



## Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province

Boko Haram emerged in the early 2000s as a small Sunni Islamic sect in Nigeria advocating a strict interpretation and implementation of Islamic law, and has evolved since 2009 to become one of the world's deadliest terrorist groups. The nickname *Boko Haram* was given by local communities to describe the group's narrative that Western education and culture are corrupting influences and *haram* ("forbidden"). The group called itself *Jama'a Ahl as-Sunna Li-da'wa wal-Jihad* (roughly translated from Arabic as "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad"). In 2015, its leadership pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL), and renamed itself as the Islamic State's West Africa Province (aka ISWAP, ISIS-WA, hereafter IS-WA). The group, still widely referred to as Boko Haram, subsequently split into two factions. Both pose an ongoing security threat in Nigeria and the surrounding Lake Chad Basin region.

Civilians in Nigeria's impoverished, predominately Muslim northeast have borne the brunt of Boko Haram's violence, which also impacts the border areas of Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. By some estimates Boko Haram has killed more than 15,200 people since 2011, including over 950 in 2017. The conflict has sparked a major humanitarian emergency, with more than 2.4 million people in the region displaced.

Boko Haram has attracted international headlines with its brutal tactics and targeting of civilians, including the abduction of over 270 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok in 2014. Amnesty International estimated a year later that Boko Haram had abducted more than 2,000 women and girls in total, forcing some to participate in attacks. UNICEF estimates that in 2014-2016 nearly 20% of Boko Haram suicide bombers were children, 75% of them girls.

Boko Haram conducted its first lethal attack against an international institution in August 2011, with the bombing of the United Nations building in Nigeria's capital, Abuja. That has been its most prominent assault on an international (non-regional) target. Boko Haram has issued threats to attack the United States, but to date no U.S. citizens are known to have been kidnapped or killed by the group.

In mid-2014, Boko Haram launched a territorial offensive that Nigerian forces struggled to reverse until regional forces, primarily from Chad, launched a counteroffensive in early 2015. Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, elected later that year, has taken a more aggressive approach toward countering the group, which has since reverted to asymmetric attacks, operating from remote border areas in the Lake Chad Basin region.

### Leadership and Group Divisions

Abubakar Shekau assumed leadership of Boko Haram after its founding leader Mohammed Yusuf was killed in police custody in 2009. Analysts suggest that Shekau fostered divisions in the group with his brutal and indiscriminate

tactics against Muslim civilians, including his use of child suicide bombers. In 2016, a new faction emerged, led by Yusuf's son, Abu Musab al Barnawi, a former Boko Haram spokesman. Barnawi renounced attacks against Muslim civilians; he claims to focus on government and security force targets. In August 2016, IS leadership recognized Barnawi as IS-WA's new *wali* ("governor"), notionally replacing Shekau, who denounced Barnawi as an apostate. He has not renounced his allegiance to Islamic State.

The name "Boko Haram" is still often used to refer to both factions, reflecting their common history. There is also ongoing debate over the extent to which the groups are distinct. Many, including the U.S. government, now refer to Shekau's faction as Boko Haram and Barnawi's as IS-WA. In February 2018, a U.S. Africa Command official described IS-WA as being a "longer term strategic threat" than the Shekau faction.

The United States has designated both groups as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs): Boko Haram in 2013 and IS-WA in 2018. In 2012, the State Department designated three individuals linked to Boko Haram, including Shekau, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs), and in 2013 it offered \$7 million for information on his location through its Rewards for Justice program. The two other individuals were cited as having close links to a regional terrorist network, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and have since been reportedly killed or arrested. In 2015, two others linked to Boko Haram were designated as SDGTs: Mustapha Chad, a Chadian commander, and Mohammed (Mamman) Nur, who is rumored to be aligned with Barnawi. He was designated as an SDGT in 2018.

### Objectives and Areas of Operation

Boko Haram has called for an uprising against secular authority and for 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 sectarian tensions in the country. According to the group's narrative, the state and Christians have collaborated against Nigerian Muslims. Most of Shekau's victims have nonetheless been Muslim, consistent with his exclusivist interpretation of Islam, which justifies brutality against moderates. Barnawi has pledged to shift the group's focus to Western, Christian, and secular targets.

