

Nigeria's Battle With Boko Haram

Through mass kidnappings, bombings, and other acts of terrorism, the Islamist insurgent group remains an enduring threat to northern Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin.

Backgrounder *by* Claire Felter

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A girl watches other children on a merry-go-round in an abandoned amusement park in Maiduguri, Nigeria. Florian Plaucheur/AFP/Getty Images

Introduction

Boko Haram is a top-tier threat to Africa's most populous country. An insurgency led by the Islamist group has claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced millions more in recent years. At times, the violence has spilled over Nigeria's borders into other

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Some experts
say Boko
Haram's brutal
campaign,
which has
included
attacks on

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schools, the burning of villages, and hundreds of abductions, is a response to longstanding religious tensions, political corruption, and widening economic disparity in Nigeria. The government's heavy-handed police and counterterrorism tactics are also fuel for the group's flame, analysts say.

What is Boko Haram?

Boko Haram is an Islamist militant group based in Nigeria's northeast. Mohammed Yusuf, an influential Islamist cleric from Borno State, created the group in Maiduguri in 2002. The overarching aim of the group, which began as an offshoot of the Salafi movement, a branch of Sunni Islam, is to establish a fundamentalist Islamic state with sharia criminal courts.

The movement's followers, called Yusuffiya, consist of northern Islamic students and clerics, as well as professionals, many of whom struggle to find work. While it is difficult to track the size of Boko Haram, U.S. intelligence officials have estimated that there are between four and six thousand hard-core militants. Other analysts have said the group's membership could be three times that. CFR Senior Fellow John Campbell

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Many analysts believe that Boko Haram emerged as a consequence of deep religious and ethnic cleavages that have long troubled Nigeria. The British, during their nearly half century of rule, merged various territories and peoples that had little in common other than geographic proximity. Nigeria comprises nearly 350 ethnic groups, including the Hausa and Fulani (29 percent), the Yoruba (21 percent), the Igbo (18 percent), the Ijaw (10 percent), and the Kanuri (4 percent).

At the same time, the country is roughly split between the Muslim-dominated north and Christian-dominated

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south. The two largest religious groups have, for decades, generally abided by an informal power-rotation agreement for the presidency, but political friction remains a significant factor in ongoing unrest.

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Sources: CIA; World Bank.

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Nigeria's record of political corruption and inequality have also contributed to the group's rise, analysts say. Despite being Africa's biggest economy and home to a wealth of natural resources, Nigeria has one of the continent's poorest populations. Roughly half of its two hundred million people live on less than \$1.90 per day; poverty is higher in the Muslim-majority northern regions. Oil has played a major role in driving economic inequality across the country: A small number of elites has long maintained a tight hold on oil revenues, and corrupt government ministers have been charged with embezzling tens of billions of dollars from the sector.

"The emergence of Boko Haram signifies the maturation of long-festered extremist impulses that run deep in the social reality of northern Nigeria," writes analyst Chris Ngwodo. "The group itself is an effect and not a cause; it is a symptom of decades of failed government and elite delinquency finally ripening into social chaos."

Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria has suffered waves of political instability, including at least half a dozen coups, decades of military rule, and a civil war (1967–1970) that claimed up to two million lives, many perishing from a blockade-induced famine.

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In Boko Haram's formative years, Yusuf criticized northern Muslims for participating in what he saw as an illegitimate, non-Islamic state. "Yusuf's vision was extreme in the northern Nigeria context, but not so extreme that it was unrecognizable," writes Alexander Thurston in his 2017 book on the group. "In diverse ways, most northern Muslims believe that Islam provides a framework that should shape public life."

The group began to radicalize amid episodic clashes between Christians and Muslims and as security forces adopted harsher tactics against suspected militants. A flash point for the group came in 2009, when a police crackdown set off an armed uprising in Bauchi State that soon spread in the northeast. Government forces killed more than eight hundred people, including many suspected Boko Haram members, in ensuing protests. Following the uprising, Yusuf was murdered while in police custody.

How has Boko Haram evolved in recent years?

Boko Haram splintered into at least two factions following Yusuf's death. Today, Abubakar Shekau heads one faction, which appears to remain focused on fighting the Nigerian government in the northeast. Several times, Nigeria's military claimed to have killed Shekau, but videos of the leader have emerged as recently as 2018.

