

American Foreign Policy Council

NIGERIA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 174,507,539

Area: 923,768 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, is composed of more than 250 ethnic groups; the following are the most populous and politically influential: Hausa and Fulani 29%, Yoruba 21%, Igbo (Ibo) 18%, Ijaw 10%, Kanuri 4%, Ibibio 3.5%, Tiv 2.5%

Religions: Muslim 50%, Christian 40%, indigenous beliefs 10%

Government Type: federal republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$268.7 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated August 2013)



Nigeria has been plagued since independence in 1960 by a number of organized militant groups. Among them are Niger Delta militants in southeastern Nigeria, whose grievances are based on extreme environmental degradation and political and economic disenfranchisement; ethnic-based militants in Nigeria's Middle Belt, where the predominantly Muslim northern region and predominantly Christian southern region meet, who often fight with ethnic groups of the opposite religion over land use; and Islamist militants in northern Nigeria, such as Boko Haram, who seek to establish an Islamic State in Nigeria, institutionalize Islamic Law and an Islamic identity, and pry Nigeria from its alliances with Western countries and reorient it towards the Islamic World.

Since September 2010, Boko Haram has become the greatest threat to Nigeria's unity and been responsible for more violence than any other militant movement in the country. More than 3,000 deaths have been attributed to Boko Haram in the last three years. Boko Haram is the most radical movement on the spectrum of Islamist movements in Nigeria, but it is divided internally between several factions and is but one of the thousands of Islamist movements in northern Nigeria. This chapter will discuss Boko Haram, focusing on the main faction Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (The Group for Preaching the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad), as well as other influential Nigerian Islamist groups.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

In addition to Boko Haram, which is northern Nigeria's most radical Salafist-jihadist group, there are thousands of other Islamist groups in Nigeria, including millenarian mahdists, Salafists, and Shi'a fundamentalists. There are also many religiously moderate, albeit socially conservative, Sufi groups of the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya orders, as well as Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI). JNI is a northern Nigerian Muslim umbrella organization led by the Sultan of Sokoto, who, in contrast to radical Islamist leaders, has called on Muslims to "pray fervently for peaceful co-existence in Nigeria and for Allah to put to shame those who are bent on chaos and unrest."¹

Nigerian universities have long been hotbeds of Islamist activity. Most leaders who are at the forefront of Islamic extremism in northern Nigeria have their roots in the universities, where they have been able to give theoretical cover to radical ideas and use the university platform to spread their message. Two noteworthy trends in Nigeria, which are consistent with the rest of the Islamic world, are that youths are the primary demographic group susceptible to radicalization and that males gravitate towards radicalization more than females.

This section describes four of the most prominent Islamist groups in northern Nigeria: Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (Boko Haram); Maitatsine/Kala Kato; Jama'at Izalat al Bid'a Wa Iqamat as Sunna (Izala); and the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN).

Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (Boko Haram)

The main faction of Boko Haram, Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad, traces its lineage to Mohammed Yusuf, a Nigerian preacher educated in Niger and Chad who maintained his headquarters in northeastern Nigeria's Borno State. He primarily taught that Western education and influence were blasphemous because they contradicted the Quran, and that service in the Nigerian government was blasphemous because Nigeria was not an Islamic

State. His teachings were so far beyond the mainstream that even other radical Salafists criticized Yusuf; one such scholar argued that if Muslims follow Yusuf's advice, then "pagan policemen [who serve in government] will kill and injure Muslims, and when taken to hospitals pagan doctors and nurses [with Western education] will attend to them."²

Although Yusuf began urging his followers, who numbered as many as 280,000 from Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, to prepare for conflict with the Nigerian government, he was not a jihadist.³ During his leadership from 2002 to 2009, his followers did not engage in coordinated violence against the state, although occasional clashes with Nigerian security forces occurred, usually because of the followers' refusal to obey local ordinances. In Yusuf's own words, he believed that *Sharia* law "should be established in Nigeria, and if possible all over the world, through preaching the faith (*dawa'a*)."⁴ Although Yusuf employed the Quranic notion of *taghut* when he preached that it is obligatory for Muslims to remove the government forcefully and replace it with an Islamic government, there is little evidence that he sought the "full-scale war" that Boko Haram has called for since Yusuf's death in July 2009.⁵

