen Senegalese with the Islamic State in Libya. With the Islamic State struggling to hold territory in Libya and Abu Musab al-Barnawi’s more internationally connected faction now in charge of West Africa province, Boko Haram could activate cells of Nigerian and Senegalese ex-foreign fighters in Libya. Activating those cells would launch ISWAP’s first attack outside of the Lake Chad region.

There are, however, no signs at this time Boko Haram is planting cells in Europe for attacks. Rather, the Islamic State is using its Syria network to carry out attacks in Europe. It is the Libya network that is likely to be responsible for attacks throughout Africa, including those under the banner of ISWAP.

RECENT ACTIVITY

From the time of Shekau’s pledge to al-Baghdadi until August 3, 2016, the formerly-bombastic Shekau was not seen publicly in any video or propaganda material, although still ISWAP recognized him as its wali (governor). During this time, Shekau and his former rival for Boko Haram leadership, Mamman Nur, were locked in a factional feud, with the two of them sending audios behind-the-scenes condemning one another.³⁰

Mamman Nur is wanted by Interpol and the FBI for masterminding the UN Headquarters attack in Abuja in August 2011 in coordination with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which killed more than 20 people.³¹ He accuses Shekau of being

dictatorial, religiously uncompromising, and killing or maiming (via sharia punishment) innocent Muslim civilians and burning down mosques over small “violations,” including being disloyal to Shekau, selling a goat against Shekau’s orders, or holding a government ID card. Nur’s criticisms of Shekau resemble those of other breakaway groups, such as the Yusufiya Islamic Movement in 2011 and AQIM-aligned Ansaru in 2012-2013.

Shekau was forced to back down after Nur’s condemnations and the Islamic State’s announcement on August 3 that Abu Musab al-Barnawi, who was aligned with Nur, was the new wali of ISWAP.³² In an audio clip released on Youtube, also on August 3, Shekau reverted to his former position and declared himself imam of Jamaatu ahlis Sunna li’Dawati wal Jihad (the original name of Boko Haram before the formation of ISWAP), thus showing that Shekau had left ISWAP.³³

Most likely Shekau lost his leadership role in ISWAP as early as mid-2015. This would explain why two of his audio-speeches in August and September 2015 were in ISWAP’s name but released outside of IS media channels, just like his audio on Youtube on August 3.³⁴ An ISWAP video released on April 1, 2016 declaring that Shekau was still leader (in response to rumors circulated online that he died) was released through ISWAP media channels.³⁵ But that video, which did not feature Shekau, was likely not produced by IS, given that the directorship of the video resembled typical pre-ISWAP Boko Haram videos. These two audios and video showed that Shekau’s hold on power in ISWAP and connection to Islamic State’s all-important media networks were tenuous.

The leadership change makes ISWAP’s future uncertain, especially in regards to its potential expansion. Both Nur and al-Barnawi are far more internationally connected than Shekau, which could prompt them to launch an attack outside the Lake Chad region. If the organization manages to successfully orchestrate attacks outside its home base, its power in the jihadi world and already-intense notoriety will only grow.

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