



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER

at West Point



Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines:

Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency

Editor:
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Introduction

As we enter the 10th year of the Boko Haram insurgency, Nigeria and its neighbors face an ever-evolving threat. Boko Haram is now factionalized, split into Boko Haram led by Abubakr Shekau; the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) led by Abu Musab al-Barnawi; and the formerly al-Qa`ida-aligned, but now operationally dormant, Ansaru. Despite the military's recovery of territory seized by Boko Haram and ISWAP since 2015, both factions remain active. ISWAP continues to raid military barracks and has even engaged in combat with U.S. forces in Niger, while Boko Haram carries out unrestrained violence against the Nigerian population. Since 2014, there has also been an uptick in 'suicide' bombings, especially by females and young girls, and attacks on the most vulnerable civilians in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. The factionalization of Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Ansaru has complicated counterinsurgency efforts and prospects for a negotiated resolution to the soon-to-be decade-long insurgency.

While Nigeria and its neighbors Cameroon, Chad, and Niger bear the brunt of the violence as well as counterinsurgency responsibilities, the United States and other international actors also seek to support counterinsurgency and humanitarian relief efforts. This report, *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency*, strives to provide all actors involved in countering the insurgency, from military to NGO professionals to academics and government officials, with unique, primary source-based, and diverse perspectives on the conflict. This double peer-reviewed report stands in contrast to much of the literature on Boko Haram, which has relied on secondary sources and "catch-all" explanations. Rather, this report engages in deep explorations of six themes related to the insurgency that have often been overlooked and understudied:

- Ideology: the influence of Islamic State theological guidance and notions of *takfir* (excommunication) on ISWAP and Boko Haram leaders
- Gender: the impact and meaning of Boko Haram's deployment of female suicide bombers, contrasted with the Islamic State's caliphate project
- Leadership: the ability of Boko Haram leader Abubakr Shekau to command loyalty in the specific socio-cultural environment where he operates
- Counterinsurgency: the challenges of integrating military and civilian efforts in counterinsurgency efforts
- Expansion: the spillover of the insurgency from Nigeria into the border countries of Cameroon, Chad, and Niger
- Alliances: the potential for any of the factions to renew an alliance with al-Qa`ida

The authors—three Nigerians, two Americans, and two from the United Kingdom—reflect diverse backgrounds both professionally and in their understandings of the insurgency.

Abdulbasit Kassim is a Ph.D. student at Rice University, focusing on African Islamic movements and international relations in sub-Saharan Africa. His article, "Boko Haram's Internal Civil War: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism," evaluates the role of ideology in the insurgency and the Islamic State's management of the factional infighting between Boko Haram and ISWAP.

Elizabeth Pearson is an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded Ph.D. candidate in War Studies at King's College London and an Associate Fellow at the London-based think-tank Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). Her article, "Wilayat Shahidat: Boko Haram, Islamic State and the Question of the Female Suicide Bomber," explores the difference between Boko Haram's unprecedented reliance on female suicide bombing and the Islamic State's contrasting reluctance to adopt female violence. It presents original data on female suicide bombings by Boko Haram and argues that both the Islamic State and Boko Haram are willing to subvert theological rules on female violence, and their

own ideologies, to tactical ends, and that gender-based violence is a core component of their jihads.

Dr. Atta Barkindo is the director of The Kukah Centre in Abuja, Nigeria. His article, “Abubakr Shekau: Boko Haram’s Underestimated Corporatist-Strategic Leader,” provides an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural, historical, and linguistic environment within which Boko Haram operates and how despite his notorious eccentricities Abubakr Shekau exploits this environment to win and command loyalty from followers.

Idayat Hassan is the director of the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), an Abuja-based policy advocacy and research organization with a focus on deepening democracy and development in West Africa. Dr. Zacharias Pieri is a lecturer in International Relations and Security Studies at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee. Their article, “The Rise and Risks of Nigeria’s Civilian Joint Task Force: Implications for Post-Conflict Recovery in Northeastern Nigeria,” evaluates how the counter-Boko Haram vigilante group, Civilian JTF, has been a positive but also, at times, a negative factor in counterinsurgency efforts.

Omar Mahmoud is a researcher at the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) focusing on the Lake Chad Basin and Horn of Africa regions. His article, “Local, Global or In-Between? Boko Haram’s Messaging, Strategy, Membership and Support Networks,” examines how Boko Haram’s operations have changed over time from an original locus in Nigeria to attacks in all countries in the Lake Chad region, including Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.

Jacob Zenn, this report’s editor, is an adjunct assistant professor at Georgetown University’s Security Studies Program (SSP) and a fellow on African and Eurasian Affairs of The Jamestown Foundation. His article, “Boko Haram’s Fluctuating Affiliations: Future Prospects for Re-alignment with Al-Qa`ida,” examines Boko Haram’s transition from a close operational relationship with al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb in the beginning of its jihad in 2009 to its loyalty to the Islamic State in 2015 and assesses whether al-Qa`ida will reenter Nigeria and what the impact of al-Qa`ida in Nigeria in the future may be.

The authors hope and expect that these articles will contribute needed analysis and new perspectives to the literature on Boko Haram and the insurgency in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, and al-Qa`ida and Islamic State activities more broadly.