



Boko Haram and the Islamic State’s West Africa Province

Since 2009, an Islamist insurgency based in northeastern Nigeria has killed tens of thousands of people and triggered a massive humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad Basin region of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger (see **Figure 1**). Founded in the early 2000s as a Salafist Sunni Muslim reform movement, Boko Haram, which roughly translates to “Western culture is forbidden,” has evolved into one of the world’s deadliest Islamist armed groups. Since 2016, an Islamic State (IS)-affiliated splinter faction, the Islamic State’s West Africa Province (IS-WA, aka ISIS-WA or ISWAP) has surpassed Boko Haram in size and capacity, and now ranks among IS’s most active affiliates.

Boko Haram and IS-WA have proven resilient despite military pressure. Regional governments have periodically reasserted control over contested territory and killed or detained scores of alleged militants, yet security gains often have been short-lived. Human rights groups also have documented extensive human rights violations by regional militaries. The United States has provided counterterrorism and other security assistance to governments in the region and obligated more than \$2.3 billion for the Lake Chad Basin humanitarian response since 2015. As of mid-2020, nearly 13 million people required some form of aid in the Lake Chad Basin region, and over 3 million people were displaced, according to U.N. estimates.

Background and Leadership

Boko Haram originated in northeast Nigeria, in an area long afflicted by poverty and economic inequality, corrupt and contentious politics, and fierce intra-communal debate over the proper role of Islam in governance and social life. Its founder, Muhammad Yusuf, preached an especially militant interpretation of Sunni Islam, rejecting Western education and influence as well as more moderate Islamic practices. The group launched an armed uprising in several northern cities in 2009. In response, state security forces executed Yusuf and killed hundreds of his adherents. Boko Haram regrouped under Yusuf’s deputy, Abubakar Shekau, expanding its operations from suicide bombings and other targeted attacks to larger raids and assertions of territorial control. The group gained notoriety for its brutal tactics, including the use of women and children as suicide bombers, and drew global attention with its 2014 abduction of 276 girls from a school in Chibok, northeast Nigeria.

In 2015, Shekau pledged loyalty to the Islamic State, and Boko Haram rebranded as IS-WA. An ensuing leadership dispute fractured the group; “core” IS leadership recognized another IS-WA leader, and Shekau’s faction reassumed the group’s original name. Shekau remains Boko Haram’s leader, while IS-WA has undergone a series of leadership changes. A third, smaller faction that operates near Lake Chad has reportedly allied with Shekau. Overlapping areas of operation can complicate the attribution of attacks.

Figure 1. The Lake Chad Basin Region



Source: CRS graphic.

Operations and Presence

IS-WA. In 2020, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) publicly estimated that IS-WA had between 3,500 and 5,000 fighters, primarily operating in northeast Nigeria near Lake Chad and in border zones of Niger and Cameroon. IS-WA initially distanced itself from the indiscriminate violence associated with Boko Haram, renouncing the killing of Muslim civilians and pledging to focus attacks on state targets and Christians. It reportedly has provided basic services and law enforcement in areas under its control, potentially building ties with some communities—though it also has attacked humanitarian personnel and imposed taxes on local trade and agriculture, sometimes in exchange for protection and other services. Moreover, IS-WA recently claimed several mass-casualty attacks on Muslim civilians, which some observers attribute to a leadership change in February 2020 favoring more hardline commanders.

The extent of IS-WA’s ties with IS global leadership, and with other IS affiliates, is debated. Core IS reportedly has provided financial and technical support to the group, but IS-WA appears to remain operationally independent and focused on local objectives. According to U.N. sanctions investigators, IS-WA maintains a “logistical relationship” with the Islamic State-Greater Sahara (IS-GS), based in West Africa’s Sahel region; global IS media recently have sought to portray IS-GS as part of or subordinate to IS-WA.

Boko Haram. With some 1,500-2,000 fighters, according to a DOD estimate published in 2020, Boko Haram operates primarily in northeast Nigeria and northern Cameroon. Annual fatalities attributed to Boko Haram have fallen from a 2014 peak of roughly 4,500 to less than 1,000 in 2020, per Council on Foreign Relations figures. Nonetheless, the group remains capable of overrunning military bases, staging attacks in urban areas, raiding villages, and taxing local commerce. Some experts contend that Boko Haram is seeking to expand into northwest Nigeria by forming ties with local jihadists and criminal actors in that area, though the extent and implications of such efforts remain uncertain.

Local and International Responses

Regional security forces have struggled to contend with a threat that has adapted in response to military pressure. In

2013-2015, Boko Haram mounted an offensive in which it came to assert control over extensive territory in northeast Nigeria and carried out its first large attacks in adjacent areas of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon. A subsequent regional campaign led by Chadian forces recaptured much of this self-declared state, prompting Boko Haram to revert to asymmetric attacks and increasingly target Nigeria's neighbors. Ensuing Chadian-led regional offensives have periodically disrupted militant strongholds and supply lines, but Nigeria's government has consistently struggled to restore stability in cleared zones. Since a surge in attacks on Nigerian security forces in 2018, the Nigerian military has concentrated troops in urban "super camps," ceding control over highways and rural areas and limiting humanitarian access and civilian protection beyond select garrison towns.

