



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER

at West Point



Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines:

Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency



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Executive Summary

Ten years ago when scholars and analysts wrote about security in Africa, northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad region rarely registered in their assessments.¹ That may have been understandable: there was still no insurgency in the region, and the group popularly known as Boko Haram,² which literally means “Western education is sinful” in the Hausa language, was considered “moderate revivalists attempting to implement social change.”³ The violent potential of Boko Haram was neither recognized nor anticipated.

Yet the launch of Boko Haram’s insurgency in 2009 immediately forced observers and scholars to reassess the threat it posed. Although some analysts denied at first that Boko Haram was receiving training, funding, and weapons from other jihadi groups, officials and researchers in West Africa recognized early that Boko Haram had cultivated networks to al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Shabaab.⁴ There is evidence that these two groups, in particular, assisted Boko Haram in rapidly increasing its tactical sophistication, such as with suicide bombings, after 2009.⁵

By 2016, Boko Haram was not only ranked the “most deadly” jihadi group in Africa, but also the world.⁶ On the verge of the 10-year anniversary of the group’s launch of its jihad—which will be in 2019—Boko Haram rivals and in some ways has surpassed its jihadi counterparts in AQIM in Algeria and the Sahel and al-Shabaab in Somalia and East Africa in tactical sophistication, lethality, and territory under its control. Boko Haram’s learning curve has indisputably been fast.

The loss of human life as a result of the insurgency is estimated at approximately 30,000 people.⁷ Boko Haram has devastated much of the countryside in northeastern Nigeria and neighboring regions of Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps are scattered across the border regions of these countries, and the task of returning IDPs to their homes has been as difficult as it has been dangerous.

Attacks and abuses that Nigerians would have never thought possible in the country have become commonplace: girls as suicide bombers, the reinstatement of “slavery,” mass immolation of students in their dormitories, among others. In this sense, Boko Haram has also tested the limits of what is permissible in jihadi ideology.

Nigeria, once considered the Giant of Africa, has seen its influence in West Africa reduced because of

1 Robert L. Feldman, “The Root Causes of Terrorism: Why Parts of Africa Might Never Be at Peace,” *Defense & Security Analysis* 25:4 (2009): pp. 355–372.

2 Boko Haram’s formal name since 2009 has been Jama’atu Ahlus-Sunnah Lidda’Awati Wal Jihad, or Sunni Muslim Group for Preaching and Jihad.

3 Ousmane Kane, “Islamic Inroads in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Harvard International Review* 29:2 (2007): pp. 64-67.

4 Alexander Thurston, for example, wrote that links between Boko Haram and AQIM were “not serious” and that it was “more likely” that double agents in the Nigerian Army trained Boko Haram members than AQIM even though such evidence did not exist. In contrast, Nigerian journalists with access to Boko Haram members, such as Ahmed Salkida, and other analysts and officials in West Africa and at the United Nations increasingly expressed concern about Boko Haram training in the Sahel and Somalia starting in 2011. Alexander Thurston, “Quick Items: Boko Haram and al Shabab,” *Sahelblog*, October 22, 2010; Alexander Thurston, “Response to NYT Article on Boko Haram,” *Sahelblog*, August 19, 2011; Lamine Chichi, “Algeria says Nigeria’s Boko Haram tied to al Qaeda,” *Reuters*, November 13, 2011; Laurent Prieur, “Boko Haram got al Qaeda bomb training, Niger says,” *Reuters*, January 25, 2012; “Letter dated January 17, 2012 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council,” *United Nations Security Council*, January 18, 2012.

5 Ahmed Salkida, “The Story Of Nigeria’s First Suicide Bomber - BluePrint Magazine,” *Sahara Reporters*, June 26, 2011; Joe Brock, “Special Report: Boko Haram - between rebellion and jihad,” *Reuters*, January 31, 2013; Jacob Zenn, “Boko Haram’s Conquest for the Caliphate: How Al Qaeda Helped Islamic State Acquire Territory,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2018.

