

HSPI Issue Brief Series

## Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria: No Easy Fix

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In July 2009, Muhammad Yusuf, the founder of Jama'atu Ahlissunnah Lidda'awati wal Jihad, or "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad," was killed while in police custody.<sup>1</sup> Yusuf's movement, known in local parlance as Boko Haram, or Hausa for "Western education is forbidden," had been part of a five-day uprising across four Nigerian states, resulting in over 700 deaths. The army was called in to quell the violence, and with Yusuf's suspicious death, many assumed the movement was broken.



Boko Haram leader Muhammad Yusuf, shortly before his death in July 2009 – *Source: Leadership.ng*

However, a prison break in September 2010 heralded Boko Haram's return,<sup>2</sup> and the movement has morphed into a significantly more lethal entity than under Yusuf's leadership, increasing its violence, expanding its geographic scope, and broadening its external connections. Efforts to combat Boko Haram have been compounded by a lack of knowledge, and the movement's continued evolution poses a threat to the stability of the Lake Chad Basin region, if not beyond. Nonetheless, a number of underlying factors make northern Nigeria susceptible to extremist influence, and the recent emergence of a splinter group called Ansaru signals that extremist ideology in the region extends beyond Boko Haram itself.

<sup>1</sup> "Nigeria Sect Head Dies in Custody," BBC News, 31 July 2009, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8177451.stm>.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, David, "More than 700 Inmates Escape During Attack on Nigerian Prison," The Guardian, 08 September 2010, Accessed online 23 March 2013 at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/sep/08/muslim-extremists-escape-nigeria-prison>.

## Boko Haram after Yusuf

Since its reincarnation in mid-2010, Boko Haram has undergone many changes. Led by Abubakar Shekau, a deputy to Yusuf who was assumed dead after the 2009 uprising, the movement has taken a deadly turn. Though little open source information exists regarding Boko Haram's structure or membership, analysis of Boko Haram's operations leads many to assume that it includes a Shura council of up to 30 members.<sup>3</sup> A few prominent extremists, such as Khalid al-Barnawi, Adam Kamar, and Mamman Nur, have also been linked to the movement, but little else exists in terms of membership knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Size estimates of the group vary tremendously, ranging from a few hundred to between 5,000-8,000, and members are thought to blend in extremely well with the civilian population.<sup>5</sup>

Boko Haram's messaging and demands have not always been clear, but center around a few core themes, ranging from pragmatic to ideological. At the ideological level, Boko Haram has called for Nigeria to be ruled in accordance with shari'ah law; democracy and the Nigerian Constitution consistently come under attack for incompatibility. Anti-Christian messaging has also been a prominent theme; spokesman Abul Qaqa famously issued an ultimatum for all Christians to leave the north of the country in January 2012.<sup>6</sup> More pragmatically, the sect consistently advocates justice for its martyred founder and other members, in addition to compensation and the rebuilding of mosques and other buildings destroyed during the 2009 uprising.<sup>7</sup> The release of detained sect members, along with women and children, has also been a key demand. Although the movement has praised al Qa'ida and referenced global jihad at times, the vast majority of Boko Haram's messaging and demands have revolved predominantly around local Nigerian issues.

Boko Haram's capabilities have also markedly increased from its humble beginnings. Attacks attributed to the group increased from 21 in 2010 to 186 in 2011, and soared to 526 in 2012. In June 2011, the organization conducted the first suicide bombing ever in Nigeria. A few months later, a car full of explosives rammed into a United Nations building in Abuja, a tactic now used frequently against churches in central and northern Nigeria during Sunday services. Boko Haram has also conducted highly

<sup>3</sup> Rice, Xan, "Changing Face of Nigeria's Boko Haram," *Financial Times*, 22 May 2012, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: [http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/9d2ab750-9ac1-11e1-9c98-00144feabdc0.Authorised=false.html?\\_j\\_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2F%2F0%2F9d2ab750-9ac1-11e1-9c98-00144feabdc0.html&\\_i\\_referer=#axzz1vbmirOK6](http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/9d2ab750-9ac1-11e1-9c98-00144feabdc0.Authorised=false.html?_j_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2F%2F0%2F9d2ab750-9ac1-11e1-9c98-00144feabdc0.html&_i_referer=#axzz1vbmirOK6).