For at least the last two years, Abu Musab al-Barnawi, Yusuf's son, has led a second faction, which CFR's Campbell says has the same ultimate goals as Shekau's but a less strict view as to what constitutes apostasy. Some analysts say the increasingly grisly nature of Boko Haram's atrocities sparked rifts within the group.

Boko Haram analysts and Nigerian security officials have offered varying assessments

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say that focusing on an affiliation to these groups downplays the context in which Boko Haram emerged. Others argue that ignoring evidence of Boko Haram's ties to other Islamist militant groups may hinder an understanding of the insurgency.

What are its tactics?

Many of the group's activities are those typically associated with terrorism, including suicide bombings, kidnappings, and destruction of property, particularly schools. In recent years, it has increased attacks on soft targets, or relatively unprotected places, and used more women and children as suicide bombers. Beyond Nigeria, the group is most active in northern Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.

Boko Haram has been linked to the deaths of more than thirty-seven thousand people since 2011, according to CFR's Nigeria Security Tracker, which monitors political violence in the country. About half of those killed were suspected Boko Haram militants, while roughly 45 percent were civilians and 5 percent were security forces.

How has the Nigerian government responded?

Nigerian security forces have made sizable gains against Boko Haram with the help of neighboring states, but the momentum to stamp out the insurgent group appears to have slowed in recent years, and communities in the country's northeast remain beleaguered.

In 2013, President Goodluck Jonathan launched a major offensive against Boko Haram, declaring a state of emergency in Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe States. While national

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Boko Haram attacks escalated in 2014 and 2015, raising doubts about the government's progress toward containing the group. In particularly brazen operations, the group claimed a bombing of an Abuja bus station that killed nearly one hundred people on April 14, 2014, the same day it abducted more than two hundred schoolgirls from the northeastern town of Chibok. The latter attack prompted an international outcry and evoked harsh criticism among many Nigerians of the Jonathan administration's slow response.

Elected president in 2015, Muhammadu Buhari has made some modest reforms [PDF] to improve the military's effectiveness against Boko Haram. Buhari, a former military dictator (1983–1985), moved the military's headquarters from Abuja to Maiduguri, increased funding for operations in the area, and appointed new military leadership.

What support have other states provided?

Nigeria has sought military support from its neighbors, who increasingly suffered attacks during Boko Haram's upsurge. Since 2015, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger have deployed thousands of troops as part of a multinational force authorized by the African Union. The coalition has been credited with helping the Nigerian military retake much of the territory [PDF] claimed by Boko Haram and reduce violence linked to the group to levels seen prior to 2014.

Security partners beyond Africa have also come to Nigeria's aid. The United States designated Boko Haram a foreign terrorist organization in late 2013, but at times Washington has withheld military assistance [PDF] out of concern over Nigeria's

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Boko Haram totaled more than \$400 million [PDF] by early 2016. In early 2018, U.S. President Donald J. Trump pushed through a roughly \$600 million deal to sell a dozen Super Tucano aircraft to Nigeria to support its counterterrorism efforts.

For its part, the UN Security Council imposed economic sanctions and an arms embargo on the insurgent group in 2014. Analysts said the move was largely symbolic, as the financial assets and movements of Boko Haram militants are difficult to track.

What are the broader risks to the region?

Boko Haram has fueled instability across the Lake Chad Basin. It has displaced millions and put them at risk of starvation, jeopardized education and health services, stalled humanitarian aid efforts, and undercut government authority in Nigeria and abroad.

“
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”

– Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*

Moreover, the insurgency has scared off international investors, particularly in Nigeria, where it adds to a list of threats that includes other militant groups which target oil

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Recent attacks and abductions signal that, despite being pushed into remote areas, Boko Haram will likely continue to disrupt the region’s development for some time. “Boko Haram represents an ugly paradox: its ideas have limited appeal but significant staying power. The group can be crushed militarily, yet state violence fuels its narrative of victimhood,” writes Thurston.

Toni Johnson and Mohammed Aly Sergie contributed to this report.

Resources

Alexander Thurston **looks at Boko Haram’s origins** in his 2017 book, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*.

CFR’s Nigeria Security Tracker **maps Boko Haram–related violence** in the country’s northeast.

Dozens of the young women abducted in Chibok **share where they are now** in this New York Times interactive.

John Campbell and Matthew T. Page **discuss Nigeria’s security challenges** in their 2018 book, *Nigeria: What Everyone Needs to Know*.

Campbell is **joined by International Crisis Group experts** to talk about Boko Haram and the humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad Basin on this episode of the Africa in Transition podcast.

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