

Boko Haram and Islamist Terrorism in Northeastern Nigeria

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Boko Haram is the northeastern Nigerian based Islamist terrorist group whose name translates to 'Western education is forbidden.' While many commentators have suggested that Boko Haram emerged in the early 2000s, the group's actual historical origin dates back to 1995 when Abubakar Lawan established the *Ahlulsunna wal'jama'ah hira* or Shabaab in Maiduguri. The sect embraced Salafist ideology when charismatic Islamic scholar Mohammed Yusuf became the leader in 2002.

How an erstwhile little known local Muslim youth organization underwent dramatic transformation to a transnational terrorist organization cannot be addressed here. Suffice it to say that roughly between 2002 and 2009 Yusuf and his followers managed to elude legal scrutiny despite substantial evidence of their involvement in controversial and illegal activities. In mid-2003, a group of 200 young men mostly consisting of Mohammed Yusuf's students decided to relocate to the Yobe countryside where they founded a religious community under a new name, *Al Sunna Wal Jamma* or 'Followers of the Prophet's Teachings.' Subsequently, the group moved to Kanama near Nigerian border with Niger following conflicts with local communities and authorities. Between December 23 and 31, they "launched a series of deadly attacks on police stations and government buildings" in Kanama and four other northern cities. Soldiers deployed to contain the militants killed several of them and a majority of the remaining members returned to Maiduguri, where they were reintegrated into Yusuf's community. Notably, Yusuf was only "blamed by the authorities" for these violent incidents. Subsequently, he was allowed to leave for Saudi Arabia where he stayed until 2005 when he would return to northern Nigeria and resume his clerical work. Meanwhile, in June 2004 four Boko Haram militants were killed by prison guards in what was described as "a foiled jail break" in the capital city of Damaturu, Yobe state. In September 2004, suspected Boko Haram militants attacked police stations and killed several policemen and civilians in the Gwazo and Bama towns in Borno State. In a counterattack, soldiers were deployed and killed an estimated 27 Boko Haram militants around the Mandara Mountains along the Nigerian-

Cameroonian border. In October 10, an affiliate group of Boko Haram attacked a police convoy in Kala-Balge near the Chadian border and kidnapped 12 policemen. Between 2005 and 2007, Boko Haram concentrated on recruiting new members and expanding its resources. Yusuf was allegedly arrested on numerous occasions during this period, but was protected by some influential men as he was released each time and allowed to return to his base in Maiduguri. In April 2007, doctrinal differences between Yusuf and his former mentor, Ja'far Mahmud Adam, reached a climax when the latter was murdered inside his Mosque in Kano. This development which signaled violent resurgence of Boko Haram, was followed by the fateful incident of July 11-12, 2009 involving the shooting of 14 members by security operatives after alleged refusal by the militants to comply with crash helmet law. In a video message addressed to the President, Yusuf threatened retaliation against the government. In keeping with his warning, Boko Haram launched short-lived uprisings in Borno, Bauchi, Yobe, Gombe, and Katsina between July 26 and 31, 2009. A military crackdown on the uprisings left over 800 dead, which included mostly Islamist militants and civilians. Yusuf and his father-in-law, Alhaji Baba Fugu, died in police custody under murky circumstances. In the aftermath of the unrest, the surviving members of Boko Haram regrouped under a new leader and began the process of morphing into a full blown terrorist organization. In September 2010, the group began to launch reprisal attacks for the death of its leader and hundreds of its members in the hand of the police.

Commenting on the July unrest, local Muslim leader stated that “More than 50 Muslim leaders repeatedly called Nigeria's police, local authorities and state security to urge them to take action against Boko Haram sect militants but their pleas were ignored.” Similarly, a senior military official in charge of a local anti-crime operation in Maiduguri, stated that he made several fruitless attempts to obtain clearance from his superiors to take action against Boko Haram. One can only infer from these and similar reports that the Nigerian government's counterinsurgency strategy has not been proactive. A far more troubling implication of these reports is related to the government's inability to implement a holistic response to Boko Haram. Instead, the Jonathan administration has generally favored the largely militaristic strategy of treating Boko Haram as a security threat. Quite naturally, militarization of the

government's response to Boko Haram intensified as violent encounters between the Islamist sect and security agencies became more frequent and casualties on the government's side rose beyond expectation.

In the course of the last six years, Boko Haram has demonstrated the extent a seemingly marginal non-state actor can challenge the capacity of a regional power to ensure the safety of lives and property in a borderless world where drugs, money, weapons and sensitive technical knowledge can be smuggled with relative ease from one part of the globe to another. Contrary to its purported mission of restoring traditional Muslim values, Boko Haram has repeatedly violated those values by killing innocent citizens, destroying mosques, churches, schools and government offices, and fomenting a climate of fear and despair across northeastern Nigeria. Contrary to Boko Haram's anti-Western rhetoric, its foot soldiers use AK-47s, rockets, grenades, motorcycles, cars, cell phones, the internet and newspapers, all products of Western technology. Ironically, Boko Haram has achieved significant success in its effort to undermine public confidence in the Nigerian government, thanks to its skillful application of Western technologies. According to recent statistics compiled by the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIFR), terrorist attacks by Boko Haram have resulted in more than 14,000 deaths since 1999. Between January 2012 and August 2013, targets hit by the Islamist sect include 50 churches, killing at least 366 persons, 31 separate attacks on Christians or southerners perceived to be Christians, killing at least 166 persons, 23 targeted attacks on clerics or senior Islamic figures critical of Boko Haram, killing at least 60 persons, and 21 attacks on 'un-Islamic' institutions or persons engaged in 'un-Islamic' behavior, killing at least 74. According to the same report, "Boko Haram's targets include churches, individual Christians, Muslim critics, and persons engaged in behavior deemed 'un-Islamic,' as well as northern elders, schools, police stations, government buildings, newspapers, and banks."

Overall, as evidenced by its poor handling of the Chibok girls incident the government's counterinsurgency strategy has yielded limited success. According to many analysts, this is due in large part to poor intelligence, institutional corruption, low pay, inadequate supply of military resources, and inadequate training of security agents, all of which have translated to low morale and institutional dysfunction within the security organizations. Notably, four weeks to the end of the Jonathan

administration (which is scheduled to hand over power to the incoming Buhari administration), the Nigerian military announced that it has successfully destroyed three Boko Haram camps and rescued over 700 girls and women who had been held hostage by the Islamist terrorist group in the Dambisa forest. It is too early to assess the implications of this development for the Nigerian and broader regional theaters of the Global War on terror as well as Boko Haram which is currently expanding its area of operation beyond Nigeria and exploring collaboration with other terrorist networks based in West Africa.