Yusuf was killed along with approximately 1,000 of his followers in a four-day series of clashes with the Nigerian government in northeastern Nigeria in July 2009. Afterwards, Yusuf's deputy, Abu Shekau, and other followers began a *jihad* against the Nigerian government and security forces, Christians, and moderate Muslim religious and political figures. Boko Haram's first attack was on September 7, 2010, when approximately 50 fighters attacked Bauchi Prison and freed fellow members detained in the July 2009 clashes, making good on the organization's promise that these prisoners would not spend the holiday *Eid al-Fitr* behind bars. Since then, Boko Haram has carried out more than 500 attacks and killed more than 3,000 people in an area of operations ranging from Boko Haram's hub of operations in Borno State in northeastern Nigeria, to Kogi State in the geographic south of Nigeria, to Sokoto in northwestern Nigeria.⁶

At a minimum, Boko Haram's main objectives are to: 1) remove religious authority from the Sultan of Sokoto and other traditional Muslim leaders and place religious authority in the hands of Boko Haram's religious leaders; 2) create an Islamic State in northern Nigeria or all of Nigeria; 3) prosecute the security officers who killed Mohammed Yusuf and other Muslims; and 4) obtain amnesty for all Boko Haram members in prison and compensation for the mosques and the homes of Muslims that have been destroyed in clashes with the government.

However, Boko Haram's killings of innocent Muslims during attacks on the government and security forces – both as collateral damage and as a means to intimidate Muslims in the general population – has been one factor that has bred dissent amongst the movement's members. In late January 2012, the internationally oriented group Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan (Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa, or "Ansaru") announced its formation in a video statement and in fliers distributed in Kano after Boko Haram's January 20 attacks left more than 150 Muslim civilians dead.⁷ Ansaru has since been proscribed as a terrorist group by the United Kingdom for its alleged involvement in the kidnapping and killing of two British and Italian men in Sokoto State in March 2012 and for being "broadly aligned" to al-Qaeda.⁸ Ansaru began raising its online media profile in November 2012 around the same time that its fighters carried out a prison break operation in Abuja on November 25.⁹ Ansaru then kidnapped a Frenchman in Katsina, 30 miles from the border with Niger, on December 21 and warned France that the prisoner's fate would be contingent on France rescinding the law banning the Islamic veil and ceasing its planned attack on the Islamic state in northern Mali.¹⁰

Other Boko Haram factions more moderate than Shekau's faction and Ansaru have reportedly offered to negotiate with the Nigerian government, but such groups have little credibility given that Shekau's faction and Ansaru are behind most of the violence in northern Nigeria, and any truce with the other factions is likely to be inconsequential.¹¹

Maitatsine/Kala Kato

Kala Kato, which means "mere man" in reference to the Prophet, claims to be an offshoot of the Maitatsine sect of the 1980s, which was led by the Cameroonian Mohammed Marwa. Marwa claimed to be a new Prophet of Islam and was known as the "Maitatsine," meaning "the one who damns." Even more extreme than Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf, Marwa condemned anyone who read any book other than the Quran or used watches, cars, bicycles, televisions, cigarettes or other products that reflected Western life. An antecedent not only to Kala Kato but also Boko Haram, Marwa and his thousands of followers clashed with Nigerian authorities in a battle in Kano in 1980 in which Marwa was killed. Subsequent battles to suppress his followers also took place in Borno State in 1982; Gongola State (present-day Gombe State) in 1984; and Bauchi State in 1985. In December 2009, Kala Kato engaged in a series of riots and clashes with the Nigerian security forces in Bauchi State, resulting in the deaths of 70 people, including soldiers, policemen, women and 15 children. The cause of the clashes was Kala Kato's violation of an ordinance against preaching outdoors, which was imposed following the Boko Haram clashes of July 2009.¹² Kala Kato remains one of the

most obscure Islamist groups in northern Nigeria, and its leader, Mallam Salisu, says that Kala Kato “has no link with the Boko Haram followers.”¹³