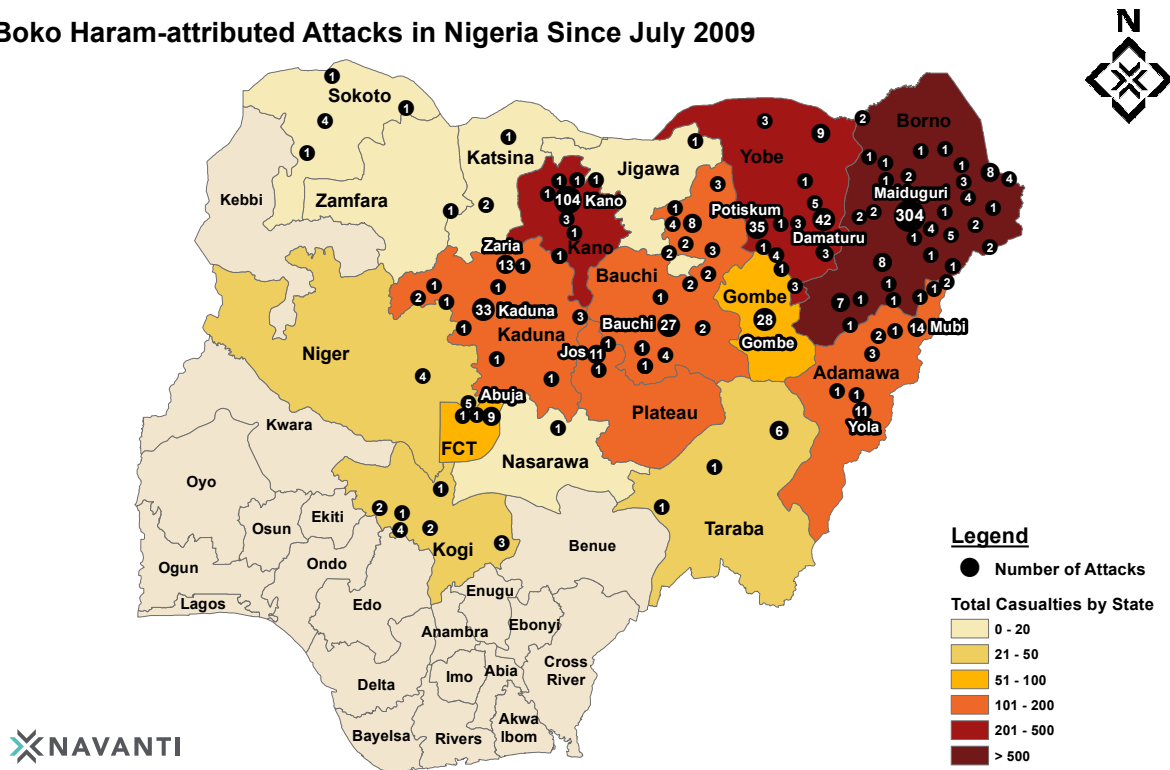
<sup>4</sup> "Terrorist Designations of Boko Haram Commander Abubakar Shekau, Khalid al-Barnawi, and Abubakar Adam Kamar," US Department of State, 21 June 2012, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/06/193574.htm>. "UN House Blast: SSS Places N25m Reward on Mamman Nur," *Vanguard*, 19 September 2011, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2011/09/un-house-blast-sss-places-n25m-reward-on-mamman-nur/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ostebo, Terje, "Islamic Militancy in Africa," *Africa Security Brief* No.23 (November 2012): 7. Cook, David, "Boko Haram: A Prognosis," James A. Baker Institute for Public Policy (16 December 2012): 12.

<sup>6</sup> "Boko Haram Issues Three-Day Ultimatum to Christians," *AFP*, 02 January 2012, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/01/boko-haram-spokesman-threatens-christians-troops/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Northern Nigeria: Background to Conflict," International Crisis Group Africa Report No. 168 (20 December 2010): 25.

## Boko Haram-attributed Attacks in Nigeria Since July 2009



coordinated assaults, displaying enough manpower and weaponry to temporarily threaten the entire cities of Damaturu/Potiskum in November 2011, and Kano in January 2012.<sup>8</sup>

However, more routine Boko Haram attacks involve gunmen armed with AK-47s on motorcycles or motorized tricycles (rickshaws). Homemade IEDs stuffed into packaging, such as soft drink cans, are another common and crude means of inflicting violence. In this sense, while Boko Haram has demonstrated the capability to engage in large-scale terrorist violence, the organization conducts smaller-scale attacks throughout northern Nigeria on an almost daily basis.