6 “Global Terrorism Index: 2015,” *Institute for Economics and Peace and START*, November 17, 2015; Dionne Searcey and Marc Santora, “Boko Haram Ranked Ahead of ISIS for Deadliest Terror Group,” *New York Times*, November 18, 2015; “Boko Haram has been the most deadly terror group in Africa (2010-2016),” *The Atlas*, 2016.

7 See “Nigeria Security Tracker,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, last updated March 9, 2018.

the insurgency. Not only has the government underestimated Boko Haram, and lost or been denied access to territory by the insurgents, but Nigeria's ability to serve as a security guarantor in the region has deteriorated. Nigeria, for example, played a leading role in peacekeeping in Liberia in the 1990s and 2000s but can no longer deploy large numbers of forces elsewhere in the region because of the need for troops to combat Boko Haram at home.⁸ Indeed, one of al-Qa`ida's goals in supporting Boko Haram from as early as 2003 was to prevent Nigeria from playing a regional leadership role on behalf of the "Jewish-Crusader alliance."⁹ In this regard, al-Qa`ida has apparently succeeded.

Despite President Muhammadu Buhari's efforts to improve the army's efficiency since coming into office in 2015, the insurgency has long exposed problems in the Nigerian government and security apparatus. There have been reports of an under-resourced army suffering from low morale.¹⁰ There have also been reports of Boko Haram commanders arrested in governors' lodges and of other insurgent associations with politicians.¹¹ The key areas where Boko Haram operates have a rising youth population facing high rates of unemployment and low literacy rates, and this is only worsened by the growing ecological crisis of a shrinking Lake Chad and expanding desertification. None of this makes countering the insurgency any easier.

While Nigerian Muslim leaders are keen to distance themselves from the insurgents, both Boko Haram and the Islamic State-affiliated faction Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) are adamant that they abide by salafi principles and the example of the Prophet and his companions.¹² This has forced Nigerian salafis into a difficult position: on the one hand, they are accused of supporting or sympathizing with Boko Haram because their theological reference points resemble those of Boko Haram, while on the other hand, their work to counter Boko Haram plays into Boko Haram's accusations that they are "palace lackeys" of the Nigerian government who backtracked on the salafi-jihadi project in Nigeria that they initially supported.¹³ The most vocal critics of Boko Haram from the Nigerian salafi community have been prime targets for Boko Haram assassinations, which has made it all the more difficult for salafis to challenge the group's ideology in the public sphere.¹⁴

The Boko Haram and ISWAP ideological campaign is no longer limited to the physical marketplace of ideas. Like the "mainstream" Nigerian salafis, the group's factions have also embraced Facebook, Twitter, and especially Telegram as a means to release their statements and propaganda. Social media allows the various factions to not only share their narratives and objectives to potential recruits but also to debate each other on issues of ideology and strategy.¹⁵ Both Boko Haram and ISWAP have used videos to boast of battlefield successes, refute government claims, and engage in psychological operations against the Nigerian government and people, a tactic particularly evident in the videos released of the Chibok schoolgirls, which succeeded in drawing global attention to Boko Haram leader Abubakr

8 Andrew McGregor, "Nigerian Army Abandons Peacekeeping Missions in Mali and Darfur to Combat Boko Haram," *Terrorism Monitor*, March 17, 2018.

9 "United States of America against Ibrahim Suleiman Adnan Adam Harun" Case 1:12-cr-00134-BMC-MDG, United States District Court, August 4, 2016; "Al Qaeda Operative Convicted of Multiple Terrorism Offenses Targeting Americans Overseas," Department of Justice U.S. Attorney's Office Eastern District of New York, March 16, 2017.

10 "Nigeria soldiers 'fire at army commander in Maiduguri,'" BBC, May 14, 2014.