Jama'at Izalat al Bid'a Wa Iqamat as Sunna (Society of Eradication of Innovation and Implementation of the Sunna) (Izala)

The Izala Movement in Nigeria is an anti-Sufi Salafist movement that opposes *bid'a* (innovation) and seeks direct interpretation of the Quran. It was established with funding from Saudi Arabia and has opposed the “Westernization” of Nigerian society. One of its founders, Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, blamed northern Nigeria’s sultans and emirs for their failure to “defend Islam.” With many institutions all over the country and influence at the local, state and even federal levels, Izala has become one of the largest Islamist societies not only in Nigeria, but also in the neighboring countries of Chad, Niger, and Cameroon. One reason for Izala’s success is its emphasis on educating women and self-sufficiency in matters of finances. The implementation of *Sharia* law in twelve northern states since 2000 provided a common front for the various divided factions within the Izala movement, with Izala claiming to have been the “initiator” of the pro-*Sharia* movement.

Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN)

This IMN is distinct from other Islamist groups in Nigeria because it is supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran, whereas most other groups like the Izala are supported by Saudi Arabia and other wealthy Sunni Muslim sponsors. The leader of the IMN, Shaykh Ibrahim el-Zakzaky, alleges that the IMN is only an “Islamic Movement,” rather than either “Shi’a” or “fundamentalist,” but the common perception of the IMN in Nigeria is that it is in fact a Shi’a movement.¹⁵ Although the IMN’s members are mostly Shi’a, the IMN resembles Izala and Boko Haram in that it believes secular authorities should not hold power and that northern Nigeria’s traditional religious rulers have allowed government abuses against Muslims by supporting Christian politicians and refusing to stand up for Muslims.¹⁶ The Sultan of Sokoto, for example, supported a southerner, Christian Goodluck Jonathan, in his presidential candidacy in 2011.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Ibrahim el-Zakzaky and his followers petitioned for the implementation of *Sharia* law and sought to bring about an Islamic revolution similar to that which occurred in Iran in 1979. In the 1990s, the IMN carried out a series of attacks in northern Nigeria, the most gruesome of which was the 1994 beheading in Kano of Gideon Alakuka, an Igbo trader who was accused (likely falsely) of desecrating the Quran.¹⁷ When *Sharia* Law was instituted in twelve states of northern Nigeria in 2000, el-Zakzaky, like Izala, believed there was an over-emphasis on corporal punishments; that the northern governors were illegitimate since they did not come

to power through Islamic parties; and that the governors were dishonest people “who amputate the hands of poor people, who steal peanuts, while those who steal millions of tax-payers’ money go scot-free.”¹⁸ Since 2001, the IMN has committed itself to involvement “in national or international issues that are of concern to Muslims, as well as in solidarity with oppressed sections of the Muslim *Ummah* such as the Palestinians and Iraqis.” The movement has also voiced support for Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, implying that it would attack U.S. interests in Nigeria if the United States or Israel attacks Iran.¹⁹ El-Zakzaky has also made frequent and well-publicized visits to Iran.²⁰

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Nigeria’s 165 million people are divided almost evenly between Muslims and Christians, with Muslims forming the majority in the northern half of the country and Christians forming the majority in the southern half of the country. With more than 80 million Christians and Muslims, Nigeria is both the most populous Christian and Muslim country in Africa. The Hausa and Fulani (often referred to as the “Hausa-Fulani” because of their close cultural interaction for the past several centuries) constitute the largest single Muslim ethnic group in Nigeria and about one-fourth of Nigeria’s total population. The Muslim Kanuri ethnic group predominates in Yobe and Borno States and is about 5% of Nigeria’s population. The Yorubas of southwest Nigeria are about 60% Christian and one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria along with the Hausa-Fulanis and the Igbos of southeast Nigeria. The estimated group of 12 million Yoruba Muslims is second only to the Hausa-Fulanis in terms of total Muslim population in an ethnic group. There are dozens of other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups in Nigeria, including the Shuwa Arabs of Borno State, who trace their lineage to the Arab tribes who migrated into northeastern Nigeria from the Sudan centuries ago.²¹