Explosives recovered in northern Nigeria — Source: Nairaland

<sup>8</sup> "Nigeria's Kano Rocked by Multiple Explosions," *BBC News*, 20 January 2012, Accessed on 25 March 2013 at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16658493>. "Over 136 Dead in Yobe Boko Haram Attacks," *This Day*, 06 November 2011, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201111060150.html>

The advance in capabilities has occurred in concert with an expansion in area of operations. Though beginning in the northeast corner of Nigeria, Boko Haram has launched attacks as far west as Sokoto state and as far south as Kogi state, while increasing its presence in the central regions (Kano, Kaduna, Bauchi, and Plateau). Targeting has also expanded from an initial focus on Nigerian security forces and government institutions, to include churches, bars, telecommunication infrastructure, schools, traditional leaders, and even the media.

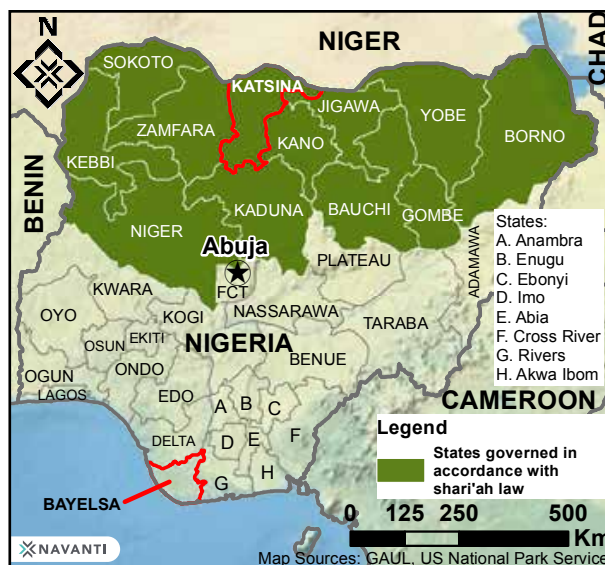
### Northern Nigeria's Operating Environment

While Boko Haram has rapidly transformed, a myriad of social, cultural, and political factors help explain its rise and continued ability to operate. Several local underlying conditions have aided its emergence, and must be considered when addressing the menace posed by the extremist movement.

#### North-South Dynamics

The north of Nigeria is significantly different from the south, a split roughly mirrored by a Muslim-Christian divide. During the colonial period, indirect British rule in the north buttressed such divisions, allowing the region to retain a degree of tradition at the cost of adaptation to a changing environment. This is most pertinently demonstrated through the continued emphasis on Islamic education, or almajiri schools, which prioritizes rote memorization of the Qur'an at the expense of developing more technical skills – playing into the origins of the name “Boko Haram.”

The reinstatement of democracy in 1999, underwritten by an implicit “zoning” bargain whereby the presidency is to take turns alternating between the two regions, also symbolizes the north-south divide. However, when current President Goodluck Jonathan (Bayelsa state) ran for re-election in 2011 after former President Umaru Yar'Adua, (Katsina state) died in office, many felt cheated. Rumors abound that angry northern elites utilized Boko Haram as a means to express their displeasure.<sup>9</sup> While this has been nearly impossible to prove and links



<sup>9</sup> Awoniyi, Ola, “Nigeria Extremist Sect has Political Links: Police,” *AFP*, 21 November 2011, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5h9yR4hQkW74KGiQaB3z\\_Gsq2DyYg?docId=CNG.8787518a246a4b8faa959fb77493332a.31](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5h9yR4hQkW74KGiQaB3z_Gsq2DyYg?docId=CNG.8787518a246a4b8faa959fb77493332a.31).  
page 4 of 10

during the infancy of the Boko Haram movement may have been terminated by today, some politicians from the north have been put on trial for alleged support.<sup>10</sup>

Periodic bouts of unrest between Muslim and Christian communities in Nigeria's central regions, though largely attributed to resource competition, also reinforce religious divisions and underline northern Muslim fears regarding southern domination. Boko Haram has been able to tap into these grievances, and present the movement as a "defender" of Nigeria's Muslims.

### *Governance and Underdevelopment*

Today the north of Nigeria is undoubtedly poorer than the south in almost every conceivable measure. Combined with limited resources and deteriorating environmental factors, such as a rapidly shrinking Lake Chad,<sup>11</sup> parts of northern Nigeria are economically destitute environments. Poor government leadership and corruption have contributed to the socio-economic situation, and generate an environment lacking viable job prospects for large numbers of youth.