11 "How Kabiru Sokoto was arrested," *Premium Times*, February 10, 2012; Emma Ujah, "High-profile Boko Haram member arrested in Ali Modu Sheriff's house," *Vanguard*, October 21, 2012; Abdulkadir Mukhtar, "'Boko Haram commander' is my nephew - Senator Ahmed Zanna," *Daily Trust*, October 21, 2012.

12 Abdulbasit Kassim and Michael Nwankpa eds., *The Boko Haram Reader: From Nigerian Preachers to the Islamic State* (London: Hurst, 2018); Katherine Balfour, "Nigerian Group Muslims Against Terror Denounce ISIS, Boko Haram," *naija.ng*, March 18, 2015.

13 Abubakr Shekau discusses how Nigerian salafi clerics "backtracked" in an exclusive audio titled "Shekau da Jafaar," likely from 2007, and is available on request. Alexander Thurston, "Nigeria's Mainstream Salafis between Boko Haram and the State," *Islamic Africa* 6:1 (2015): pp. 109-134.

14 See, for example, "Outspoken religious leader killed in Nigeria," Al Jazeera, February 4, 2014.

15 Jacob Zenn, "Electronic Jihad in Nigeria: How Boko Haram Is Using Social Media," *Terrorism Monitor*, December 9, 2017.

Shekau and the ineffective government response to the kidnapping.¹⁶

But what are Boko Haram's goals and objectives? The leaders have always claimed that they want to govern territory under sharia law and fully eliminate the secular, democratic, and 'un-Islamic' Nigerian political and educational systems. This includes targeting Western education because of the co-educational mixing of the sexes, the promotion of the English language, and the teachings of Darwinian theories of evolution that come along with it. The factions and leaders have at times sought to create their own Islamic state in Nigeria, while at other times they have sought to identify with other Islamic states and groups, such as the Taliban in 2003 or, since 2015, the Islamic State.

There are ongoing debates about whether Boko Haram and ISWAP are on the rise or decline and whether the insurgents are winning or losing. In March 2015 when Boko Haram pledged its loyalty to the Islamic State, the Nigerian government was launching a large-scale counterinsurgency offensive against the insurgents and was confident it would defeat them once and for all. Some analysts mistakenly saw the pledge to the Islamic State as a sign of the group's weakness and an attempt to deflect attention from the group's battlefield losses.¹⁷ But the offensive against Boko Haram did not fully dislodge the insurgents from their territories nor did it undermine their loyalty to the Islamic State, which the group first announced in 2014, was formalized in 2015 and has maintained in 2018 even despite the Islamic State's territorial losses in Syria and Iraq.

The Nigerian government has often claimed that Boko Haram is desperate or on its 'last legs,' or, more recently, that its violence was "the last kicks of a dying horse."¹⁸ Yet ongoing attacks including suicide bombings, abductions, and raids on military convoys do not suggest the movement is demoralized, lacking finances, or near its end. Boko Haram has also received several million dollars from the exchanges for the Chibok schoolgirls in 2016 and 2017 and ransoms from other kidnappings.¹⁹ ISWAP and Boko Haram also still possess tanks, rockets, and other heavy weaponry, some of which has been pilfered from Nigerian barracks and armories.²⁰ Reports from the United Nations suggest that both factions control territory where they can implement their version of sharia law and deny the Nigerian government access.²¹

One of the impacts of Shekau's 2015 pledge of loyalty to the Islamic State has been on the internal factions of the group. As the longstanding leader and only public face of Boko Haram since 2009, Shekau was appointed by the Islamic State in March 2015 as the group's leader under the new name, ISWAP. However, in August 2016, the Islamic State demoted Shekau in favor of Abu Musab al-Barnawi (alias Habib Yusuf). The internal factionalization of the group was said to be another sign of the group's decline, but, if anything, the continuation of ISWAP under al-Barnawi and a revived Boko Haram under the leadership of Shekau has diversified—and not eliminated—the threat as the factions compete with each other.²²

16 "Boko Haram Releases Videos Showing Some Of The Remaining Chibok Girls Who Vowed Not To Go Back Home," YouTube, January 15, 2018.

