

BOKO HARAM

QUICK FACTS

Geographical Areas of Operation: Primarily Nigeria, but currently expanding operations throughout West Africa.

Numerical Strength (Members): Exact numbers unknown.

Leadership: Abubakar Shaka

Religious Identification: Sunni Islam

Quick Facts courtesy of the U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism

“Boko Haram” refers to a group of Islamist militant factions in northern Nigeria that trace their ideological origins to the slain imam Mohammed Yusuf (1970 – 2009). The faction of Boko Haram most directly connected to Yusuf is Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad, led by Yusuf’s former deputy, Abu Shekau, who emerged as the new leader 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, but Yusuf said that he believed that the Islamic State “should be established in Nigeria, and if possible all over the world, through preaching the faith (dawa’a).”

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. Boko Haram’s name since July 2010 – Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad – 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 more than 600 attacks since launching its first attack on Bauchi prison on September 7, 2010, and has been responsible for kill-

ing more than 3,800 people during that period. 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 claims to have connections to al-Qaeda.²

The potential for Boko Haram to evolve from being a local to a regional or global threat is clear, and there are signs that several Boko Haram factions have already abandoned Nigeria-oriented objectives in favor of embracing transnational militant objectives..

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 Hausa language translates to *Boko Haram* (*Boko* means "Book" or, more broadly, "Western education," and *Haram* means "sinful"). 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.³ Yusuf and his estimated 280,000 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.⁴

The reason for the acceptance of Yusuf's anti-Western and anti-education ideology is the belief among many northern Nigerian Muslims that northern Nigeria is losing its Muslim identity to Western influence and Christianity as well as the failure of the secular government to provide services to the people of northern Nigeria and warrant their allegiance. 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. In addition, southern Nigeria, whose population was almost completely animist before the arrival of the British, was by 1960 predominantly Christian, while northern Nigeria remained predominantly Muslim.

When democracy was institutionalized in Nigeria in 1999 after several failed attempts, 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.⁵ A Christian president is virtually guaranteed to win the presidency in Nigeria in every election cycle because southern voter turnout is much higher than northern voter turnout. Only the unofficial “rotational presidency” system, whereby political parties agree not to field Christian candidates every other term, allows for a Muslim to win the presidential election.

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.⁶ The Sultan of Sokoto even publicly backed the Christian southern candidate Goodluck Jonathan in his landslide presidential election victory against the northerner Muslim Muhammad Buhari in 2011.

As a result of the rise of democracy in Nigeria and 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 2002.⁷

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.”⁸ 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 (since they considered the Nigerian government to be illegitimate). The friction between the Nigerian Taliban and the local government led to frequent clashes, including one battle in early 2004 in which 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.⁹ The Nigerian security forces responded to the attacks by killing 18 Nigerian Taliban members, arresting a number of others, and destroying “Afghanistan.”

In 2004, Yusuf’s followers attempted four attacks on the 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 to Nigeria 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 between the Nigerian Taliban and the government 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 both the government and Yusuf’s followers blamed each other for instigating the clashes, it appears that such a clash was inevitable given Yusuf’s rising popularity in northeastern Nigeria, his rejection of the legitimacy of the Nigerian State, and his sermons encouraging his followers to hoard weapons in preparation for battle.¹⁰

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, and other states in northern Nigeria. In July 2010, Yusuf’s former deputy Abu Shekau, who the security forces believed was killed in the July 2009 clashes, emerged in a video statement as Boko Haram’s new leader. He issued a video message “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,” and warned that “*Jihad* has just begun... O America, die with your fury.”¹¹

GLOBAL REACH

Boko Haram has not carried out any attacks in the predominantly Christian oil-producing zones of southern Nigeria, including Lagos and Port Harcourt, or in any of the three countries that border Borno State—Niger, Chad and Cameroon. However, since April 2012, Boko Haram has allied with the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Ansar al-Din in the region of northern Mali that these Islamist militias call the “Islamic State of Azawad.” It has attacked

the forces of the secular Tuareg-led militia, National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and the Malian army. Although Boko Haram has carried out some attacks in Mali, its main focus remains northern Nigeria. Boko Haram's presence in northern Mali is largely a result of the group's commanders coming under pressure in northern Nigeria and their need for refuge across the border.

Although Boko Haram does not carry out attacks in Borno State's border region, it is active in the border region for the purposes of refuge, training, transit, planning attacks and recruitment. In Niger, Boko Haram cells were captured in Zinder in September 2012 and Diffa in February 2012 and December 2011. In September 2012, a long-time Boko Haram member and employee in Nigeria's immigration service confessed to having trained in assassinations and special operations with 15 other militants in Niger, some of whom were government security officers.¹² Meanwhile, Boko Haram members fighting in Mali are reported to be traveling to Mali "en masse," according to a MUJWA commander in Gao, Mali.¹³

Whereas Niger's vast desert makes it an ideal training ground and refuge for Boko Haram, Cameroon's similar characteristics to Nigeria, such as a relatively poor majority Muslim north and a wealthier majority Christian south, make it an ideal recruiting ground for Boko Haram. Cameroon has become a hub for Boko Haram ideological infiltration, and other reports suggest that Boko Haram is using Cameroon as a place of refuge. Boko Haram leader Abu Shekau reportedly fled to Ngaoundere in northern Cameroon after Boko Haram's January 20, 2012 attacks in Kano, which killed 186 people.