The heavy handed response by security forces towards Boko Haram and the overall lack of justice has also engendered resentment towards the Nigerian state. Reports from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have detailed allegations of mistreatment and the disappearance of young Muslim males, generating a backlash amongst the very population security forces are ostensibly deployed to protect.<sup>12</sup> In Maiduguri for example, the Joint Task Force (JTF) is so unpopular that during a recent visit by President Jonathan, residents asked for its removal (a request he denied), preferring to face the wrath of Boko Haram alone.<sup>13</sup>

### *Social*

In part, as a response to the socio-economic situation and decades of poor leadership, Zamfara became the first Nigerian state to introduce shari'ah law in 1999 – a move followed by 11 other states in short succession. Local support for shari'ah was driven by its perceived ability to reform the north and generate prosperity. In reality, this did not transpire, allowing Boko Haram to argue that implementation has been inadequate and call for more extreme measures.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "Former Boko Haram Spokesman Named Ndume as 'Financier' – Witness," *The Nation*, 07 March 2012, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://www.thenationonline.net/2011/index.php/news-update/52564-former-boko-haram-spokesman-named-ndume-as-%E2%80%98financier%E2%80%99-witness.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Akinsuyi, Yemi, "Lake Chad Shrinks from 25,000 to 2,000 Kilometers Square," *This Day*, 07 June 2012, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201206070227.html>.

<sup>12</sup> "Nigeria: Trapped in the Cycle of Violence," Amnesty International (2012). "Spiraling Violence," Human Rights Watch (October 2012).

<sup>13</sup> "Sign Agreement on no More Killings, I will Withdraw JTF, Jonathan to Borno Elders," *Vanguard*, 09 March 2013, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/03/sign-agreement-on-no-more-killings-i-will-withdraw-jtf-jonathan-to-borno-elders/>.

<sup>14</sup> Cook, David, "Boko Haram: A Prognosis," James A. Baker Institute for Public Policy (16 December 2012): 7.



In addition, northern Nigeria has a history of extremist movements. In the early 19th century, a jihad waged by Usman dan Fodio overthrew ethnic Hausa elites,<sup>15</sup> and remains a source of inspiration for extremist groups in West Africa today.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore in the early 1980s, Mohammed Marwa, a preacher originally from Cameroon, instigated the Maitatsine riots that killed thousands in at least five northern Nigerian cities.<sup>17</sup> Parallels to Boko Haram can be found in both of these movements. Additionally, a number of other occasionally violent religiously conservative groups are also active in northern Nigeria, including the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), Izala, and Kala Kato. Taken in this context, Boko Haram, albeit perhaps the most violent, can be seen as one amongst a number of similar entities, both contemporary and historical.

In this sense, a multitude of cultural, social, and political factors define Boko Haram's operating environment. Nonetheless, factors external to northern Nigeria, along with issues like porous regional borders and conservative religious influence from Gulf nations, also contribute to Boko Haram's success.

### External Support to Boko Haram

Advances in Boko Haram capabilities have led many to speculate that the movement receives significant outside assistance from al Qa'ida affiliates — namely al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The US Ambassador to Nigeria recently stated “we have seen reports for years about Boko Haram members traveling to northern Mali for training and then returning to Nigeria.”<sup>18</sup> Various regional foreign ministers and officials have made similar comments, including US AFRICOM Commander General Carter Ham, who referenced the “growing collaboration” between Boko Haram and al Qa'ida-aligned organizations during a March 2013 briefing before the House Armed Services Committee.<sup>19</sup> Hard proof of such links is difficult to obtain, but several incidents lend credence to these connections, including:

- The arrest of seven alleged Boko Haram members in Niger purportedly en route to meet AQIM members in 2011.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Alao, Abiodun, “Islamic Radicalisation and Violence in Nigeria,” Conflict, Security, & Development Group (2009): 7.

<sup>16</sup> Cristiani, Dario, “West Africa's MOJWA Militants – Competition for al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb?” *Terrorism Monitor* Volume 10 Issue 7 (06 April 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Adesoji, Abimbola, “Between Maitatsine and Boko Haram: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Response of the Nigerian State,” *Africa Today* Volume 57 Number 4 (Summer 2011): 101.

<sup>18</sup> Alechenu, John, “Tackling Boko Haram Demands New Approach,” *Punch*, 15 March 2013, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://www.punchng.com/news/tackling-boko-haram-demands-new-approach-us-envoy/>.