17 Adam Higazi, "Mobilisation into and against Boko Haram in North-East Nigeria," in M. Cahen, M.E. Pommerolle, K. Tall eds., *Collective Mobilisations in Africa: Contestation, Resistance, Revolt* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2015); Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 183.

18 Latifat Opoola, "B/Haram bombings last kicks of dying horse – Buhari," *Daily Trust*, November 27, 2017.

19 "Investigation shows Cameroon paid 2billion FCFA to Boko Haram for hostage release," *journalducameroun.com*, June 20, 2017; Joe Parkinson and Drew Hinshaw, "Freedom for the World's Most Famous Hostages Came at a Heavy Price," *Wall Street Journal*, December 24, 2017.

20 "Boko Haram leader, Abubakar Shekau sends felicitations to his followers in a new video, claims responsibility for a string of attacks and shows spoils of war," Sahara Reporters, January 1, 2018.

21 "Nigeria North-East: Humanitarian Situation Update," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, January 2018.

22 Hamza Idris, "Boko Haram supremacy battle: Shekau loses grounds to Albarnawi faction," *Daily Trust*, December 14, 2017.

Moreover, even despite Nigerian government claims of Shekau's death, he remains as alive and volatile as ever, taunting Nigerian and world leaders alike. Meanwhile, al-Barnawi and his loyalists present a more 'hearts and minds' tone as compared to Shekau, especially toward the Muslim civilian population, a stance that makes ISWAP somewhat more tolerable to civilians than Boko Haram, but therefore more dangerous in the long-run.²³ Surrender is not an option for either Shekau and his loyalists or al-Barnawi. For example, Ahmed Salkida, the only journalist who has met Shekau face-to-face since the launch of the insurgency, wrote in early 2018 that:

*"Shekau has groomed men and women in their thousands that even he can no longer keep in line; many within the network see him as an obstacle to what they would have accomplished if he was gone long ago. No doubt, he remains the face of the insurgency, but no longer the driver of it ... If we consider one of Shekau's lines in his last video literally, that he is tired of being around and would prefer death than this life, as a sign of complete defeat, then we are still VERY ignorant of the group's corrosive ideology, which is, 'to kill or be killed.'"*²⁴

Sources close to ISWAP, meanwhile, claim that al-Barnawi must report to the Islamic State, which means that there is a no possibility for an end to the insurgency via negotiations with the group.²⁵

One reality of the insurgency is that its evolution has never been easy to predict. The extrajudicial killing of Muhammad Yusuf—al-Barnawi's father—was one factor in the sudden and unanticipated rise of the insurgency in 2009, for example. If, or when, Shekau is killed, it will certainly be celebrated by many in Nigeria. But some of his loyalists may join ISWAP under the lead of al-Barnawi and strengthen it. Other members of Shekau's faction may even become more unrestrained in their use of violence, thus exacerbating the harm to civilians.

In a conflict that has no easy answers and no solutions in sight, Boko Haram is already and will remain one of Africa's enduring insurgencies. In order to better understand Boko Haram now and in the future, this report challenges some key misconceptions about the insurgency and provides new analyses and insights based on many exclusive primary source materials and datasets. It explores six areas that are increasingly important but under-researched about Boko Haram and ISWAP: ideology, gender, leadership, counterinsurgency, regional dynamics, and terrorist networks.

On ideology, Abdulbasit Kassim argues that:

- By preaching in support of suicide bombings and al-Qa`ida, "mainstream" Nigerian salafi preachers laid the ideological framework that Boko Haram later promoted when it launched the insurgency in 2009.
- The Islamic State has had some level of intervention in the management of the internal civil war between Boko Haram and ISWAP.
- Rigidity in ideology, particularly over the issue of labeling Muslims as infidels and the ethics of war, has been responsible for the factional infighting between Boko Haram and ISWAP.