Regional military coordination has improved with the 2014 activation of the African Union-authorized Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF), comprising troops from Nigeria along with Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, but low capacity and interoperability gaps limit its effectiveness. Meanwhile, Nigerian and Cameroonian authorities have encouraged the emergence of local vigilante groups that have aided military efforts through intelligence gathering and patrolling. Residents in both countries have accused militias of abuses, however, including extortion and sexual violence; some groups reportedly have recruited children. Prospects for their future disarmament are uncertain.

In 2016, the Nigerian government launched Operation Safe Corridor, a de-radicalization program for ex-combatants. Several hundred men and boys reportedly have "graduated" from the program, though the extent of their reintegration into society is unclear. Observers also have raised various concerns related to Safe Corridor, including over poor screening processes whereby civilians reportedly have been misclassified as ex-combatants, inhumane camp conditions, and the exclusion of women and girls from the program. De-radicalization efforts in Niger have been slow to advance, and are nascent, at best, in Cameroon and Chad.

Security Force Abuses and Other Issues

Human rights groups have accused security forces in the region of extensive abuses, including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary arrest and torture. In 2020, Amnesty International estimated that "likely more than 10,000" alleged militants, including many children, had died in Nigerian custody since 2011 due to excessive heat, overcrowding, and inadequate food, water, and health services. The Nigerian Air Force, which has received U.S. training and equipment, has reportedly killed hundreds of civilians during air raids. Military abuses may discourage combatant defections and/or drive recruitment by stoking a sense of victimization by the government. In 2020, the International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor closed a preliminary inquiry into abuses committed in northeast Nigeria by Boko Haram, IS-WA, and the Nigerian military, finding evidence sufficient to merit a full investigation. Nigerian authorities, for their part, have conducted inquiries into alleged abuses, but findings generally have not been made public, and few personnel appear to have been held to account. Meanwhile, the government has accused human rights groups of undermining its counterinsurgency efforts.

Defense sector corruption has reportedly sapped military effectiveness. In Nigeria, procurement fraud, patronage-

based personnel management, and outright embezzlement have left frontline troops severely under-resourced. A 2018 study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found that "decades of unchecked corruption have hollowed out the Nigerian military and security services."

U.S. Engagement and Considerations

The United States has provided military capacity-building assistance for national security forces (among which Niger has been the largest cumulative recipient), sales of military equipment (particularly to Nigeria, which has the region's largest military budget), and logistics and advisory support for the MNJTF. In 2020, under the Trump Administration's effort to reduce and reorient the U.S. military footprint in Africa, U.S. Africa Command ended an intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operation based in Cameroon that deployed in 2015 and involved up to 300 U.S. military personnel. Past engagement also included the temporary deployment, in 2014, of an unmanned aerial vehicle and roughly 80 U.S. military personnel to assist in efforts to recover the schoolgirls that Boko Haram abducted from Chibok. U.S. humanitarian aid for the region totaled \$469 million in FY2019 and \$499 million in FY2020.

Several factors have complicated U.S. support for regional counterterrorism efforts, including human rights concerns. In 2014, the Obama Administration blocked a transfer of U.S.-origin military helicopters from Israel to Nigeria, reportedly in part due to human rights concerns, and in 2017, it froze the sale of 12 A-29 Super Tucano attack aircraft to Nigeria after a Nigerian jet bombed a displaced persons camp. The Trump Administration later approved the latter sale, over opposition from some Members of Congress; delivery of the aircraft is due in 2021. U.S. "Leahy laws," which prohibit most kinds of U.S. security assistance to foreign security force units or individuals implicated in gross human rights violations, have also resulted in some U.S. aid being curtailed or redirected.

Governments in the Lake Chad Basin region face competing security priorities, which may draw attention and resources away from U.S.-backed efforts to counter Boko Haram and IS-WA. In Cameroon, for instance, some personnel from an elite U.S.-trained battalion reportedly have redeployed from the IS-WA-affected north to the west since the onset of a separate secessionist conflict in 2017. More broadly, governance deficits and development challenges across the Lake Chad Basin region may impede the realization of enduring security gains, notwithstanding U.S. security capacity-building efforts. Some Members of Congress may debate whether U.S. engagement with and assistance to the region are appropriately weighted between security, development, and governance activities.

The United States has designated Boko Haram, IS-WA, and a separate splinter faction known as Ansaru (whose present operational status is debated, after a period of dormancy) as Foreign Terrorist Organizations. The State Department also has designated several associated individuals as Specially Designated Global Terrorists subject to U.S. sanctions.

Tomás F. Husted, Analyst in African Affairs

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