<sup>19</sup> Ham, Carter F. 2012. Remarks made at the Homeland Security Policy Institute. Washington, DC; The George Washington University. A video of General Ham's remarks can be found online at: <http://www.gwumc.edu/hspi/events/GENHamPRF416.cfm>. Ham, Carter, “Statement Before House Armed Services Committee,” 15 March 2013.

<sup>20</sup> “Report of the Assessment Mission the Impact of the Libyan Crisis on the Sahel Region, United Nations Security Council S/2012/42 (18 January 2012): 11-12.

- Reports of AQIM-sponsored training in Algeria involving Boko Haram-linked jihadists, like US “Specially Designated Global Terrorist” Adam Kambar.<sup>21</sup>
- Occasional Boko Haram messaging praising al Qa’ida or global jihadist groups.

Despite probable connections, however, Boko Haram’s actions and statements have remained primarily Nigeria-centric. The attack on the United Nations building is a significant outlier event, but may be explained in terms of UN support to the Nigerian Government, or even as a “one-off” repayment to al Qa’ida groups.<sup>22</sup> In this sense, Boko Haram appears to have utilized external training and support in order to fulfill local goals, or simply has been slow to adopt a more global outlook.

### **Boko Haram as a Regional Threat**

On 19 February 2013, armed gunmen kidnapped a family of seven French tourists, including four children, near Waza National Park in Cameroon, close to the Nigerian border. While foreign targets have been the subject of kidnappings in northern Nigeria, Boko Haram previously denied involvement in such operations.<sup>23</sup> However, a March 2013 video featuring Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau claimed the abduction, signaling a shift in tactics.<sup>24</sup> In fact, until that event, Boko Haram had also been careful to avoid violent incidents on the turf of Nigeria’s neighbors, despite increased reporting regarding external activity. During the video, however, Shekau primarily complained about the detention of sect members in Cameroon, signaling a locally rooted motivation for the incident.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, these complaints follow a similar pattern of



Current Boko Haram Leader Abubakar Shekau —  
Source: YouTube

<sup>21</sup> “Barnawi, Kambar: Qaeda-linked Militants with Boko Haram Ties,” *AFP*, 21 June 2012, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5g8nEGH80j1ZNGi8OSpyhToV6xnhw?docId=CNG.45333191a208a469c0b87197c888b277.3b1>. “Terrorist Designations of Boko Haram Commander Abubakar Shekau, Khalid al-Barnawi, and Abubakar Adam Kambar,” US Department of State, 21 June 2012, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/06/193574.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Forest, James, “Confronting the Terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria,” Joint Special Operations University Report 12-5 (May 2012): 81.

<sup>23</sup> “Boko Haram Denies Abducting Europeans Killed in Failed Rescue Bid,” *Vanguard*, 09 March 2012, Accessed online 02 April 2013: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/03/b-r-e-a-k-i-n-g-n-e-w-s-boko-haram-deny-abducting-europeans-killed-failed-rescue-bid/>.

<sup>24</sup> Audu, Ola, “Boko Haram Threatens JTF Spokesperson, Demands Prisoners Exchange for French Nationals,” *Premium Times*, 19 March 2013, Accessed online 02 April 2013: <http://premiumtimesng.com/news/125659-boko-haram-threatens-jtf-spokesperson-demands-prisoners-exchange-for-french-nationals.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Audu, Ola, “Boko Haram Threatens JTF Spokesperson, Demands Prisoners Exchange for French Nationals,” *Premium Times*, 19 March 2013, Accessed online 25 March 2013: <http://premiumtimesng.com/news/125659-boko-haram-threatens-jtf-spokesperson-demands-prisoners-exchange-for-french-nationals.html>.

messaging prior to initial attacks in Kano on 20 January 2012 and Sokoto on 30 July 2012, and may presage additional cross-border violence in the near future.

### **A Proliferation of Boko Haram Groups**

Various breakaway factions from Boko Haram have also emerged, the most prominent of which is Ansaru, or Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina fi Biladis Sudan (Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa). Originally announcing themselves in January 2012 after a massive assault in Kano, the group appeared to distance itself from Boko Haram's track record of killing innocent Muslims.<sup>26</sup> Operationally quiet for several months after its inception, Ansaru emerged as a serious force in November 2012, conducting multiple kidnappings of foreigners and other attacks. Ansaru's messaging and actions have been focused more externally than Boko Haram and, in particular, frequently reference the French intervention in Mali. Ansaru's rapid development and effectiveness has solidified its status as an emerging entity in northern Nigeria, and considering Boko Haram's historically more localized approach, may currently represent the greater threat to Western interests in the region.