Almost all Muslims in Nigeria are Sunni Muslims of the Maliki school. However, about 10% of Nigeria’s Muslims are Shi’a, and they can be found throughout northern Nigeria, particularly in Sokoto State. The number of Shi’a Muslims has increased since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which brought an Islamic government to power in Iran. Ibrahim el-Zakzaky has been the leader of the Shi’a movement in Nigeria with the financial and ideological support of Iran. The rise of Shiism in Nigeria has led to a low-intensity rivalry between the majority Sunni population and Shi’as, and there have been instances of Sunni mobs or Sunni leaders ordering the destruction of Shi’a mosques and attacking Shi’a communities.²²

However, conflict is most frequent between Muslims and Christians as they

compete for a greater share of political and economic power in Nigeria. Election season tends to generate the most tension. Muslims tend to believe that, since Muslims constitute more than 70% of Nigeria's population, the 2011 victory of the Christian presidential candidate Goodluck Jonathan over the Muslim candidate Muhammad Buhari (by 58% to 32%) was likely fraudulent. Anger over this issue has contributed to an increasing sense of marginalization among Nigerian Muslims. Boko Haram has exploited this anti-democracy and anti-Christian tension by staging dozens of attacks on churches and Christians in northern Nigeria.

Over-population also contributes to religious tensions as Muslim groups from northern Nigeria migrate into Christian areas in the Middle Belt, prompting competition over land use, as well as competition between the faiths to proselytize new members. The Sultan of Sokoto, who also leads the Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), has said that "The rise of secularism and the increasing activities of western evangelical organizations have made it all the more urgent that the message of Islam shall be heard loud and clear and the JNI must play a leading role in this endeavor."²³

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Although the word "secular" is not specifically used in the Nigerian Constitution, Section 101 of the Constitution provides that, "The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State Religion." Nonetheless, in practice religion plays such a large role in the state that Nigeria is not truly secular, and many religious leaders and citizens agree. As the Sultan of Sokoto said, "Anyone saying Nigeria is a secular nation doesn't understand the meaning of the word secular. There is nothing secular about the Nigerian nation since whatever we do will always put Islam and Christianity in the forefront."²⁴

Islam, for example, enters the governmental sphere in several ways: the country observes Islamic holidays such as *Eid el-Fitr*, *Eid al-Adha* and *Milad al-Nabi*; the government is involved in organizing the *Hajj* pilgrimage; Islamic slogans in the Arabic language are featured on the country's currency and army insignias; Islamic sermons are delivered in public places; and, most significant of all, twelve states in northern Nigeria have implemented *Sharia* Law since 2000.

This controversial implementation is inextricably linked with politics, as many northern governors seem to support *Sharia* Law less out of religious devotion than out of a desire to portray themselves as "defenders of faith" in order to gain political advantage and to mitigate their lack of support from

mainstream Muslims. Through a veneer of dedication to Islam, these politicians attempt to win the support of the masses and stifle criticism or, in many cases, investigations into their corrupt behavior. Some religious scholars have argued that the traditional rulers, including the sultans and emirs, who have no formal authority but serve as political advisers and maintain influence through their social status, are really opposed to *Sharia* Law because it does not permit hereditary succession, which is the basis of their positions.²⁵ Izala, the IMN and Boko Haram all believe that the Sultan and other traditional rulers are apostates for accepting a version of “half-*Sharia*” in which secular institutions like elections and democracy exist side by side with Islam.

Although Islam is not formally a state institution in Nigeria, Muslims organizations, including JNI, Izala and the IMN, play an important role in the country. With the 2000 advent of *Sharia* Law, these organizations have begun to erode several pillars of the secular nature of the country. Moreover, Boko Haram seeks to completely overthrow the secular and the traditional Muslim establishment in Nigeria and create an Islamic State based on the model of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Although achievement of this goal is unlikely, Islamist groups are gaining more power in West Africa, while in North Africa and the Arab World, political Islam is now becoming mainstream. A convergence of these forces makes it likely that the secular nature of the Nigerian state will continue to face a challenge from regional Islamist forces, which may in turn erode Nigerian Muslims’ support for the secular authorities governing their country.

ENDNOTES

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