On gender, Elizabeth Pearson argues that:

- The Islamic State's strict prohibition on female violence was geared toward its 'state' project, with a strict division of male and female roles (violent/non-violent) in order to recruit both men and women, unify its members, and regulate their behavior. And with no similar governance role or

23 Mamman Nur, "An Open Letter to Abubakar Shekau," SoundCloud, Sahara Reporters, August 4, 2016; Jacob Zenn, "The Terrorist Calculus in Kidnapping Girls in Nigeria: Cases from Chibok and Dapchi," *CTC Sentinel* 11:3 (2018).

24 Ahmad Salkida, "1/ If we consider one of Shekau's lines in his last video literally, that he is tired of being around and would prefer death than this life, as a sign of complete defeat, then we are still VERY ignorant of the group's corrosive ideology, which is, 'to kill or be killed,'" Twitter, February 8, 2018.

25 "Boko Haram Gives Reason for Release of Dapchi Girls, Denies Ceasefire Talks With FG," Sahara Reporters, April 9, 2018.

recruitment objectives, Boko Haram has been freer to embrace female violence.

- Boko Haram's use of female 'suicide' bombing is not only unprecedented in scale, but also in the absence of symbolic meaning accorded to 'attackers' or consistent public theological justification.
- Boko Haram and the Islamic State engage in gender-based violence in the pursuit of tactical goals, but this changes to suit their aims and context.

On leadership, Atta Barkindo argues that:

- The Nigerian government's inability to defeat Boko Haram is the result of a misplaced security policy that dismisses Shekau as ignorant and clueless.
- Most policymakers, analysts, and academics do not understand the socio-cultural, historical, and linguistic antecedents of the environment within which Shekau operates and therefore struggle to understand why he has been able to be the Boko Haram leader since the start of the insurgency.
- Shekau's ability to strategically build networks and enter into and leave alliances when necessary is a reason for his success.

On counterinsurgency, Idayat Hassan and Zacharias Pieri argue that:

- The familiarity of anti-Boko Haram vigilantes in the Civilian JTF (CJTF) with local languages and the local terrain in northeastern Nigeria makes them uniquely capable of combating Boko Haram at a grassroots level.
- Fears have arisen over the possibility that the CJTF will 'turn bad' as so often happens with civilian-based armed groups (CBAGs).
- The Nigerian government has to address concerns of CJTF members regarding their future employment, education, and training and provide them a legitimate path into the armed forces. Failure to act will only serve to further delegitimize the state.

On regional dynamics, Omar Mahmoud argues that:

- Boko Haram's geographic operations and alliances have increasingly expanded beyond Nigeria's borders over time.
- Despite Boko Haram's evolution, Nigeria continues to remain the locus of the group's operations.
- It is important to examine specific aspects of Boko Haram and ISWAP when determining the geographic trajectory of the insurgency and considering policy responses.

On terrorist networks, Jacob Zenn argues that:

- Al-Qa`ida is no longer operationally active in Nigeria but is still interested in carrying out attacks in Nigeria or allying with some jihadi factions in Nigeria in the future.
- Although both Boko Haram and ISWAP are loyal to the Islamic State, with only the latter recognized as an Islamic State 'province,' some fighters could question that loyalty if Abubakr al-Baghdadi dies.
- In the long-term, the AQIM sub-groups in Mali will connect with ISWAP or Boko Haram defectors, very possibly from the Fulani ethnic group, and reestablish a faction to operate in Nigeria that will carry out attacks on foreign interests.

It is hoped that these analyses of 'Africa's enduring insurgency' will be useful to counterterrorism practitioners, humanitarian organizations, and academia and will assist in understanding and, ultimately, mitigating and resolving the conflict.