Other breakaway factions have emerged, but none have enjoyed as much success as Ansaru. The Yusufiyya Islamic Movement (YIM) put up fliers around Maiduguri in July 2011 announcing it had broken with Boko Haram over tactical differences.<sup>27</sup> However, little has been heard from the group since. More recently, a self-proclaimed Boko Haram spokesman, going by the name Abu Mohammed Abdulazeez Ibn Idris, claimed to represent Shekau and declared a ceasefire in Maiduguri in late January 2013.<sup>28</sup> Rumors of negotiations with the Nigerian Government have emerged from time to time, and Boko Haram acknowledged an effort led by prominent Islamic scholar Dr. Ibrahim Datti in March 2012, but all have ended in failure.<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to attribute any sort of legitimacy to Abu Mohammed,<sup>30</sup> yet considering the reported angst of some since Shekau has taken the reigns,<sup>31</sup> Abu Mohammed may represent a faction of battle-weary members. Nonetheless, given the continued rate of violence, his group would appear operationally irrelevant vis-à-vis the security situation.

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<sup>26</sup> "Boko Haram: Splinter Group, Ansaru Emerges," *Vanguard*, 01 February 2012, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/02/boko-haram-splinter-group-ansaru-emerges/>.

<sup>27</sup> Idonor, Daniel and Marama, Ndahi, "Boko Haram Sect Splits," *Vanguard*, 21 July 2011, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201107210066.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Marama, Ndahi, "Boko Haram Agrees to a Ceasefire," *Vanguard*, 28 January 2013, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/01/boko-haram-agree-to-a-cease-fire>.

<sup>29</sup> "Statement by Boko Haram's Spokesperson Debunking Reports of Dialogue with the Nigerian Government," *Sahara Reporters*, 23 August 2012, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://saharareporters.com/news-page/statement-abu-gaqa-boko-harams-spokesperson-regarding-reports-dialogue-nigerian-government>.

<sup>30</sup> In early March 2013, a video of Shekau emerged denouncing Abu Mohammed and the ceasefire, but the self-declared spokesman pressed on, calling Shekau's video fake.

<sup>31</sup> Shuaib, Shuaib, "Why Boko Haram Opted for Dialogue," *Leadership*, 17 February 2013, Accessed online 25 March 2013 at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201302180422.html>.



## Key Questions Going Forward

Boko Haram has emerged from indigenous origins to present itself as a regional threat, with the potential for cooperation with al Qa'ida goals. A number of underlying factors help explain its rise and ability to thrive, and the emergence of Ansaru signals northern Nigeria as an evolving hotspot of extremist activity. There has been little evidence to suggest that Boko Haram poses a direct threat to the United States, but the organization has demonstrated the ability to mount large-scale violence, which it could potentially direct at Western targets in the region. In order to adequately address the problem posed by Boko Haram, some key questions remain:

**Ideology:** Is the anti-Western sentiment espoused by Boko Haram deeply rooted in northern Nigerian society? Will the elimination of Boko Haram dissipate support for such ideology, or will like-minded groups continue to find room to operate?

**African solutions to African problems:** Can effective regional cooperation mitigate Boko Haram's expansion? How prepared are regional governments to deter the movement?

**Comprehensive Counterterrorism Approaches:** What measures beyond military action can the Nigerian Government take to disrupt Boko Haram? Can negotiations bring about a peaceful resolution to the violence? If so, what economic, governance, and social programs can be enacted to address underlying issues?

**US Involvement:** What is the appropriate role for the United States to play? What agencies and tools can be most effective, and in what capacity?

A careful examination of the above will require close collaboration with Nigerian and regional partners, including in the realm of intelligence sharing, in addition to in depth study of social and political issues. Examining the interrogation records of arrested Boko Haram members or patterns of recruitment, for example, may help shed light on some key questions.

## Conclusion

The Boko Haram movement has ebbed and flowed in its short history, only to consistently emerge as a strong entity. The uprising of 2009 demonstrates that efforts to counter Boko Haram must be done with careful calculation, at the risk of aggravating a delicate situation. Nonetheless, given continued underlying conditions, Boko Haram is likely in a position to pose a serious threat to stability in the Lake Chad Basin region, if not beyond, for years to come.

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***Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria: No Easy Fix** represents the second brief in a series concerning African security challenges and their broader implications. The series is a collaborative project from the **Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI)** and the **Navanti Group**. The first brief, **Pardon the Pivot, What about Africa?**, and future releases can be found at the HSPI website as a Special Issue Brief Series.*

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