Other Boko Haram commanders, including the Christmas Day 2011 church bombings mastermind, Kabiru Sokoto, also 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 time that Shekau was reportedly hiding in Ngaoundere. Yet other reports of Boko Haram in northern Cameroon detail Cameroonian authorities arresting suspected Boko Haram members trying to enter the country, such as the case of 25 Arabic teachers suspected of Boko Haram ties attempting to cross from Nigeria into Cameroon, as well as local villagers reporting 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 also has a deep 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 reportedly received funding with the help of AQIM from organizations in the UK and Saudi Arabia, and Boko Haram's spokesman claimed with a degree of reliability that Boko Haram leaders met with al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia during the lesser *hajj* (*umrah*) in August 2011.¹⁴ In addition, the leader of a Boko Haram cell that was responsible for the 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.¹⁵ Three months before those attacks, in August 2012, a Boko Haram faction led by Abu Mohammed negotiated in Mecca with a Nigerian government team led by National Security Adviser Sambo Dasuki and advised by General Mohammed Shuwa. President Jonathan has rejected new talks with this faction, however, on the grounds that "there can be no dialogue" with Boko Haram because it is "faceless."¹⁶

Boko Haram also has significant connections to several other African countries: Burkina Faso, where Boko Haram recruits have reportedly trained; Senegal, where 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); Algeria, where AQIM militants reportedly offered to send millions of dollars in funding to Boko Haram to facilitate kidnappings of foreigners for the purpose of obtaining ransoms to buy weapons from AQIM; Somalia, where the Cameroonian Mamman Nur reportedly traveled and received explosives training from al-Shabaab before returning to Nigeria in the weeks before Boko Haram's attack on the UN Abuja Headquarters in Abuja on August 26, 2011;¹⁷ and Libya, a starting point from which man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) have entered Nigeria through Tuareg smuggling networks in Niger, possibly linked to AQIM and MUJWA. Such equipment can be used by Boko Haram to shoot down commercial airlines flying into Niger, Chad and Nigeria.¹⁸ In addition, dozens of Boko Haram members have reportedly trained in Afghanistan, and in northern Nigeria Boko Haram appears to have adopted tactics similar to the Taliban.¹⁹

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.

RECENT ACTIVITY

In 2012, Boko Haram expanded its area of operations to a geographic area twice the size of its area of operations in 2011. By the end of the year, attacks were still most intense in Boko Haram's hub of operations in Borno State and in Kano, but there have also been attacks in Kogi State in the geographic south of the country and in Sokoto State. Sokoto is in the far northwest of the country and 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 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, as the militias continued their push southwards into area nominally still under the control of the Malian forces.²⁰ Boko Haram's connections to these militias will likely be a major factor in the internationalization of Boko Haram's insurgency in 2013.

Towards the end of 2012, Boko Haram launched an offensive in the east of Nigeria in Adamawa, Taraba and Benue States with a series of attacks on rural towns at the base of the Mandara Mountains, which run along the Nigeria-Cameroon border. There were also a series of attacks in Zamfara in northwest Nigeria, where Boko Haram has not typically been active, leading to speculation that militants not affiliated to Boko Haram were causing instability in that part of country. In addition, the Boko Haram faction *Ansaru*,²¹ which emerged in January 2012, became more active toward the end of 2012 and began raising its profile through a series of online media releases, attacks on foreigners, and a prison break.

Ansaru embraces an ideology similar to MUJWA and has mimicked the primary tactic of MUJWA and AQIM: kidnapping foreigners. *Ansaru* was placed on the UK Proscribed Terror List on November 23 for kidnapping and killing a British and Italian hostage in Sokoto State in March 2012 while operating under the group name "al-Qaeda in the Lands Beyond the Sahel."²² According to the UK, Ansaru is "anti-Western" and "broadly aligned" to al-Qaeda. In its own words, Ansaru says it wants to restore the "dignity of Usman dan Fodio," who conquered Sokoto and most of northern Nigeria and influenced other *jihads* in the areas of West Africa where Boko Haram is present today (northern Cameroon, northern Nigeria, Niger, northern Mali and Senegal).²³ On December 21, *Ansaru* kidnapped a Frenchman in

Katsina, northwestern Nigeria. It warned that it would continue to attack the French government and French citizens until France ends its ban on the Islamic veil and its “major role in the planned attack on the Islamic state in northern Mali,” which is virtually the same warning that MUJAO’s and AQIM’s leaders have issued to France.²⁴ As of early January 2013, Boko Haram was reportedly fighting along with MUJWA, AQIM and Ansar al-Dina as they advanced into central Mopti region, Mali.²⁵

ENDNOTES

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[20] “Mali troops fire shots at Islamist fighters,” *News24*, January 8, 2013.

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

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