Key factors that have given rise to the insurgency include a legacy of overlapping intercommunal, Muslim-Christian, and north-south tensions within Nigeria and 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 incentives, social pressures, and coercion have also been cited in studies on the group's recruitment. Defectors and

former captives of Boko Haram often face persecution or discrimination after returning home.

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, Boko Haram attempted several attacks in Lagos, but to date its reach in southern Nigeria appears limited. In 2014, the group launched attacks into northern Cameroon, southern Niger, and eastern Chad, prompting clashes with the security forces of those countries. Attacks in neighboring countries increased after those militaries became involved in the regional offensive against the group in 2015. Boko Haram has also been linked to various kidnapping operations in northern Cameroon.

**Figure 1. The Lake Chad Basin Region**



### Size, Financing, and Capabilities

Estimates of Boko Haram's size vary. U.S. military officials suggest that it has roughly 1,500 fighters, while IS-WA may have up to 3,500. Boko Haram's membership appears to draw predominately from the minority ethnic Kanuri community in northeast Nigeria, where it has been most active, but both factions are reported to have fighters from the other Lake Chad Basin countries as well. Experts suggest Boko Haram funds its operations largely through criminal activity, including bank robberies, kidnappings, assassinations for hire, trafficking, cattle rustling, and extortion. The group reportedly collected several million dollars in ransoms in exchange for the release of Chibok schoolgirls. Both factions have seized vehicles, weapons, and ammunition from the Nigerian and Nigerien armies.

### Relationship with IS and Al Qaeda

In March 2015, Shekau released a statement pledging loyalty to the leader of the Syria/Iraq-based Islamic State. An IS spokesman welcomed the pledge, urging followers to travel to West Africa to support Boko Haram. 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 part of the Islamic State may have provided recruitment and fundraising opportunities by raising Boko Haram's profile, but the extent to which affiliation has facilitated operational ties is unclear. Such ties may also hold less promise today given territorial losses by "core" IS. Potential links between Boko Haram/IS-WA and IS affiliates in Libya may be of more immediate concern.

Analysts warn that Boko Haram's leadership dispute may diversify the threat rather than alleviating it. Some argue that AQIM, which had links to Boko Haram prior to its alignment with IS, may seek to build ties with one or both of the factions, although evidence for this is scarce.

### Outlook

The significance and consequences of Boko Haram's leadership dispute are subject to discussion. While some argue that the "internal civil war" suggests Boko Haram's degradation, others downplay the importance of the divisions, noting that the group has long been fractious. Regardless, analysts agree that the threat posed by both factions persists, as do the factors contributing to militancy in the Lake Chad Basin region.

The regional military offensive in 2015 and subsequent operations 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 has sought to improve regional coordination, but the African Union-authorized, donor-backed Multinational Joint Task Force has struggled to provide security in territory regained from Boko Haram, threatening the return of displaced populations.

The Nigerian military has repeatedly claimed to have militarily defeated Boko Haram, but many analysts disagree with the assertion. Multiple factors have undermined the military's response to the insurgency. Corruption is systemic and drains resources from the security apparatus. By many accounts, Nigerian troops have not been adequately resourced or equipped to counter the insurgency, despite a substantial defense budget by regional standards. Abuses by Nigerian forces during operations—including mass detentions of civilians—and civilian casualties during operations have taken a toll and reportedly fueled extremist recruitment. The Nigerian army launched Operation Safe Corridor mid-2016 to encourage defections and facilitate the rehabilitation of former militants. Reviews of its implementation and impact are mixed.

U.S.-Nigeria relations were strained under President Buhari's predecessor, due to disagreements over Nigeria's counterterrorism approach and U.S. concern over the military's human rights record. U.S. counterterrorism assistance to Nigeria has been limited in comparison to that provided to its Lake Chad Basin neighbors, which have received increasing amounts of military aid to address the threat. The U.S.-Nigeria security relationship has improved since 2015, but slowly. In 2016, the Obama Administration notified Congress of the sale of 12 military aircraft and related equipment to Nigeria. The deal was subsequently frozen over concerns regarding Nigeria's procedures to prevent civilian casualties following airstrikes on an IDP camp, but was approved by the Trump Administration in late 2017. While counterterrorism cooperation has improved since President Buhari and President Trump took office, challenges remain as the two countries seek to improve security cooperation.

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